

Social Networking—Blessing or Curse?

Fellowship Meeting, Sunday, September 25, 2011

Taught by Pastor David Silversides

Ephesians 4:17-32 (KJV)

“17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, 18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: 19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. 20 But ye have not so learned Christ; 21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; 23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. 25 Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. 26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: 27 Neither give place to the devil. 28 Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with *his* hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. 29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. 30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: 32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

Amen. May God bless His Word to us.

And so our theme is *Social Networking—Blessing or curse?*

Most of us have heard of social networking sites on the web. Facebook is perhaps now the most commonly known and used. And of course there are others—Twitter, MySpace, and others, which vary in format. But, being no expert on the internet or on social networking, the basic idea is the same, which is to facilitate ease of communication between people and groups of people and also to some extent to put things into the public domain. And so these are internet sites where people can either keep in touch with people they already know or (at least in theory) meet one another and communicate in greater or lesser numbers and interact with one another.

Three years ago we spoke on the subject of internet blogging, and much of what we said there applies here also. But you weren't all here then, and some of you will have forgotten perhaps what you did hear. And, even if not, we need to be always exhorted and established in the truth that we know.

Well, are web-based social networks a good things or a bad thing? Are they a blessing or a curse? Well, I suppose the answer is that they are neither in themselves. It is a mode of communication, a relatively new mode of communication. But then most of the modes of communication apart from face to face speech were all new at some stage. Even letter writing as developed and then of course the telephone and so on. And so it is simply in itself a mode of communication. And communication is not in itself good or bad; it can be either. There can be

good communication, communication of what is good, and communication of what is bad. Communication is simply points of information. But the speed and scope of communication accentuate the dangers belonging to all communication amongst men and women. And all such modes are essentially an extension of speech. So there is a great deal to say about social networking, not because it is mentioned in Scripture, but because there is a great deal in Scripture about speech. And social networking is simply an extension. The principles in Scripture concerning speech must be applied to social networking.

So what we have to say can be summed up in three main things, one very brief and then getting a little more extensive in the second one and then briefer again in the third.

It can be summed up as (1) truthfulness, (2) thoughtfulness, and (3) the special dangers.

First of all, **truthfulness**. We are not going to elaborate on this, but all that we say by whatever means must be *true*. We should not lie, whether we are talking to someone—whether we are talking to them on the phone, whether we are on our mobile, whether it is Skype, whether it is a blog, whether it is Facebook, whatever it is—we must not lie. God cannot lie. God never lies—not even to sinners, not even to those who don't deserve anything good, who don't deserve the truth. He doesn't lie. If it were otherwise, we would be altogether without hope because we could not know that the Bible was true. If lying was justified on account of the worthiness of the recipient of the message, then we could not know that God had given us truth. God cannot lie. We must not lie. We must never bear false witness, not by any means of gadgetry of any kind.

Well that's basic. Secondly, **thoughtfulness**. Well, here we have much more to say. We are trying to keep it relatively staccato like because the time is late, but here we have to consider several different things.

First of all, the obvious one is, what we say. **What we say**. We must not relax standards of speech because we are using a computer, because it is on the web, and because the people we are communicating with are not actually there in front of us. This is part of the danger—we will come to the dangers more specifically later. But because the people are not there, it is very easy to relax our standards of speech. It shouldn't be so. The fear of God should pervade our thinking, whether there are people in front of us or not. But because we are still sinners, there are certain situations of communication where we more easily lower our standards of speech in than others.

What should not be spoken to people eye to eye should not be communicated to them by a networking site either. There should be no viciousness simply because we are not face to face. All internet communication—the temptation is to be less restrained because the consequences of what we say and the effect on the person who is receiving it is not visible; it is not as tangible. The response will only come via the computer screen, and because we tend to fear man, we feel less of the fear of man communicating in that way, than we do when we are face to face with people. That is part of our sinfulness, but it is a sinfulness that we must mortify.

So we mustn't become careless about fairness, about seeking to do good, seeking to do good to all men, especially the household of faith.

