Redeeming Social Life Online|

By Justin Buzzard

How many of our lives and relationships would radically change if we didn't have a cell phone, email, and access to the Internet? How many of us are unable to be fully present with the people we're with, because we're distracted by our cell phones, *iPods*, *Blackberries*, or *iPhones*?

Over the last few decades, we've experienced greater technological development than in any previous generation. These technologies have radically affected how we participate in community, how we operate as families, and how we work.

Technology is usually created with the intention of making life better. However, it always carries the possibility of blessing or curse because it exists as a tool used by fallen people in a fallen world. If we use tools without understanding their power, we stand a good chance of harming others or failing to exploit the tremendous good they can do.

Enter *Facebook*.

Like most other new things, Christians tend to either embrace *Facebook* uncritically, or retreat from it and condemn its use. Embracing technology uncritically—the "bear hug," as I call it—means using a technology without thinking through its impact on yourself and others. The "cold shoulder"—ignoring/retreating from/condemning a technology—is often driven by misguided fears and shallow biblical interpretation. While the problems with embracing uncritically are more easily discerned, giving a technology like *Facebook* the cold shoulder also has its problems.

Humankind has been given the work of mastering the earth, which involves the tasks of creating and cultivating (Gen. 1:28). Ultimately, this mandate is to be carried out in service of the two great commandments—love of God (which involves honoring his creation) and love of neighbor (Mat. 22:36-40). As we participate with integrity in technologies that provide avenues for loving God and other people, we are doing something deeply human and honorable.

Scripture calls us to thoughtfully create and cultivate. As this relates to technology, it involves taking a third way, what I call the "side hug:" thinking through how a technology such as *Facebook* can cause harm or help in our pursuit of loving God and others.

After an initial 30-day experiment with *Facebook*, I'm now several months into being a regular, almost daily, user. Along the way, I've detected many ways in which *Facebook* can hinder our pursuit of the great commandments, and many ways participation in it can be leveraged as a means of blessing.

First, here are nine ways *not* to use *Facebook*:

1. Don't use status updates to complain. For many, complaining has become a trend on *Facebook*. With their status updates, many people broadcast consistent grumbles, like: "Joe is bored," "Joe can't wait to leave his stupid job," or "Joe is exhausted." By all means, be real, be honest and authentic, but beware of the culture of complaint.

2. Don't measure your worth/identity by the number of your *Facebook* friends and interactions. *Facebook* measurements are the opposite of gospel measurements. *Facebook* tells you that the more *Facebook* friends and interactions you have, the more important, loved, and accepted you are. The gospel tells sinners an opposite message: no matter how lonely, unpopular, or unnoticed you might feel, in Jesus you are more loved, accepted, and noticed than you can imagine.

3. Don't value forming *Facebook* (virtual) friendships more than real world friendships.

4. Don't diminish your face-to-face time with people to check what's going on in your *Facebook* world. If you've ever been out to dinner with friends and found yourself anxious to pull away and check out what's happening on *Facebook*, you know what I'm talking about.

5. Don't be someone online you'd never be in person. Let *Facebook* reflect the real you, not some pseudo-personality that emerges when you're alone with your computer.

6. Don't hurt and exclude others (intentionally or unintentionally) through use of applications such as "Top Friends." Likewise, don't become jealous of others having conversations without you. Be patient and gracious with potential misunderstandings that inevitably happen in cyberspace. When you spot something on *Facebook* that causes feelings of hurt or jealousy, assume the best.

7. Don't allow *Facebook* and online life in general to make you a more distracted person. If you've noticed that use of *Facebook* and online life—constant change, updates, movement, and hyperlinks—has made it more difficult for you to sit down and read a book for one hour, you'd benefit from stepping back and evaluating how this technology is affecting you.

8. Don't allow *Facebook* to tempt you away from your calling and work. Don't let *Facebook's* little status updates ("Lisa is chewing gum") and Wall writings take your focus off the great and big things that your heart should be engaged in, namely the work that God has put you on earth to do.

