

FOLLOWING GOD IN A SELFIE-CENTRED WORLD

A word has entered our vocabulary in the last decade due to its proliferation with the introduction of social media called the Selfie. For anyone here who perhaps has been visiting another planet doesn't know what a selfie is it's basically a photo that one takes of oneself and posts up on social media to share with friends.

We do have a generation growing up in this world today on social media where narcissism has become a growing problem. Narcissism is a term that means love of the self which is derived from the Greek legend of Narcissus who fell in love with the reflection of himself that he saw in a pool of water which is really kind of like many people today who like to take photos of themselves in a mirror often posing their lips out to make an impression of a duck because ducks are just so good looking.

We can leverage technology such as the internet to reach more people than ever before with the gospel and do many great things with technology. On the flip side there can be some unintended negative consequences that technology can have on our walk with God and on our values if we are not careful about our use of such technology.

Today I would like to take a brief look at two of the negative effects that technology and the internet can have on our values and our walk with God and what God has to say about how to correct those problems.

1) Discontentment

When we compare with others, we become dissatisfied and discontented in our own hearts. When I was young, we just had to kind of randomly guess that we weren't popular. These days you can measure it! "So and so got 100 likes and my post only got 2."

Researchers did a study at two college universities, and they had students spend half an hour on Facebook, and then surveyed their feelings after half an hour of just looking on Facebook. And what they found is, one third of the students felt significantly depressed, citing envy as the number one emotion of what they felt, after 30 minutes of just watching what happens on Facebook.

Even with older technology like TV this can be a problem with ads designed to stir up discontentment that can only be cured by buying the product they are selling – ads encouraging us to buy bigger and better cars and houses – shows about celebrities living opulent lifestyles and travelling the world.

With TV and Facebook we can find ourselves comparing our mundane behind the scenes life with other people's highlights reels. One friend I know said she got off Facebook because it was a bit too much seeing all her other friends getting married and having children, something as an older single, I can very much relate to.

We can feed on images of things and people that arouse lust and cause us to have discontentment with what we have or even who we are with and that not only can kill our joy but also destroy our relationships with those we love.

There are two godly qualities that can help us deal with this problem of discontentment. The first quality is thankfulness. Please turn with me to Philippians chapter 4 and we'll start with verse 6 which I'll read from the Contemporary English Version. In verse 6 we read: "Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God."

Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel." This inner peace, which is the opposite of restless discontentment, comes from being thankful for all that God has given us and trusting God to provide for our needs when we put our requests to Him. No matter how little we have or how tough we have it in this life (and remember Paul was in prison when he wrote this epistle) if we are baptised we are His begotten children and God has an mind-blowing future for us in His coming kingdom.

If we are going to compare ourselves with others we should only compare ourselves with those less off than us and be grateful for all the blessings that God has given us with a humble heart not a proud one like in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Going down a few verses in Philippians 4 we read about the other quality that is the flow-on effect of having a thankful heart – being content. Starting in verse 12 we read: "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." It is the power of Christ within us through His spirit that is the secret of being content in every situation. "Godliness with contentment is great gain" as it says over in 1 Timothy 6:6. God's promises of a wondrous future and trusting in His unfailing love for us can help us to defeat the dragon of being worried and discontent with our lot in life.

2) Self-centredness

With the popularity of social media and user-generated content such as Facebook and Youtube, as a society we're becoming more and more addicted to the immediate affirmation of likes and comments from others. Scientists will tell you that it releases a feel-good chemical in our brain called dopamine and many are addicted to that. What did they say? Did they like it? Who liked it? How many people liked it? And many people are addicted to this immediate feedback!

One of my pet hates is seeing too many people at the same time doing this with their smartphones like when you are waiting for or on a bus or train. Something deep inside me wants to scream out "Get a life people!" or "Why can't you people just be content with your own thoughts and daydreams." Speaking of pet hates don't even get me started on why are there so many four wheel drives where I live in New Farm.

