Social Networking, Part 3 (Idolatry)

Matthew 16:25;Luke 17:33; John 12:25 Wed, December 3, 2014

*For whosoever will* ***save*** *his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*

*Whosoever shall* ***seek to save*** *his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.*

*He that* ***loveth*** *his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.*

# Introduction

1. Let me wonder out loud about something: how much of our culture’s infatuation with social networking has to do with our desire to *save our lives*?

* I don’t mean salvation in the gospel sense – although there would be a connection there.
* I just mean that we are afraid of losing our lives – of losing the moment.
* People seem to be more concerned with recording events than they are with living in them or even enjoying them.
* Most of us would say that Jesus was speaking here of a much bigger problem. And I would agree with that.
* There are those who determine to hold on to what they have at all cost, without any regard for the will of God.

Mt 16:24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

26 For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Lu 17:31 In that day, he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back.

32 Remember Lot's wife.

33 Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

* Many of the people in Hell chose to keep their life rather than take up their cross and follow Christ.
* They went for their stuff instead of going after Christ.
* The desire to document an event certainly *might* not be the same kind of thing.
* But I believe that this is the case more than what we would like to believe.
* At the very least, could we not say that this is at least a feature of our fallenness, the desire to hoard, not just material things, but memories and moments.
* Suppose someone loved his life and sought to save it. How would you tell?
* Would their inability to enjoy an afternoon because they have to record it and broadcast it, would that be an indicator?
* Where does the desire to save your life show up? Does it only appear in the big picture, or does it show up in the small moments of our lives and the way we live those moments?
* If a person is saving his life, how would that affect his behavior? What kinds of things would he do? Would he live in the moment, or would he be constantly obsessed with *keeping* that moment?
* If a person loves their life, how would that look? Would that show up in their behavior in any way?
* The answer is that, of course it would show up in their life and behavior, in the way they handle important moments and events in their life.
* Now, I have nothing against taking pictures and videos. Taking a picture in itself does not prove that you have a problem in this regard.
* But I have repeatedly urged you to stop and consider – to examine your use of technology.
* What we will not examine has the greatest power to enslave us and to become an idol.

1. The last time we considered social networking, we mainly focused on the Tower of Babel.

* We see the underlying heart issues on full display at that event – the Genesis of social networking.
* Social networking is our modern-day Tower of Babel.
* We see this in social networking’s power to unite people around a cause.
* We see it in the way social media dissolves our distinctions and gives us a “universal mind” – or at least “mindset.”
* We see it in the erosion of individuality, the almost robotic way we all seem to speak the same things.

1. Underlying that unifying power is the power of communication that is amplified in social networking.

* And beneath it all is a quest for image, for name. “Let us make us a name.”
* John Dyer pointed out that “When God created the garden, he put humankind in it to reflect his image. At Babel, we find humans creating a city as their anti-garden and a tower as an image to themselves.” (p. 104)
* We might refer to Facebook as the great image to modern culture.
* Facebook (and the other various social-networking sites) are image-driven sites, and therefore image is very important.
* And that brings me to the point I want to make tonight…

# Division

I have already spent a good bit of time dealing with technology and the tendency in technology to become an idol – whether it is a car, a house, or a cell phone.

* We are discussing a specific technology now – technology for relationships and communication.
* And I want to deal with that more specifically now.
* There is something in our own hearts that makes us prone to idolatry. And there is something in technology – and specifically in social networking, that serves to enable that idolatry.

Tonight, I want to address the heart of the problem and then to begin looking at some of the features of our problem.

## The Heart of the Problem

1. Technology always highlights some feature of humanity and then enables us to overcome our human limitations.

* I feel like I have said that so many times now that you can all say it like you mean it yourself.
* Nonetheless, when we consider social networking, we need to go back over some familiar ground so that we can get a right perspective.
* The football team runs out the same tunnel for about half their games, and they run the same play, often multiple times in a game.
* Ruts are well-worn paths that show the direction we like to go, and they help to keep us on track. So we won’t worry too much about getting into the rut.
* By enabling us to overcome our human limitations, technology enhances that feature.
* It exaggerates our abilities. But it also exaggerates our fallen nature.
* Ultimately, what we really are in our hearts shows up in our use of technology --- what we are shapes how we use (and how we sin with it).

1. Now, I want to focus specifically on social networking so that I can show you the way it highlights, enhances and magnifies what we are.

* Social networks are driven by our innate longing for relationships, for friendship, for acceptance, for value and worth in this world.
* I have pointed out that social networks essentially are Internet-enhanced relationships.
* And so, what you see in social networking is that whatever a person is in real life becomes exaggerated through social networking.
* If a person is gregarious and a people-magnet, they will have lots of friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter.
* If a person is especially compassionate or encouraging, they will have a greater ability to be that through social networking.
* If a person is bitter or envious in real life, then his *ability* to be bitter and envious will increase dramatically.
* If a person likes to be petty or peevish or snarky, he will have more opportunity to do so on the Internet.
* And if a person is lonely in real life, that person will probably find Facebook a lonely world as well.
* The advances in social media demonstrate our deep longing for relationships, but they do not satisfy the craving.
* In fact, it could be argued that the advances only serve to drive it deeper.
* Our longing grows deeper, our deep dissatisfaction more apparent, the pain sharper.
* And this is what drives the idolatry of it. We depend on it so much, and it demands more and more and gives so little back in return.
* As we rely on social media to take the edge off our hunger, we also allow it to control our lives and our thinking more and more, and that is what gives it special power to become an idol.

