

## Whole40 Week 4

Fast From Email, Texting, & Social Media

Feasting on In Person Relationships, Phone Calls, Notes

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

We're getting deep into our Whole40 experience. We're paying attention to our own habits. What we eat. What we buy. Your habits root you in a world of relationships; habit express your desires and your values.

This week, you are asked to bring your curiosity to your habits around digital media. We want you to fast from email, texting, and social media; and feast on in-person relationships, make phone calls if you want to talk to someone, and write notes by hand. Our Scripture text for the week is a word about how to have healthy human relationships from the writer of Ephesians in chapter 4, beginning in verse 25. As background, you can think about Ephesians as one big letter about unity--Christ "breaks down the dividing wall" between people, making us one. Here's a portion of Ephesians talking about what that looks like in practice.

25 Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup>Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and do not make room for the devil. <sup>28</sup>Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with those who are needy. <sup>29</sup>Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup>And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup>Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup>and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. <sup>5</sup><sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

We'll come back to Ephesians in a bit. But I hope you noticed that these instructions contrast with the way we sometimes experience digital communication. Digital communication seems to enable--maybe encourage--the worst kinds of human communication; the exact opposite of the grace-filled relationships we are to have.

I know the shadow side of social media. I was a devoted Twitter-er for a decade. I began because at the time I was a pastor for young adults in New York City so I figured, "if my people are using these platforms, I better know what it's like to be on them." I got hooked on Twitter. I loved following my favorite writers and thinkers. I loved the "hot take"--how quickly people processed current events. What I never loved about Twitter was how mean people seemed. I don't think people are generally mean. But something about Twitter amplifies mean-ness. The platform is designed to make the most "engaging" content visible--and the "engaging" content is content that stirs things up. A popular tweet is rarely something like, "your cookies are so delicious." A popular tweets will be "your cookies taste like dog vomit." When you're on Twitter for a while, that's the kind of stuff that you start to

write because you learn that that's what gets likes and follows. The platform doesn't make people mean. It encourages mean-ness. Which, if you think about it, is... awful.

My most popular tweet was a take-down. In 2019, President Trump posted something foolish about his support for teaching the Bible in schools. Trump was technically a member of the church I served, so I had technically been his pastor. In this tweet, I saw an opportunity, I pounced.

(show tweet)

It went viral. Thousands of notifications. Likes. Retweets. Follows. Also criticism. Anger. Outrage. It was all overwhelming--like an auditorium of people all shouting at you.

I knew, even in my moment of internet stardom, what I had written was a cheap shot. You can argue that the guy deserved it--he acts horribly on social media, and here, he was pandering to people who love Jesus and the Bible when he himself could not care less about Jesus or the Bible. But I love Jesus and I know the Bible. I knew better. I knew every time I wrote a tweet like this, it was unfair. What I really wanted was to have a conversation. I wanted to ask, "what did you mean by this? Do you think that reading the Bible in schools might possibly harm some people for whom this is not sacred scripture? Perhaps this public policy has consequences that are worse than the benefits?" But you can't really have a conversation on Twitter. So you take the low road; you take a cheap shot.

I could feel, over time, my brain patterns changing according to the needs of the platform--I could feel myself always preparing to spin criticism in 140 characters or less. When Elon Musk bought Twitter, I closed my account. In time that I've been off social media, I feel better. I get my news a little bit slower. I'm a little less social; but a little more human.

This is what we are asking you to explore this week. Who are you when you're online, when you're posting or scrolling? Do your relationships there build people up? How?

Scientists have laid out a case *against* social media. Some of you saw the 2020 documentary, *The Social Dilemma*. The movie pulls back the curtain on these phones; it talks about how they are designed to addict us by rooting themselves into our brain chemistry. In particular, we have a neurochemical called dopamine that thousands of years of evolution developed to reward us for searching out things that are good for our survival: food, safety, sex. Dopamine rewards us for searching. The device in your pocket plugs right into your dopamine delivery system. The pretty lights and colors hook you in, but the real reward is the "information" that is perfectly tailored to your tastes and interests. Facebook shows people have a wildly good time. Instagram shows endless loops of novel attractions. Twitter gives "information" that you think you need. Snapchat and texting give you immediate interaction. Email activates what psychologists call the pull of "random rewards." All of these platforms, because they are "social," activate the part of your brain that likes to be communicated with and consulted.

None of this is bad; not inherently. Some studies show that social media has a positive impact on mental health, when used in moderation. I know so many people with limited mobility, or those who live far away from friends and family, for whom social media is a godsend. Other studies show the dangers. Addiction. Compulsive use. Unhappiness from searching and searching and searching and finding nothing meaningful--one scientist calls it "spiraling into a joy-seeking abyss." Inability to concentrate or get into a flow state. Inability to think about long-term problems or deal with frustration or pain. Teenagers, especially, seem to suffer from the constant comparisons and also from the cruelty.

This week, pay attention to your social media use. When do you use it? When you are bored? Or lonely? Is there a reason, or just because it's there--for a little dopamine jolt? When you are on social media, how does it make you feel? Good? Bad? Connected? Jealous? Anxious? Sad?

You are a social animal. Your body, your being, is made for connection, for collaboration, and for cooperation with other beings. You need to love and be loved by others. It began the very moment you were born. Without even thinking about it, you initiated a process of attachment to your primary caregiver. Your mind, your soul, is so powerful, so supple, so imaginative, that you are able to join your mind with the mind of another. You long to do so. Relationships are essential to your health and your happiness. That same neurochemical, dopamine that these devices trigger, is the chemical that gets released when you fall in love, or when a mother gives birth or breast feeds her child. This chemical is there for you to push you to pursue the intimate connections you need to thrive. Don't waste it on Instagram. We now know, too, that the pain of being rejected in a relationship, the pain of losing love--fires the same region of your brain as if you broke a bone. When someone acts cruelly toward us on social media--in a way they'd never do if we were in person because if we were in person we would see the consequences of our words--that cruelty actually hurts. Social pain is real; Tylenol helps ease heartbreak. You are beautifully evolved to seek out love and trust and friendship and to avoid hurting others.

This week, take time to build and nurture social relationships—at home, work, and school. Go out and see people--face to face. 93% of human communication is non-verbal anyway. Let your soul touch another soul. It's what you're made to do.

I talk a lot about our one-ness. I talk about "Beloved Community," being the "Body of Christ." I want you to know is that our connectedness is central to our theology. God is love; those who love know God. When we find our place of belonging in a community, when we experience the grace-filled movement from stranger to friend, God is there.

But for all the grandiose theological language I used about community, the truth of being in community is much more prosaic. Our souls don't levitate into relationships that give us a glimpse of God. No, we negotiate our mutual belonging in hundreds of daily interactions

with God's saints who are disguised as your spouse, your children, your grumpy neighbor, the angry guy on Twitter.

How will you choose to live out your oneness this week? Will you speak only truth? When you get angry, will you choose not to sin? Will you say only what builds others up? Can you be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving?

God's love has claimed you. You are made whole in God's love. And by love you are joined into one body--the Body of Christ. Live in love toward every other member of God's body.