We shouldn't flirt. We shouldn't flirt on social networking sites. You say, "well surely Christians don't need to be told that." Well, yes, Christians do need to be told that. Christians say things on a social networking site that they would never have the nerve to say if they were actually in the presence of the people they are speaking to. Shyness is less operative, a bit more time to think, more time to make a subtle comment that they can backpedal from and re-explain if it causes offense.

That's why our Larger Catechism condemns under the 7th commandment "all corrupt and filthy communications, or listening thereunto." And in fact we read that, didn't we, in Ephesians 4:29: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

And Ephesians 5:3-4: "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; 4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks."

So we must think about what we say. I am well aware that this is stating the obvious. Of course, we must. Christians must think about what they say, by whatever mode they say it. But sometimes these things that are obvious still need to be spelled out; there needs to be an alertness to these things in our mind.

But then, secondly, and we believe this is particularly important in the use of social networks—**we must remember to whom we are saying it**. We must know whether we are saying something to all (if it is in the public domain), or whether it is in some list of friends. But we must never forget who either will or may see what we have written. Never fail to consider the effect of what you are saying on all who may have access to it. Perhaps you are thinking of one or two particular people, people who have responded and you are having an exchange with. But what about those others that haven't said anything for quite some time, but they are on the list. The tendency is to forget about those who don't communicate very much. But, you see, Biblically, we are to think about all who will see any communication that comes from us. And that is very often forgotten—that something that was really not, hadn't been thought through and is intended for some, is seen by people who haven't really entered the mind of the one putting a communication on. And that is particularly true if you are not used to speaking to a range of people at one time. It is very easy to forget some of those who will see or read what we have written.

Such embarrassment has often been caused by thoughtless comments not intended for all those who actually see them and have access to them. So you should never say anything without thinking who can read this, who can see it. You need to be aware of who has access to it.

Well, a third consideration is, restraint. **Restraint**.

The Scripture says in Proverbs 10 and verse 19: "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips *is* wise."

For some people, their lives revolve around their computer screen. And really if you are always communicating, then there is a multitude of words. And, you have to ask, “Am I really doing good, by this vast output of communication.” It is a great mistake to think that communication is always a good thing. Godly communication is. Considerate speech from godly friends is worth having; it is a blessing. But not everything.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 7, verse 21, we read: “Also take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee.”

That verse is telling us that there are things we would better not hear, because they are not considerate statements. Sometimes people say things in a heated moment or a careless moment, and they wish they had not said them, but they cannot be withdrawn. Once you make a comment, yes, if it wrong, you apologize for it. But it cannot be obliterated as if it never happened. And some things are better not said. Some things are better not heard, as that text tells us, because they cannot be erased from the memory.

Proverbs 29, verse 11: “A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise *man* keepeth it in till afterwards.”

A fool uttereth all his mind. And there are plenty of internet fools. Everything that comes into their head goes straight unto the internet. That is not good enough for a Christian. We have to consider what we are saying. The speed of communication on the internet generally makes for much un-thought-through content. And it reaches many people very quickly. And strife is generated.

The Scriptures speak of the tongue as a little member, and yet how great a matter it kindleth. Well, the internet is an extension of the use of the tongue. A Christians should not be a blabberer who just pours it all out without thinking. A Christian should think about what he says and therefore should think about what he says on a networking site.

Then there is **confidentiality**. The breaking of confidence is a great sin. A breach of trust. To undertake not to disclose to others something and then to disclose it, is a sin. And it is a sin that can easily be committed through social networking. And when it is broken by that means, it can be very badly broken as well. Keep confidence.

Then **privacy**. This is not quite the same thing. There are some things which don't involve a breach of confidence but which should be kept private. There is a notion today that the more people express themselves the better. It simply is not true. We are far too sinful to indulge the luxury of telling everything that is in our hearts. The idea that we pour everything out is simply not a Biblical concept. Some things are meant to be private. Limited expressions of affection, for example, between a man and a woman are legitimate even in front of others. But not all. There are intimacies that should not be in public and therefore should not be expressed on a networking site where others have access to it. There are things that should be private. The intimate relationship between a man and a woman is one of them. And the verbal aspect of that should not

be blazed abroad. It is not edifying to others. It may entertain people, but it can lead people into sinful thoughts.

