

Welcome

When the story of social media is told, one of the undeniable goods will be the way it changed protest action. Thanks to social media, everything from abusive CEOs to actual dictators have been toppled. Back in 2011-12, citizens in a dozen Middle Eastern countries used particularly Facebook and Twitter to organize massive protest and resistance actions. They resulted in regime changes in five different countries.

That's an incredible amount of power for a social media platform. They can make or break movies, can turn a stinking stock into a Wall St powerhouse and even topple an evil dictator.

So there's a lot of power in social media.

But as we've seen throughout this series, it's both good *and* bad. Facebook, which facilitated the Arab Spring, has proven to be detrimental to US culture and threatened our democracy. Twitter, which has always proven dangerous to minorities, has become a haven for White Supremacists and contributed to the rise of anti-semitism in the last couple of years.

When we step back to consider the hardware, the problems get more complex. In their annual sustainability report, Microsoft reported that their water usage increased by more than $\frac{1}{3}$, largely because of generative AI (think ChatGPT). We call the internet "the cloud", which makes us think it's all up in the sky. But it's not. It's in huge data centers that use a ton of natural resources for energy - including water to cool them. Just using AI to search (instead of the more traditional search algorithms) uses significantly more power -- and more natural resources.

We know our devices are made in countries with, let's call them 'very lax' labor laws, including child labor. And with rare earth minerals mined under unethical conditions. It's nearly impossible to buy a device - a cell phone, a laptop, basically everything our culture is built on.

No wonder *The Good Place* argued there's no such thing as ethical consumption in our modern world.

All of that raises some profound existential questions for Christians. What does faithfulness look like when being completely holy is impossible?

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.

Then 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.

Last week, we began to look at cancel culture. We started with that impulse to react that can spur us to rush to cancel someone. We saw that Scripture cautions us to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.

But we also saw that the rush to judgment is only one piece of cancel culture - and not the real heart of canceling. Canceling originated on Black Twitter as a social media incarnation of the sort of boycotts that drove the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s. Canceling as it originated is a careful, considered, organized refusal to participate in things that benefit those who cause harm. It's protest.

Jesus calls us away from a reactive, emotional response to bad behavior, especially on the public stage. But Jesus is no stranger to carefully considered acts of protest.

Of course Jesus didn't have social media. He couldn't organize a protest with a hashtag. But we do have an example of Jesus carrying out a carefully planned protest - his cleansing of the Temple.

Turn with us to Mark 11.

We don't usually think of the Temple Cleansing as a considered act; some scholars call it Jesus' *Temple Tantrum* when they're being tongue-in-cheek. Our impression is that Jesus walks into the Temple, sees what's going on and hulks out, starts flipping tables and whipping people.

But a careful reading of the story indicates that's not what happened at all. Jesus cleansed the Temple on Monday of Holy Week. The day before was his Triumphal Entry, what we celebrate on Palm Sunday. Take a look at a little, often overlooked verse that tells us what Jesus did the evening after he arrived in Jerusalem - the night before he cleansed the Temple.

So Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. After looking around carefully at everything, he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples. -- Mark 11:11

Jesus visited the Temple. If he'd flown off the handle, it'd have happened Sunday night. But that's not what happened. He came, he looked *carefully at everything* and then he went back to where he was staying. So he could make a plan.

What follows the next day is a planned, considered act of protest. Jesus makes a public stand against injustice and oppression.

There's a reason the Civil Rights protests of the 1950s and 60s grew around the Black Church. Black congregations throughout the South found in the story of Jesus a savior who knew their oppression and who moved to resist the systems that deny their dignity.

God does not ignore oppression. And neither should God's people. God calls us to careful, considered resistance to the systems and forces in our world that dehumanize us.

Song

Canceling as an impulsive reaction is something a people of faith should avoid. But what about canceling as a careful and considered protest?