1. Now, social networking does have one feature – a feature that I think is especially pronounced in social networking, that I want to discuss for a moment.

* We can call it The Narcissus Effect
* Now, first of all, the observers and pundits of media and technology have long been discussing the Narcissus effect.
* Bill Watterson, creator of Calvin & Hobbs, once wrote a strip of panels in which Calvin is reading a book and comes across Karl Marx’s quote: “Religion is the opiate of the people.”
* Calvin pauses for a moment, looks at his TV, looks at his book, and then says, “Marx hasn’t seen anything yet.”
* Of course, if Watterson thought TV was bad, I wonder what he thinks of the smart phone.
* Marshall McLuhan wrote at length about the Narcissus Effect back in the 1960’s – before the Internet.
* But what he wrote about I think applies more to social networking than what he was applying it to.
* I think you all know the story of Narcissus, the boy who became so infatuated with his own reflection that he lost track of all else and eventually died.
* And of course, there is no shortage of references to Narcissism in this day --- I read an issue of Time Magazine that was dedicated to the ME, ME, ME generation, and celebrated their Narcissism.
* Two points that McLuhan made that I want to point out: first, that Narcissus did not fall in love with anything that he recognized as being himself.
* That is an important part of the story.
* This is why social networking in particular has so much power to carry us away captive --- because it is not *ourselves* that we are caught up with. It is the *image* of ourselves that consumes us.
* And the second feature of Narcissism that is relevant – and I think even more relevant than the first – is the *numbing* effect.
* We get our word “narcotic” from Narcissus --- and Narcissism has a numbing effect. It numbs us to our pain.
* When we become obsessed with something – whether it be our profiles or our status updates or our friend requests or the relationships we are conducting through these various social networks…
* We become numb. And that is why social networking has such power to take us prisoner.

1. But of course, the problem isn’t primarily in the technology; the problem is rooted primarily in the idol factory of our hearts.

* Our hearts long for something to fill the void.
* And the natural heart does not long for God to fill it --- at least not the God of the Bible.
* We long for anything else – any substitute relationship that will fill the void where God ought to be.
* What we depend on and do not examine --- what we rely on without realizing that we rely on it, and without questioning our reliance on it (there is that narcosis) --- can easily become an idol to us.
* Let’s face it: far too many people – Christians included – measure their worth and their identity by the number of friends they have on Facebook or followers on Twitter.
* Too many measure themselves by who their friends are, who posted on their Facebook page or who “liked” something they posted.
* Too many measure themselves by what they can post about doing.
* And far, far too many are obsessed with their profile, with their “brand.”
* These are all marks of idolatry. It permeates our culture, and our churches are infested with it.
* It has become the replacement for a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ, a relationship that still doesn’t take place through any medium on the Internet.
* But this is what makes social networking such a powerful substitute (my opinion only, here)…
* Because social networks like Facebook and Twitter have a transcendent quality.
* It is beyond us, something we really don’t understand. It seems almost surreal in the way it works, otherworldly in how intuitive it can be.
* It goes beyond this life, into a realm that is unfamiliar to us.
* And that is why it has become such a popular substitute for God.

## The Features of our Problem

Two idols of the mind are enhanced by social networking – self-worship (image, profile, status) and the worship of relationships (which is another form that self-worship takes).

### Self-Worship

1. Careful, Your Profile is Showing

* Profile – your personal brand
* Status
* Exhibitionism
* Image   
    
  Roland Barthes described the mental process of a photograph or selfie:  
    
  “I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy.” (*iGods*, p. 188-189)
* He describes it as authentic inauthenticity (basically – these are my words) Detweiller adds this thought:  
    
  “Think about the poses we adopt because we know the image might show up on Facebook or Twitter. We project a version of ourselves that we’d like to see forwarded to envious friends.” (189)
* Barthes again: “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object…” (189)

### Relationship Worship

* Friendship or “Fans”

1. The Escapist World of Social Networking

* Voyeurism
* Escaping reality
* Escaping responsibility

1. Facebook Envy

2Co 10:12 For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

1. The limits of the “like” feature (*iGods*, p. 161)
2. Are you enjoying your relationships, living in them, or are you posing them and recording them and embalming them?

# Conclusion

J. Gresham Machen --- “The world is restless today. There are many voices but there is no peace. Men are feverishly saying to a god manufactured to serve the social needs of man: ‘Deliver me; for thou art my god.’ They are trying to produce decency without principle; they are trying to keep back the raging sea of passion with flimsy mud embankments of self-interest; they are trying to do without the stern, solid masonry of the will of God. When will the vain effort cease? Shall we continue on our wanderings? Shall we continue to stagger like drunken men? Shall we still fashion a divinity that shall serve our utilitarian ends? Shall we amuse ourselves with idols? Or shall we return unto God?”

# Conclusion