So these are some of the elements of thoughtfulness that ought to be found in our use, if we do use social networks--and indeed with all communication by modern technology where everything is so fast. We should be careful about what we say. We should be alert to whom we are saying it or potentially so. There should be restraint because we sin easily with words. We should maintain confidentiality. And those things which ought to be private in speech should be kept private when it comes to using the web.

Thirdly, the special dangers. **The special dangers.**

We have mentioned one—**the speed and ease and scope of communication**. If you can't cope with applying Biblical standards of speech to the use of social networking, then don't do it. If you can't apply Biblical standards of speech to social networking, then don't bother.

Life can go on without Facebook. There are people who actually manage to live their lives, hopefully to the glory of God, without Facebook. We are not condemning it—that would be going beyond the word of God. But we do say, consider that life is possible without it. And if you can't maintain Biblical standards of speech in your use of the internet, do without.

Then, another danger is the illusion of privacy, **the illusion of privacy**. When you are in a crowd of people, you know you are not in a private situation, instinctively. But when you are sitting in front of a computer, in your own home, and no one else is there, there is an illusion of privacy. But it is only an illusion. How much communication by means of computer do you think is absolutely water-tight private. And the answer is none, really. It depends how good a hacker is. But just about everything you do on the computer, if a sufficiently-skilled hacker was sufficiently interested (and most of our stuff is far too mundane to arouse such interest but if so) they would gain access to it.

There are gradations of security. Some is more secure than others. But I'm saying that in order to shatter any subconscious thought that sitting in your own study or front room or whatever with your computer, that once you start using that computer then what you are doing is as private as your own home. It isn't. And we need to be aware of that.

And social networking from your own computer may feel more private than it actually is. And I hope I'm not treading on anyone's toes too much. But sometimes we've been astonished at what Christian families put on websites and blogs and networks and so on about their own family. It is almost like an advert(isement) saying "stalkers, come this way!" Because they put everything, masses of information that anyone who wanted to could find. So beware of the illusion of privacy. Never mind just who you *want* to read it; think about who *can* read it.

Your thoughts about who you are addressing, who you want to see these photographs and so forth. The fact that that is your intention is not mysteriously conveyed to the computer. You have to think about who actually *can* see it.

Then there is **the danger of escapism**. The illusion of friendship. Of course, I know sometimes people are interacting with people who they know face to face anyway. And sometimes people strike genuine friendships in this way. But there can be an illusion of friendship. There's the pride of having such a huge list of "friends." Are they real friends? Some might be, but let's not delude ourselves. We can feel safer; we are less vulnerable. If they say anything we don't like, we can strike them off [unfriend them] as it were. It is far harder and yet far more worthwhile to develop real face to face friendships.

There is **the danger of pretending that we are contending for the truth**. We mentioned this is connection with blogs. That we can kid ourselves, that we are really contending for the faith, but we never actually face anybody eye to eye and tell them the truth and feel their rage and annoyance at what we are saying. It is nicer to do it at a computer keyboard. And we can deceive ourselves that we are contenders, that we are doing valiant things, but we never get beyond our computer keyboard.

I am not saying that it isn't a legitimate way of contending for the truth. But let's not deceive ourselves. If all we ever do on behalf of the truth is at a computer, then we really are not facing reality. We need to be able to look sinners in the face and tell them that they need the Lord Jesus Christ. Or, if people are in error, serious error, and we think something should be said, we should be able to do that face to face. So there is a danger of escapism. Living in a virtual world. Living in an unreal world. Pretending that we are doing what the word of God requires, when it really is only a minor part of Christian witness. Our Christian witness generally has to be among actual people, physically present.