9. Don't let *Facebook* cause you to think about yourself more than you already do. You were created to look outside yourself toward God, other people, and the wonder-filled world he has made for you to enjoy and cultivate.

In the same vein, here are six ways to use *Facebook* to love God and others, and care for your own soul:

1. Use *Facebook* to get back in touch with far-away friends, showing them how Jesus has changed you. As *Facebook* has reconnected me with friends from my past, a number have been struck by how much I've changed. High school friends from Sacramento regularly express shock at learning that I'm a pastor.

2. Use *Facebook* as an extension of face-to-face relationships and to enhance time with people. Get to know people and love and care for them better when you're with them because, through *Facebook*, you know more about who they are and what's going on in their lives.

3. Use *Facebook* to take the focus off of yourself. *Facebook* can actually help you get outside of yourself and your problems. Next time you login, use the time to focus on creatively listening to, loving, and encouraging others. Approach *Facebook* thinking about what you can give.

4. Use *Facebook* to sharpen and discipline what you do with your time. *Facebook* status updates can serve as a form of built-in accountability. Just knowing that my *Facebook* community can read my updates provides additional motivation to stay on task and actually do what I say I'm doing.

5. Use *Facebook* to quickly announce and facilitate great face-to-face gatherings. Instead of taking 45 minutes to call 10 people to come over for a spontaneous evening, use *Facebook*.

6. Use *Facebook* to influence other people for Jesus. Create a new culture with your status updates. Use them to love, encourage, teach, and challenge people.

Recently, my wife used a *Facebook* status update to express how her reading in the Gospel of John was encouraging her. One of my wife's friends from high school read my wife's update on a particularly difficult day, triggering her to begin reading the Gospel of John. Since that status update, my wife and her friend have had several fruitful conversations.

We are all in different places in our use of technology. As a result of bear hugging, some of us are Internet addicted and need to take a fast or maybe even a permanent break from *Facebook*. Some of us need to take more time to reflect, get alone with God, and ask him how to engage this technology for his glory, our good, and the good of others. A few of us are giving technology the cold shoulder and need to catch up with the 21st century.

May we work to put our use of *Facebook* beneath Jesus' feet, along with everything else in our lives.

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Safety Tips for Social Networking

Social Networks or Online Communities have become an integral part of the lives of many teenagers today. There are some real dangers involved, as there are in off-line aspects of a young person's life. But rather than attempting to deny access and participation in this form of online socializing, we suggest that with some common sense, open, calm dialogue, and simple guidelines, participation in an online community can be a safe and enriching experience. Here are our tips for making this happen (More information about social networking is available by scrolling down this page.):

For Parents:

