

Welcome

One of the big headlines of the summer movie season was how badly DC's *The Flash* movie bombed. Despite being hailed by some of the studio as one of the best superhero movies ever, the film vastly under-performed at the box office.

One of the big reasons for that was the film's star, Ezra Miller. In the years leading up to the film's release, Miller was arrested multiple times for kidnapping, abuse, and last year was accused of grooming an indigenous child who was twelve years old at the time.

A lot of people chose not to see *The Flash* to protest Warner Brothers studio's decision to continue to employ Miller even after their bad behavior became well-known.

I had conversations with several of you about the complexities of the issue - my wife and I decided to go see the film while some of you chose not to.

What is the "right" thing for a Christian to do in a situation like this? Do we ignore - and fund - the bad behavior of bad actors and the studios who hire them? Or do we cancel them?

It reached its height with the #metoo movement, but it's not just bad men who are targets of cancel culture. Someone, somewhere on the internet decides that something someone said or did is bad. It could be something current, like the podcast host who wouldn't help his daughter open a can of beans, or something from the past, like when *Guardians of the Galaxy* director James Gunn was canceled for things he tweeted more than a decade earlier.

Once someone points out that bad thing, the internet forms a mob around the accused, deciding they're guilty and crying for cancellation. Sometimes, it's enough to drive the person off social media, as happened with the so-called BeanDad. Other times, the mob is looking for real-world consequences, like getting Disney to fire Gunn from *Guardians 3* (of course they eventually rehired him).

What makes cancel culture so scary? After all, when we learned that Bill Cosby had sexually assaulted over 60 women throughout his career, nearly no one thought there shouldn't be consequences. We might disagree on the exact *nature* of the consequences, but we all agree what he did was evil.

No, what often scares us is the feeling that anyone, at any time, could get canceled. Which means that at any time, any one of *us* could get canceled. And we're in a world where the language around race, gender and sexuality is changing all the time, particularly as we center more marginalized voices. Which of us hasn't said the wrong thing before? Which of us hasn't posted to social media something we didn't think all the way through?

Maybe our anxiety around cancel culture is really a fear for ourselves. So today, I want to ask, What is cancel culture, exactly? How do we know when it's happening? Should Christians participate? "Who Would Jesus Cancel?"

I hope by the end of our time together, we'll see the issue is at once simpler and more complex than we realized. I hope we'll see that God calls us to serious engagement with the evils of the world - not to ignore them. And I hope we'll see that while there are no easy answers, our responses can be grounded in God's unending love for us and for the world.

Message

It's been nearly a decade since we did a series called SOCIAL, where we explored what it looks like to live faithfully in online spaces. I don't have to tell you that a lot has changed in the last decade, particularly in the world of technology. TikTok didn't exist, X was still Twitter and Facebook hadn't sold us out to the Russians yet.

Smart Home devices weren't everywhere, always listening to us quite yet.

Yeah, a lot has changed in the last decade, so we thought it would be good to revisit our Social series. What does it look like to think faithfully about technology in 2023? How do we understand the forces shaping our culture, our homes, our imaginations? And how do we chart out a faith-filled course in this always-changing technological landscape?

We started by learning how to think theologically about technology - that while technological progress isn't inherently evil, it's also not morally neutral. God wants the way we engage technology to connect us more deeply to God and to each other.

Last week we looked at the invisible forces that decide what we see - the social media algorithms. We saw that God warns us not to give ourselves mindlessly over to them, but to take responsibility for what we see.

This week, I want to explore a phenomenon that's emerged in the last decade precisely because of the way social media technology has evolved: cancel culture.

Before we dive into the Scriptures, I want to explore what, exactly, Canceling is. As early as 2010, Lil Wayne was quoting an old Wesley Snipes role, talking about 'canceling' a woman. But it was in 2014, on an episode of *Love & Hip Hop* that "you're canceled" entered into popular vernacular — thanks largely to Black Twitter thinking that moment on the show was hilarious.

It was through social media that Black Americans continuing to work for civil rights began to use the term to echo the boycotts of the 1950s and 1960s. The idea remains the same: if someone with power is acting wickedly, one of the most potent weapons those on the margins have is the

boycott - we refuse to participate in the systems that give them power. So we don't buy from them, don't support their products. We cancel them.

It didn't take long for the majority culture to do what it usually does with Black culture — appropriate it and start using it differently. So Cancel Culture became a boogeyman for talking heads worried about their own status.

But there are two very different things that get smashed together under the banner of Cancel Culture. One of them is a careful, considered, organized refusal to participate in things that benefit those who cause harm. It's protest. We're going to dive more deeply into this next week.

The other is the 'social media mob', where people tweet first and ask questions never.

I get that impulse. After all, how many of us have had to experience learning something awful about someone we're a fan of? Whether it was Ezra Miller or Kevin Spacey or the singer from Brand New or Michael Jackson or... the list goes on and on and on.