When I was in New Zealand for the feast Dave Middleton, who works for a telco over there, mentioned that he sat in on 3 different meetings with phone companies demonstrating their new phone products and a phrase that was repeated in each demonstration was that we want them using their phones to be an addictive experience. And boy have they have achieved that in spades.

There is that chemical rush that's causing many people to be more addicted to social media and the instant affirmation that it brings as well as not being able to resist looking at their phones when they are actually with other people. One tell tale sign to know that you can know you're addicted to social media is when you cat has its own instagram account. My cat Cilla has her own facebook photo album but that's completely different.

I simply can't understand this current generation's love affair with taking selfies. When I was young it seems like most people dreaded having their photo taken and it was like pulling hen's teeth getting everyone I wanted in a group photo. And of course we all dreaded having our annual photo taken of our class at school desperately hoping we wouldn't look as bad as our license or passport photo.

Many are hooked on this instant gratification and if we suffer from this we need to recognise it if we are to overcome it. With many people and the things that they post online it can be painfully obvious it's all about them. To quote a funny William Shatner impersonation I once heard "It's not about you,

it's about me." They are serving themselves rather than using that tool as a means of serving others, of primarily sharing things with a view of what can be of benefit to other people.

Social media is also changing the nature of relationships. It gives the illusion of companionship, without the demands of friendship. For example, the average American Facebook user has around 330 Facebook friends, but the average American says they only have two close friends, which is down from six, 20 years ago. Many people need to rediscover the power of practicing presence, of being together with other people rather than just online. There's power in presence.

Let's go over to Hebrews chapter 10, verses 24 and 25. Paul here writes: "Let us consider one another to provoke to love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

I am a part of the webcast team and we do our best to provide a service for people in remote areas (Hi Lloyd in Townsville and John in Cairns if you guys are on). We do this for members who don't have a church group to fellowship with as well as others who can't be here because they are sick. The webcast is a great service for those who can't be here but for those of us who can be here being present at church each week gives us the means of stirring one another up to good works and encouraging each other as Paul reminds us here we need to do. There is power in presence!

Let's suppose you've got a friend, or a family member, that's hurting right now. They just got bad news. Bad medical news, they lost their job, their girlfriend broke up with them, they found out bad news about their husband or child. What is an acceptable way we can show love? An acceptable way that most of us would do, in our generation today, is crank out a text or a facebook post: "Hey, just thinking about you."

Let's take it up a notch. There's another thing we can do. It's the original purpose for one of these things before they became used a portable PC. You can dial their number and talk to them on the phone. You can ask them, "Hey, how are you doing?" and you can listen to the tone of their voice. And then, you can ask them some questions, and the conversation can go places that it will not go with texts when you hear tone of voice. Definitely the case on my dumb phone where I have to click 3 times just to type a letter.

Let's say we really wanna get crazy. Let's really get radical and take it up another level. Another way we could show love is we could go see them. We could get in our car, go across town, whatever the case would be, and we could sit down with them, face to face, and listen to them, and ask them questions, have a cup of coffee with them, give them a hug if they need one. For the recipient your presence speaks much more than your posts on facebook.

Compassion is not just good intentions but concern that moves us to action and that compassion is often inconvenient. It's easy to give when it's convenient but a lot tougher to give when it's inconvenient.

The cure to the selfishness which can be inflamed by modern technology is to take on the mindset or attitude of Christ which is spoken on in Matthew 20:27-28: "And whoever desires to be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

One memorable quote from a speech by former U.S. president John F. Kennedy was "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." What about us in our church community here? Are we givers or takers? To paraphrase JFK's quote in a church context "Ask not what the church can do for you but what you can do for your church."

In conclusion, it is possible to serve God in a selfie-centred world. We have to be aware of the dangers of discontentment and the lust for more and more that can be inflamed by modern technology and counter that with being thankful and content with what God has given us including His promises of providing for our needs and a wonderful World to come.

We also have to be aware of the dangers of being addicted to the instant affirmation that fuels selfishness. We can counter that selfishness by investing time in person with others and taking on the attitude of Jesus who did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many.