1. **No social networking for kids in middle school or younger**. We recommend a minimum age of 16 for participation in on online community. Generally, children younger than 16 are not mature enough to handle the opportunities and challenges of social networking.
2. **Balance your teen's need for privacy and self-expression with concerns about safety and responsibility**. Forbidding social networking sites probably won't work for kids in high school, so focus your energies on appropriate postings and safety information. Begin an open conversation about your teens' social networking experience. Try to establish a context for discussion that is not combative or accusing.
3. Create your own account on MySpace or another social network. Spend some time browsing the network's site. This will give you familiarity with the world that is so essential to your teen(s) and their friends and will facilitate future conversations.
4. If your child has an account, require that they show it to you. Periodically monitor/read it.
5. **Create safe privacy settings.** Make sure they're set for "friends only."
6. Set the expectation that only people they know in real life should be on their "friends" list.
7. Know your children's passwords, screen names and account information. This will enable you to view their pages even if they set their profile to "private". (Private profiles are accounts that can only be viewed by others given explicit permission to view it. This is a double-edged sword, in that it means strangers [like sexual predators] don't have an easy way to learn about or harass the private account owner. However, it also means that without being granted access, parents and other adults in positions of authority or care-giving cannot view the online activity of the owner either.)
8. Remove online privileges if it becomes a problem. This is only as a last resort and keep it mind that a young person can establish an account and access it school, the library, or a friend's house. Clearly, open dialog and trust is best.
9. As another last resort, consider installing keystroke capturing software on your family computer from www.getnetwise.org. Again, this won't deal with your child's using computers away from home.
10. Talk with other parents, with teachers, and other adults who work with kids. Also, check out the links to other helpful websites below.
11. **Tell kids to think about their photos and entries before they're posted.** Since anything can be downloaded and forwarded, ask your kids if they want the world to see what they post. Remind them that future colleges or potential employers could be checking them out.
12. **Make sure they avoid all personal identifiers** and avoid postings about parties, events, or activities where a stranger could find them.
13. **Don't let kids meet strangers.**
14. **Know how your kids are getting online**. More and more, kids are accessing the Internet through their cell phones. Find out about what limits you can place on your child's cell phone. Some cellular companies have plans that limit downloads, Internet access, and texting; other plans allow kids to use those features only at certain times of day.
15. **Talk to your kids about bullying**. Online bullying can take many forms, from spreading rumors online and posting or forwarding private messages without the sender's OK, to sending threatening messages. Tell your kids that the words they type and the images they post can have real-world consequences. They can make the target of the bullying feel bad, make the sender look bad – and, sometimes, can bring on punishment from the authorities. Encourage your kids to talk to you if they feel targeted by a bully.
16. **Setting your profile 'Private' to screen outsiders.** Most social networks will permit you to set your profile private to prevent outside individuals from viewing your profile. This enables you to reach out to other's who you are friends with, but exclude incoming profile requests. I suggest parents enforce that their children's profiles remain private.
17. **Maintain your computer's defenses.** As a general precaution, it's important to make sure you have an updated anti-virus, firewall, anti-spyware and operating system updates. It's been noted previously, some MySpace advertisements contain malicious code and can infect your computer system.
18. **Consider using a fake name or alias.** There is no need to use your real name on social networks. Get creative and take a look into Social Security Administration's popular names database and find one you like.
19. **Don't get 'Phished'.** Phishing is a common tactic of spammers to compromise some else's account and send messages purporting their products. Take a moment to understand how to properly login to the social network. Don't click links you didn't ask for or expect. If a link prompts you to log in again — it's most likely a phishing scam.
20. **Research other online internet safety resources.** There are plenty of other resources to help you learn more about Internet safety. CERT has a security tip all about social networking. Plenty of additional resources for parents are freely available too from the SafeKids.com Web site. Also, check into ProBlogger, blogs about his blog stalker and his tips for blogging safely.
21. **Don't Meet in Person.** Christians are supposed to witness to people. This means inviting them to go to church and discussing your faith with people you may have just met. Yet the anonymity of meeting people online is a little more dangerous. You need to be very, very careful. If you do feel like inviting that person to church, you should discuss it with your parents and only go with friends.
22. **Get Rid of Bad Comments.** As a Christian you need to live up to a different standard, but it doesn't mean you live in a vacuum. You probably have non-Christian friends that are not as appropriate about their posts in your comments section. Even though they are non-Christian, it does not look good for you to have those comments on your profile. Also, if you see something too revealing in your comments section, you should delete it right away.

For Children:

1. Talk with your parents. Let them learn and understand the role of social networking in your life.
2. Never post anything you wouldn't want your parents, teachers, or future employers to see. Remember, O**nce you post information online, you can't take it back**. Even if they delete the information from a site, older versions may exist on other people's computers and be circulated online.
3. Never post personal information (phone number, E-mail or address) on the web. The same applies for your friends' information. Be aware that information you post could put you at risk of victimization
4. **Never** meet with anyone you first "met" online and tell your parent if anyone requests a meeting.
5. Only add people as friends if you know then in real life. Set privacy settings so that you have to approve people to be added as a friend.
6. Include your parents and other trusted adults as friends. If your parents do not have an account, give them access to your profile.