

# **The Heart of the Matter**

## **Lesson 18: The Christian's Attitude Toward the Internet and Social Networking**

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### **1. The Age of the Internet**

The internet search giant "Google" recently released an exhaustive list of the 1000 most visited sites on the Web. Facebook took the number one spot with 600 million unique visitors for the month of September 2010. Although Facebook gives you the advantage of being able to keep in touch with family, fellow Christians, and friends, there is something about it that is worrisome. Frankly some of the things that fellow Christians are posting on Facebook and other social networking websites are of great concern.

Obviously, the Bible says very little specifically on the subject of the Internet and social networking. But, if we see the medium as another means of putting out a message to the world, then God DOES have a great deal to say about it in the Scriptures. As we shall see, God says some are sending the wrong message to the world.

### **2. Our "Message" to the World**

Whether we would like to admit it or not, all Christians are sending a message to the world. We are showing others that serving God is the most important thing in our lives, or we are showing them that He really doesn't matter to us. We are showing others that we are different from the world (i.e., shining lights in the darkness, Mark 5:14-16), or we are demonstrating by our words, actions, what we "like," and the way we dress ... that we are just like them.

Some Christians might be tempted to think that the only example that really

counts is that of preachers, elders, and those leading in public worship. This is absolutely untrue! No matter how long you've been a Christian, whether you are male or female, young or old, a full-time preacher or simply someone who cleans the church building, your example is extremely important. What kind of message are YOU sending to the world?

### **3. Who are Your "Friends?"**

One of the major features of Facebook is having friends ... friends to visit your page, giving friends access to your information, giving and getting updates with friends, sharing pictures and videos, playing games and doing surveys with friends, etc. In the world of Facebook "friend" is not just a pronoun but a verb, too. You can "friend" or even "unfriend" someone.

As members of the household of God (Gal.6:10; Eph.2:19) it is good for us to have brothers and sisters in Christ as friends on our Facebook page. We have a common goal that binds us together like no other earthly relationship can: HEAVEN! What a blessing it is to be a part of the world's largest family. Faithful Christians make the best friends. They are careful to be good examples. They encourage you to put God first. They will humbly and lovingly correct you when you need it. They encourage you to be separate and different from the evil things of this world (Jas.4:4).

Unfortunately, we can't say the same things about those who are not Christians. They have different and more worldly interests. They engage in different

activities, some of which are in direct contradiction to Bible teachings. Worldly friends are more likely to dress immodestly, use foul language and questionable behavior, and think about and desire worldly things over spiritual.

#### **4. What Kind of Messages are You Sending with Your Facebook Pictures?**

You've heard the old saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words." The same holds true for the photos that we post on Facebook. By means of our pictures, we are telling everyone what we are like, what our interests are, and whether we are different from those in the world or just like them. Frankly, some Facebook pictures of those claiming to be Christians are sending the wrong message. Provocative stares and gestures, and immodest dress (including short shorts, tight pants, exposed cleavage, and revealing swimwear) make it hard to see Jesus in you. Instead of accentuating the spiritual "inner you" these pictures are pointing attention at the worldly (sexy?) outside. Is that the message a true Christian wants to send to the world? And lest we forget, God is no respecter of persons ... these considerations are for both women AND men of ANY age group.

#### **5. What Do Your "Status Updates" and Interests Say About You?**

Facebook (and Twitter) give you the opportunity to tell others what you're up to at any given moment. Status updates might talk about where you are going or what you are doing or what is on your mind. Christians may mention a scripture they are thinking about or talk about an opportunity to help someone. They may build someone up with encouraging words. But, unfortunately, many Christians have included links to questionable websites or made shocking statements using lewd language or profanity. If we are to be lights unto the

world then what place do references to sexually explicit movies and music have on a Facebook page? Comments about friends on their Facebook pages are supposed to build them up, but often end up racy and put them down in the minds of others. As corny as it may sound to some, you can still ask yourself just one question to make sure that your Facebook status and interests are righteous in the eyes of the Lord: would He be pleased if you had Him read your Facebook page? (Hint: an all-knowing God has already done just that!)

#### **6. Tool for Truth or Facebook Folly?**

Facebook can be a benefit to, or a blight upon, one's spiritual life. Please carefully consider your use of Facebook (or any other social networking site such as Twitter) to see if you meet God's standards for godly living. By way of warning, here are some potential "follies" of Facebook and social networking in general, that you should seriously consider:

**a. Presents a false sense of freedom from accountability.** Typing away on a keyboard can lull you into thinking that whatever you write and post is just "keeping it real" and that you are "just being yourself." What if the "words of (your) mouth and the meditation of (your) heart are not acceptable to God (Psa.19:14)? Some things should neither be thought nor spoken (Matt.12:35).

