10.27 Truth in Love Today, pt 4 - phones and social media

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Father, may these things that have just been sung over us, may this be true, that the meditations of our heart, may the words of our mouth be pleasing to you. We thank you for the gift of your Word and we now look to your word and ask that you would, Holy Spirit, encourage us and challenge us and teach us through your word. In your name, Jesus, we pray.

Amen. Well, you know that we are in the midst of a sermon series where we're walking through the book of Ephesians, and we're walking slowly through this book, and our plan is actually to take this entire academic year walking slowly through the book of Ephesians. And along the way, we have been pausing here and there to pause on a concept or an idea that comes up in Ephesians and then take that and dive deeper into a particular cultural hot topic that relates to that concept or idea. So, you know, 3 weeks ago or 2 weeks ago, David was preaching through Ephesians 2 and the idea of new creation community, biblical community. What is that?

And then we paused on that to last week consider living out biblical community. How does it then play out for us to be welcoming foreigners into our midst. So, we spent last Sunday talking about that and then last Wednesday with a discussion and hearing more about that. And then that lands us this Sunday. We're continuing to pause for a moment on this idea of biblical community and this morning diving into this cultural reality of smartphones and social media and to have a conversation about how does How do we live out biblical community in the midst of all that smartphones and social media bring into our life?

So, that's the conversation that we're going to have, and I want to preface that just with a story to have you consider for a moment. So, many of you know that I grew up in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. I was raised in a Christian household, and my parents, they loved and they enjoyed They provided for us and they trained us up, my brother and sister and I, to know the Lord. When I look back, I mean, I look at my childhood and I felt so very loved by my parents. I felt so very enjoyed by my parents.

I know they loved playing games with me. They loved reading with me. They loved going to every single one of my sporting events or music events. They enjoyed me thoroughly. Literally, I felt that as I grew up.

I felt provided for. I didn't have everything, but I had everything I needed. I had so much of what I wanted. I felt provided for. I felt trained up in a knowledge of the Lord.

When I look back at my childhood, I have such gratitude and a gratitude that I could just go on and on and on about for what my parents provided for me in those years. When I was 21 years old, I went— did a pastoral internship in a small town called Darlington in Wisconsin, and my parents decided that they would make the 10-hour drive from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, to Darlington, Wisconsin, to come and visit me. So, imagine my parents make this 10-hour drive. Imagine what it would have been like if, upon seeing my parents, I said, oh, Mom and Dad, you know, I have a lot going on this weekend. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to spend much time with you.

There's, you know, there's these work responsibilities that I want to get ahead on. There's this movie I want to watch, and then I just want some downtime, some me time. So, I think I'm just going to have a little bit of time with you this weekend. How do you think they would

feel about that? What would be their perspective of my decision of the way I wanted to place my attention that week?

How would you feel if you were the parent, if you were in their shoes, how would you feel about my decision about the way that I'm going to place my attention that week? I think, you know, then I even ask, okay, well, what would I gain if I did that? What would I gain by placing my attention that weekend on, you know, some more work responsibilities, getting ahead, watching a movie, having some downtime? What would I gain by placing my attention in those places? And then on the flip side, what would I lose by placing my attention in those places?

This, you know, I want to consider it almost a parable of sorts. If we think then that our heavenly Father has come to visit us, how much attention are we placing on our heavenly Father as he has come to visit us? So, that's the conversation that I want to have. And we think about this reality that there's actually a lot of things vying for our attention in our culture right now, right? I mean, we have industries and companies that spend millions and millions of dollars to get our attention.

And then, once they get our attention, they make billions of dollars from our attention.

Attention. So, I read this interesting parts of this book recently by Neil Postman, and it was called Amusing Ourselves to Death. He wrote this book in 1985, and a lot of it— I know, interesting— a lot of it was his commentary on what TV was doing to our culture. And from his perspective, TV, the purpose of TV was to captivate an audience, and monetize their attention, to captivate an audience and monetize their attention. So the tactic was, let's get as many people watching our program as possible.

So think about, if you can, think about TV shows in the '90s and the early 2000s. Man, did they succeed on gathering a huge audience, on captivating this audience and monetizing their attention. So, then we kind of go through in history. We have, well, the internet comes along, right? And then smartphones come along and social media comes along.

And if we examine that today, I think we could conclude that the goal, the purpose, or yeah, the goal of social media and smartphones in many ways is the same as TV in 1985. It is to captivate an audience and monetize their attention. But the difference is they now have a huge audience. They don't need to get an audience because I think they have all of us. So now the tactic is keep them on, keep us on, keep us on, keep us on longer and longer and longer.