We learn shocking, awful information about the true self they hid from us and we feel betrayed. We feel a need to respond. To lash out. To protect that part of us that was hurt by this revelation.

Or we feel outrage on behalf of a victim, someone who was hurt by this bad behavior. So we retweet, change our profile picture, add a hashtag to express our anger. We want to make it clear that we're *aware* and *outraged* and *doing something*.

But more often than not, those immediate reactions don't actually *accomplish* anything. All they really do is... change our emotions. They help us go from feeling sad, betrayed, outraged to feeling better.

This is why James warns us in his letter:

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. — [James 1:19-22](#)

James says, Whoa whoa whoa... not so fast my friends. Don't just act. Don't just *react*. *Think*. Slow down and really consider what God's path through the mess might look like.

James warns us against participating in that first thing that gets lumped under the banner of "Canceling" - that reactive impulse spurred by our moral feelings about bad actors.

James says, “Slow down. Don’t rush to action. Stop and consider.”

Do you know where James gets such a radical idea? From God’s own character. As [Psalm 145](#) celebrates:

The LORD is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. — [Psalm 145:8](#)

There’s something powerful in understanding that this is who God is - not the one who is angry with us, but the one whose love for us is infinite. Maybe we can rest in God’s love for us, especially in these times we come face to face with the evils of the world - or even the evils in our own spirits.

Song

That impulse to cancel is often a reaction to hurt - either our own feelings of betrayal or justifiable outrage at the exploitation of another. When we’re hurt, we want to react. That’s natural - we’re trying to protect that vulnerable part of ourselves. Film critic Claire Dederer recently released a book called *Monsters* that’s a long meditation on canceling. Early in the book, she observes:

This, I think, is what happens to so many of us when we consider the work of the monster geniuses — we tell ourselves we’re having *ethical thoughts* when what we’re really having are *moral feelings*. — Claire Dederer, *Monsters*

Ethical thoughts vs moral feelings. A couple of big differences there - ethics are external. They’re from God or the State or your parents.

Morals, on the other hand, are the things we’ve internalized. They’re our own internal sense of right and wrong.

A lot of the time, our ethics and morals overlap, but not always.

And in the case of people who’re bad actors, this gets really fuzzy. After all, we might all agree that what Ezra Miller has done is morally repugnant and a good bit of it is illegal, too. But does this mean it’s morally wrong to watch *The Flash*? What about projects Miller was in before their bad behavior?

This is a complicated question so we really should guard ourselves against acting out of strong emotion. Not because it’s always wrong, but because anger doesn’t *care* if it’s justified or not. Our default reaction is to consider anger a sin. But the Bible doesn’t treat it as such. In fact, the author of Ephesians famously says, **“And *don’t sin by letting anger control you.*” Don’t let the**

sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.” -- Ephesians 4:26-27

And we know Jesus was angry, particularly when it came to the kinds of oppression and injustice that tends to trigger calls for cancellation. But... isn't canceling doing exactly what Ephesians warns against? Isn't it lashing out, reacting in the moment with a tweet or a hashtag or piling on with the internet mob?

Ephesians is quoting Psalm 4 there, and the Psalm is doing something really fascinating, something that doesn't come across in English or even in the Greek of the New Testament. In the NLT version we use here, Psalm 4:4 reads:

Don't sin by letting anger control you. Think about it overnight and remain silent. -- Psalm 4:4

But a really literal translation reads more like this: “Tremble with fear before God and do not sin. Speak in your heart in your bed and remain silent.” -- Psalm 4:4

The Psalm was written in the context of a person who's being unjustly persecuted by people who claim to worship God. This particular command isn't a general one (like it is in Ephesians), but very specifically directed at the wicked. The Psalmist is saying, “You're headed down a dark path by working your evil. You should instead, consider what God thinks about your wickedness. Instead of speaking against me, you should speak in your heart - which is a Hebrew idiom that means “think long and hard” or “meditate” and keep silent.”

Talk to yourself and keep your mouth shut. A fun bit of poetry, but it also aligns with James' instructions - be slow to speak, quick to listen, slow to anger.

Friends, we face real issues in our world - injustice, oppression, cruelty, abuse. We owe it to those who suffer to be careful and considered in our responses. Unconsidered emotional responses, justified though they may be, do not create real change - in people or in systems. We're going to talk more about that change next week. But for today: I want to invite you to consider how you respond in the moment. Are you quick to listen and slow to anger? Or do you rush to judgment?

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to a table that's an act of divine mercy.

When in the last week have I been slow to anger and quick to show mercy?

When in the last week have I found myself reacting in the moment rather than being slow to anger?

When in the next week might I be tempted to react in the moment rather than being slow to anger?

How can I spend time this week slowing down enough to be merciful?

Assignment + Blessing