**b. Offers an apparent removal of moral restraints.** Either Facebook gives the feeling that moral restraints do not apply when posting, or the postings on Facebook indicate that one's moral restraints have already been removed. Probably both. Either way, the result is sin and disgrace. Photos of Christians immodestly dressed provocatively display attitudes of worldliness. We are not to love the world (1 John 2:15-17).

**c. Holds up privacy to public display and discussion.** The decorum of decency and privacy is gone. Some of the things discussed on Facebook (or Twitter or MySpace) ought to remain private. Crudeness, lewdness, and vulgarity have taken the place of sensitivity, maturity, and wisdom. Manners and common courtesy should be hallmarks of Christians.

**d. Provides the perfect venue for those without tongue control.** Social networking sites make it easy to exercise “loose lips.” All kinds of disruptions, distortions, evil surmising, gossip, and rumor-mongering have found its way onto Facebook. And that means these sins have already found their way into the hearts, the thinking, the attitudes, the language and the conduct of those who post such destructive words. Instead of carefully choosing words, social networking sites make it easy to post before you think. Remember, great forest fires begin with a small spark (James 3:5).

**e. Lends itself to mindless chatter – and worse.** Once written and published, words can do much good or great harm. Try to be thoughtful and careful with what and how you write, knowing that your words may very well outlive you. Social networking sites make it very easy to thoughtlessly write without considering the consequences. If you ridicule someone you have become arrogant and unloving. If you post profanity and join in coarse joking you have lowered yourself to join the world in the sewer of vulgarity (Eph.4:29; 5:3-4). If you post unfounded rumors, malicious gossip and tale bearing you have left the land of brotherly love and crossed over into the land of bitterness and malice (Eph.4:31-32).

**f. Can consume your time.** We must be good stewards of our time (Eph.5:16). Social networking (and the internet for that matter) can be addicting; stealing

away hours of productivity in school, on the job and in the kingdom of God.

## 7. A Word to the Wise

It is not called the World Wide Web for nothing. Literally anyone can get your information once you put it on the internet. And social networking sites are made for you to do just that. So be wise.

Here are “Ten Commandments of Social Networking” by Paul Steinbreuck. Hopefully these will help to make you a wiser internet and social network user.

**1) Thou shalt have no other gods before me.** Don’t allow social networking to become a god. Are you losing hours at a time to Farmville? Do you interrupt meals with family and friends to send and receive messages? Is your first impulse when you wake up to check email/Facebook/Twitter instead of listening to God? Has posting become more important than praying? If so, maybe social networking has become a god.

**2) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images.** Throughout history people have created things to remind them of God – sculptures, stained glass windows, crucifixes – which people eventually began to worship instead of God. Likewise many people have become enamored with the potential social networks have as a platform to share the gospel, connect people to their church, or share spiritual insights. Be careful not to allow the tools used in the name of God to become more important than your relationship with God.

**3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.** Don’t use acronyms that take the Lord’s name in vain like OMG. Don’t use acronyms that are shorthand for profanity. In general consider the coarseness and vulgarity of what you say online.

**4) Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.** Be intentional about taking breaks from social networking so you can spend focused time with God.

**5) Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long.** Kids, respect the social networking rules your parents set up. Parents, set up social networking boundaries for your kids (and for yourself – DB). Install filtering software on all computers. Set rules for when and how much time your kids can spend online/texting. Warn them about friending strangers.

**6) Thou shalt not kill.** Jesus said, “You’ve heard it said, ‘Do not murder.’ ...But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother... [or] says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” (Matthew 5:21-22) Don’t insult or hate on people online.

**7) Thou shalt not commit adultery.** Guard yourself against porn. Use filtering/monitoring software on your

computer and mobile browser and get yourself an accountability partner. Guard yourself against emotional affairs. Just because you’re not having sex doesn’t validate flirting or deep soul-level conversations with someone who’s not your spouse.

**8) Thou shalt not steal.** Don’t steal time from your employer, your spouse, or your kids for social networking.

**9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.** Don’t lie or slander people online.

**10) Thou shalt not covet.** Don’t envy people’s blogs or the number of friends, followers, or comments they have. Don’t envy the hot studio photo from 5 years ago they use as their profile pic. Don’t envy all the parties, vacations, and accomplishments they choose to post about. Much of what people post about is put in the best possible light and their struggles and shortcomings are omitted.

*(This material on the Internet and Social Networking has been excerpted from a sermon by Jerry Falk and other resources.)*

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### **Questions for Discussion**

- 1.** Is Internet privacy a right? Does this question even matter when taking into account Hebrews 4:12-13?
- 2.** What has God to say about your influence on Christians and those outside the Lord’s Church? (1 John 2:10; Romans 14:21; Colossians 4:5; 1 Peter 2:11-12)
- 3.** What does “seasoned with salt” mean to you in the context of your use of the Internet and social networking sites? (Colossians 4:6)
- 4.** How can you use Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace to fulfill the command of Matt. 5:14-16?