I looked at some research recently from a Pew Research poll, and this research reported that What was it, 1 in 4 adults, adults in general, 1 in 4 adults say that they are, quote unquote, constantly on their phones. So 25% of adults in general are constantly on their phones is what they report. More than 50% of adults report, quote unquote, that they're on their phones too much. Then we look at social media and we can learn that adults, again, adults in general, 84% of adults in general are on YouTube, 71% on Facebook, and 50% on Instagram. Now obviously, if we narrow down those demographics, those numbers would change, but adults in general, 84% on YouTube, 71% on Facebook, and 50% on Instagram.

So they have captivated their audience. They have us all. And now the tactic is keep us on longer and longer and longer. I read some of an interesting book titled Dopamine Kids, and I've been told that that's an offensive title and that it could just as likely be called Dopamine People. So, we'll refer to this book as Dopamine People.

And one of the things that this book reports, it talks about this interesting cycle of dopamine and serotonin where there are chemical releases in our body, and the chemical release of dopamine has to do with pleasure involved with desire, and the chemical release of serotonin has to do with the pleasure involved with reward. So there's— we are created with this great system where we have the pleasure of desire, and then we work, and then we get the pleasure of reward, and there's this cycle that's ideally drawn out, some desire and work and reward. And what has happened with researchers and marketing researchers, they have figured out a way, in many ways, to short-circuit that process by supplying after just a little bit of work, they'll give a tiny reward, which moves us right back into desire. And then just a little bit of work, we get a little reward again. Which short-circuits that, so we're on this kind of desire loop, desire, desire, and more desire, and more desire.

And you see it play out when, if I open up my phone and I pull up Yahoo, I get this, poof, I get confetti, and it celebrates the fact that this is the 7th day in a row I've checked my email. That's, whoa, that makes me want to check it again. And then here's what's cool. When I press send on an email, you hear this shh. That is super pleasing.

I want to hear that again. So I send another email and another email. Shh, shh. And then this happens on Instagram. I think of it as like Instagram is the modern-day hypnosis, where when you get on Instagram and you see, oh, that's an interesting picture.

Oh, another picture, another picture, a video, another video, and you're on this desire loop, and you're not even really thinking about what you're doing. You're just desire, desire, another picture, another video, another picture, another video. And something interrupts you and you wake up from what seems like a trance and you think, what? 5, 10, 15 minutes has gone by and I've been hypnotized by this loop, this endless loop of desire, just looking at the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. This interesting book, Dopamine Kids or Dopamine People, It reports that a similar thing happens with food.

So, if you think about potato chips, we've all eaten potato chips, right? And not a person in the history of the world has ever eaten a potato chip and said, wow, this is a fabulously prepared, incredible piece of cuisine. I'm impressed. No, we eat a potato chip and we think, hmm, I want another one. And we eat another potato chip.

I want another one and another one. And then we eat the whole bag and we feel terrible. And it's this loop of desire, right? So whether it's— whether you get a smaller bag, I wish. Then we get a second bag and a third.

So we're on this dopamine loop. So it's true that social media and smartphones, they have captivated this audience. They have us all. And the desire is to keep us on longer and longer. So you might ask the question, well, so what?

What does it matter? I mean, so these companies, they're making billions of dollars off of my attention, but, you know, and in return, I'm getting entertained and I'm being informed. So, you know, maybe I'm okay with that interaction. I'm a little with that transaction. A little embarrassed about it, but maybe I'm okay with that.

So then a discerning voice asks the question, well, what about, what about when you're pulled into sinful entertainment or sinful internet engagement of some sort? And then you, in defense, might say, well, what if, what if I never look at any pornography? What if I never gamble? And what if I never get tearing down people's character on social media? What if I never do any of the bad stuff, of the obviously bad stuff that's out there?

If I can avoid giving my attention to that obviously bad stuff, then isn't it okay? I mean, who am I hurting by obsessing over the next podcast voice that's popular or binge-watching videos of people falling down? Who am I hurting by doing that, right? And I think we then, you know, so the question is, you know, if we're giving that attention and we're saying, so what if these companies are making billions of dollars, I'm getting informed and entertained, isn't that okay?

So I don't know, are you okay with that?

I want to think about 3 principles that I think we can learn from Scripture that say a few things about what to do with our attention, where we should place our attention. So, the first principle that I want to consider with you is this principle from Scripture that we're actually instructed to place our attention on the Lord. So, Hebrews 12:2 talks about— the author of Hebrews instructs us that We are to run this race with perseverance, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. So, we're to place our attention on Jesus, fix our eyes on Jesus. In a similar way, Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 4:18, he says, fix your eyes not on what is seen, the earthly stuff, but what is unseen, the eternal stuff, or what is seen is only temporary and what is unseen is eternal.