Then, there is **the danger of self-centeredness**. How many people really need to know if you've got a cold, or a sore throat, really. You might mention it to your family at the breakfast table, but do you really need to report to a large group of people that you are feeling a little under the weather? Are you that important? Isn't this a bit egocentric?

I don't know what you all do, those of you who are on Facebook or whatever. But there are people who scarcely breathe without reporting it on Facebook. This is nonsense. We aren't that important. Our families get a bit tired if we moan about everything, don't they? And yet we think there is a whole group of people out there who want to know if we've had a bad night's sleep or whatever. Really, we need to get a grip on ourselves. We are not that important.

I don't mean to sound unsympathetic to those who are feeling unwell. But you've got to consider, would you go into a group of thirty people and declare the state of your health

at this particular point? Well, why do it on Facebook? There has to be some realism about the whole business.

And then there is **time wasting**. Time wasting. Some people find it to be a form of relaxation. But how much time are you spending talking inconsequential drivel on the computer? Is that “redeeming the time, knowing that the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16)?

Could you imagine John Calvin spending hours every day telling his friends about his ailments? (It would have to be hours because he had so many.)

There has to be a Christian robustness that is not self-absorbed. We are here to serve God, to glorify God, to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. We only have one life in this world. How much time are we going to spend typing vanities. Do we have such an excessive time spent in the Word and in prayer that we can afford to waste it?

I’m not saying there is no place for relaxation and recreational use of social networks. But we shouldn’t find our great comfort in telling a group of people everything about ourselves. There is a place for confiding in Christian friends. Of course there is, and we all know the benefit of that. But if you are going to socially network, let it be a very minor part of your life.

And that brings us lastly to addiction. **Addiction**. When we think of the word *addiction* we think of drugs or drink or something of that sort. But actually we can become addicted to just about anything. Can you do without Facebook? We mentioned earlier on, if you can’t do it right, don’t do it. And that life can go on without it. But can it for you? Can you live without it? Or are you addicted?

Now, it is true, we all get used to things. Some of us can remember when mobile phone were quite a novelty, but we got used to mobile phones. The same is true with e-mail and other uses of the computer, we get used to them. I’m not saying, “Are you used to it?” But, “Can you do without it?”

Things that start out as quite a novelty and then a useful thing end up becoming indispensable. Because we build our lives on the assumption that they are there. We used to manage quite nicely without a mobile phone. Now to go out without it there is a sense of panic. “I’ve forgotten my mobile.”

It is not just whether we have gotten used to it. It is whether we could live without it.

What is the big event in your day? Is it reading Scripture? Is it prayer? Or is it keeping up with Facebook? You can’t go to bed without reporting on Facebook... If that is the case, you need to review your priorities.

Our comfort is not in spilling everything out on Facebook. Our comfort is pouring out

our hearts before the Lord. Don't let any social network become a substitute. You confide in your social network instead of the Lord...

Well, you say, that doesn't happen! It does happen. It does happen. There are people who say far more on their social network site than they do to God in prayer... Christians!

We are to be stewards. Stewards of our time. Stewards of our words. Not only what we say but to whom we say it. You say, "But I treat everybody the same." But why do you treat everybody the same? They are not the same. People need different things. What you say that might be well understood by one person might not be understood—might be misunderstood—by someone else.

Something you say that would be taken in good humor by one person might be very hurtful to someone else. Because they are not the same. So be careful. Stewards of our tongues. Stewards of our words. Doing good to all men. Provoking to love and to good works. Not spilling out thoughtless words that can cause havoc. Perhaps havoc that you don't even see. Use methods of communication for good, for your own good and for the good of others. But not as a substitute for the main things in the Christian life—worshipping God, studying His Word, calling upon His name, living to His glory in whatever position you are in the family or in the society in which we are, or in the Church. Don't waste your time on irrelevancies or even worse than that—spilling out words to no profit. In the multitude of words, there wanteth not sin.

Let us seek by the grace of God that every thought should be brought captive to the obedience of Christ. Amen.