So, we're taught pretty clearly that we are to place our attention, we're to fix our eyes on Jesus. So then the question is, well, what is that— how does that play out in your life? How does that look in your daily rhythm? How much attention are you giving to Jesus? How much are you fixing your eyes on Jesus?

The second principle that we draw out in Scripture in this regard is this reality that we find lasting beauty and satisfaction when we place our attention on the Lord. Philippians 3:8, Paul reminds us of this from his experience. He says, what is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. So, Paul was saying, out of all the good things I've experienced in life, nothing compares to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

I want to know Christ and I don't— the other stuff doesn't matter. Knowing him brings more deep and more lasting satisfaction than anything else in all the world.

I love the psalmist in 84, in verse 1 and 10 of Psalm 84, he declares, how lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. The psalmist looks to presence with attention on the Lord and he says, this is better than anything that the world has to offer. David agrees when he writes in Psalm 63. He says, better is your love, O Lord, is better than life.

Your love is better than life, anything that life has to offer. So you think about David, King David, and they reigned over Israel. Um, he knew all that the world could give in regards to power. He experienced all the power that you could experience in the world. He experienced all the wealth that the world has to offer.

He experienced any of the— all of the sexual pleasure that the world has to offer, and he says, of all the world has to offer, your love, O Lord, is better than any of that.

That's an incredible testimony from one who's experienced all these things, and he steps back and he says, Lord, your love is better than any of that. That's where I find lasting satisfaction.

The 3rd principle that I think we draw out of Scripture in this regard is that we're designed to place our attention on the Lord.

We're made for relationship with him. We know that in the beginning, God existed as one and as 3, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, existing in Trinity, in perfect loving community. And God, within perfect loving community, decided he was going to create humanity and invite humanity into the very perfect loving community of the holy God. So, he created us and we chose to rebel against him and to go after other things and put our attention in other places rather than enjoy his perfect loving community. And what God responds to us is he responds to us with grace and mercy and he pursues us and he sends Jesus to live on the earth, to die on the cross, and then to say, if you put faith in Jesus since he died for your sin, you put faith in his work and you can have access, you can have peace with God, you can move back into the peace and loving community of the triune God.

So, it's not just that God offered a way for us to have peace with God, individuals with God, but he brought all of those who place faith in him to have peace with God and peace with one another. So, what we were made for, what we were designed for, is relationship with God and in this perfect loving community, and in this perfect loving community with those who place faith in him. As I place my attention on God, he directs my eyes to others who have placed faith in him. And we read in Ephesians 2, as James referred to earlier in this service, Paul writes this in James 2:19, he says, Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

So, we are fellow citizens, fellow members. As we put our attention on the Lord, he draws our eyes to one another and we have peace and loving community with one another. We seek to bring God glory and we see, we pursue, we accept, we care for, and we enjoy one another in this loving community that we were designed for. We see one another, that is, we notice each other, we notice what God is doing in others' lives. We pursue each other, that is, we ask questions about what's going on.

We accept each other, that is, we give everyone value based on the fact that they were created in the image of God. We care for one another, that is, we support and we speak truth to one another. And we enjoy one another. That is, we understand how God delights in each of us, so we then take delight in each other as we see the work of the Holy Spirit in others that we meet who have placed faith in Jesus. I hope that each Sunday morning as we gather together, or whether it's during the week or in small groups, that we would see, pursue, accept, care for, and enjoy one another.

That's part of what it is to be in community. To do all of these things as we have God's glory in mind.

So, this is the new creation. This is the new community of us with God and us with his people. This is what we were designed for. Our attention on Christ leads our eyes to others, which displays and declares the glory of God. So, through Scripture, we learn that we are instructed to place our attention on God.

We are— we find the most beauty and satisfaction when we place our attention on the Lord. And we're actually, in fact, designed to place our attention on the Lord. Relationship with God and his people is the most important thing in this world. So, there are 2 parts of that that

I think we can struggle with in a given moment. One of those is this reality that relationship with God takes time.

When we look back, God pursued Abraham, right? And as he revealed himself to Abraham, he said, Abraham, I'm going to make you into a great nation, and 25 years later, he brought along a son for Abraham. We look at God pursuing Moses. God pursued Moses, he was revealing himself to Moses, he invited him up on top of Mount Sinai to learn more of the Lord. So, Moses goes up to Mount Sinai and you know what happens up there?

He waits there for 6 days all alone. Then on the 7th day, the Lord reveals himself to him and for the next 40 days, the Lord is revealing himself to Moses. The Lord is not in a rush in pursuing relationship with us.

It's interesting because there's so many ways in which we get panicky and we get rushed about things, but we need to calm down and recognize God is pursuing relationship with us and he simply does not rush.

Then when I think about this, you know, relationship with God, relationship with his people, I think about his people and I realize, man, some of you are a little bit difficult.

Some of us— I mean, us, us. Some of us are a little bit difficult.

We— I mean, right, if you get to know me well enough, I'm eventually going to annoy you. If you spend enough time with me, I'm going to hurt your feelings. And that's true of all of us. We have these rough edges and we talk at Covenant a lot about— we talk about the friction gifts. Of community.

As we spend time together, our rough edges, right, they soften each other. So, it's the rough edges of us imperfect people spending time in community and it grows patience and gentleness and the ability to forgive.

So, yes, relationship with God, it takes time. And relationship with people, we can be difficult, but it doesn't change the fact that relationship with God and his people is the most important thing that we can be placing our attention and our time on in all the world. Meanwhile, meanwhile, we have phones and social media that are designed to monetize our attention. We're lured into promises of instant gratification, and the reality is the internet is like instant gratification on steroids. I mean, the amount of immediate entertainment and information that we can get in an endless way is mind-boggling.

It's like potato chips, just another and some more and some more and some more, and then you just feel sick.

So, I want to present 2 ideas. How does this play out in life? I'm called through Scripture to put my attention on God and his people. I have millions of dollars of marketing trying to get me to place my attention on all sorts of other things. So, how does that play out in my daily life?

Could it be, is it sometimes that I wake up in the morning and what is the first thing I do? I reach for my phone and I start scrolling, and I'm thinking about, okay, what did I miss? What emails do I need to, you know, catch up on? And then, and then maybe you go down for breakfast, and while you're eating breakfast, you look at the phone and, how can I be entertained? Or, what's one more story I can read?

And, and then you get in your car for your commute to work, and we all have our phones synced up with our cars, so we, we put them there and we listen to, you know, this podcast on the way to work, and we stop at a stoplight, and since we're stopped, we can check our email, right? I don't do that, and you shouldn't either. So we don't do that. But you go on, you get to work, and the reality is, you know, this phone, it provides all these shortcuts that some are good, some are bad, I don't know, all these distractions. And so I get shortcuts and distractions I'm looking at throughout the day.

I get home and I just want to unwind in the evening, so I pull out my phone, look at some funny videos, catch up on some news, and then it's time for bed and I just need to relax and what's going to put me to sleep but more funny pictures of people falling down or whatever it is. And so, what happens is the last place and the first place that I give my attention is my phone.

Is that what your daily rhythm is like?

Or is your daily rhythm, could your daily rhythm look a little bit different? Could it be that you wake up in the morning and the first thing you do is not reach for your phone, maybe you pick up your Bible and you listen to the Lord's words and have a conversation with him? You get on for breakfast and you have a conversation with a family member or a friend or you look out the window at God's incredible creation and you just take that in and remind yourself of who he is as Creator and who you are as part of his creation. You get in your car and you head to work and you decide, you know what? I'm just not going to listen to any— I'm not going to turn on the radio or podcast.

I'm just going to have quiet and I'm going to ask the Spirit to tell me, Spirit, where do you want my mind to be as I'm driving to work this morning? And as you put yourself in that rhythm, you find yourself, you get to work, and you have this underlying question that just naturally comes up that is, Spirit, how do you want me to respond to this next task and to this next person? And would it be that that is the underlying question throughout your workday? Spirit, how do you want me to respond to this next task and this next person? And you get home and in the evening you have conversation with friends or loved ones and perhaps you think of someone that you can encourage and a way that you can encourage them.

And then before you go to bed that night, you read a page in a short devotional. And the last place and the first place that you've put your attention that day is on conversation with the Lord. Now, I know it's not necessarily, like, black and white, like you're living the first scenario or the second scenario, but I think it's good to just challenge ourselves and say, what— How much of that first one is my daily rhythm? How much of that second one is my daily rhythm? I think it's good for us to consider that.

What are you gaining by placing your attention on so many things other than the Lord and his people? What are you losing when we're placing our attention on so many things other than the Lord and his people. Where are we placing our attention? We're invited into the peace and the loving community with God and with his people. We're instructed to place our attention on this kind of community with God and his people.

We're reminded that we find lasting satisfaction in placing our attention on this kind of community with God and his people, and we realize that we are designed to place our attention on this kind of community with God and his people. If your heavenly Father came for a weekend visit, would you give him your attention? I hope that you will. I want to end

with just reading again a little bit from Psalm 84. This is the psalmist's reflection on his placing attention on the Lord and what it is to experience him.

He says, how lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Better is one day in your courts than 1,000 elsewhere. I want to encourage you to close your eyes and just listen to that again and even attempt to say that sincerely to the Lord. And then as we say that and just have a moment, the worship team will come up and they'll lead us into a song and you can stand and join that song when you're ready.

Just listen to this again with me and with the Lord. How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.