Last week, we explored the work of film critic Claire Dederer, whose book *Monsters* is a meditation on canceling. She agrees with Jesus here, though her criticism of reactive responses isn't grounded in God's character, but in the more practical reality that it doesn't work. Dederer observes that this conviction we have that our individual response is what matters most is a reflection of the sort of classical liberalism of the Enlightenment, the philosophical conviction that what matters most is the individual human person. She observes:

Given the role we inhabit, it's natural for us to try to solve injustice and inequity through our individual choices. This feels like a great idea, but unfortunately, it doesn't really *work*...

This is the liberal, enlightened ideal of individual solutions — people will make good choices because people are inherently good. Liberalism wants you to turn your gaze away from the system and focus instead on the importance of your choices...

The way you consume art doesn't make you a bad person, or a good one. You'll have to find some other way to accomplish that. — Claire Dederer, *Monsters*

The way we consume art doesn't make us bad or good! An emotional reaction to bad behavior doesn't fix the problem - that's why Louis C. K. is doing stand up again, Kevin Spacey isn't in jail and Ellen just signed a new multi-year TV deal.

So what *are* people of faith supposed to do in response to this sort of bad behavior?

Turn with us to [Revelation 18](#).

Obviously, the ancient Christians of Asia Minor didn't have to deal with Twitter mobs. And if you tried to suggest we cancel Caesar, you might end up on a cross. But one of the major themes of the Revelation is that Jesus' way is diametrically opposed to the way of the Empire — so much so Rome is depicted as a fearsome beast that makes war on Jesus, depicted as a the Lamb.

Chapter 18 is part of the final vision where the war between the Empire and God plays out. The devil and the Empire have teamed up to take on God's people, and they do so by exerting massive pressure on those Christians - cultural, economic, religious, political pressures designed to force Christians to follow Caesar instead of Jesus.

The Revelation imagines all of these pressures as a woman riding the back of the Beast. Revelation calls her the Mother of Prostitutes.

Just before what we're about to read, the Beast and all the kings of the Earth turned on the woman and killed her. It's a savage scene that reminds us that Empires always fall, collapsing under the weight of their own violence.

Chapter 18 is the woman's funeral. We're only going to read the first bit here, but I want you to pay attention to the instructions God gives specifically to people of faith:

After all this I saw another angel come down from heaven with great authority, and the earth grew bright with his splendor. He gave a mighty shout:

“Babylon is fallen—that great city is fallen! She has become a home for demons. She is a hideout for every foul spirit, a hideout for every foul vulture and every foul and dreadful animal. For all the nations have fallen because of the wine of her passionate immorality. The kings of the world have committed adultery with her. Because of her desires for extravagant luxury, the merchants of the world have grown rich.”

Then I heard another voice calling from heaven, “Come away from her, my people. Do not take part in her sins, or you will be punished with her. For her sins are piled as high as heaven, and God remembers her evil deeds. Do to her as she has done to others. Double her penalty for all her evil deeds. She brewed a cup of terror for others, so brew twice as much for her. She glorified herself and lived in luxury, so match it now with torment and sorrow. She boasted in her heart, ‘I am queen on my throne. I am no helpless widow, and I have no reason to mourn.’

“Therefore, these plagues will overtake her in a single day— death and mourning and famine. She will be completely consumed by fire, for the Lord God who judges her is mighty.” — [Revelation 18:1-8](#)

God's instructions? "Come away from her, my people." The literal Greek there is "come out of her," which implies a much more... intimate connection to the violence and evil of the Empire.

The Revelation is concerned with the systemic exploitation of the Empire, how at every level it seeks to exploit and oppress for the good of the most powerful Romans.

Today, one of the biggest problems with so-called 'cancel culture' is that it focuses on individuals, rather than systems. Why was Harvey Weinstein able to abuse so many women? Why were Kevin Spacey and Louis CK able to take advantage of so many younger actors and comedians who looked up to them?

The #metoo movement wanted to create changes not in individual bad actors, but in the systems that enabled and protected abusers.

This is exactly the sort of empire logic Revelation opposes. And God's call in the face of that is, "Come out of her."

This is what the early calls for cancellation aimed to accomplish: by organizing boycotts, they hoped to redirect money, energy and attention away from those who profited from their exploitation and toward people, organizations and systems who honored their dignity and personhood.

The "come out of her" call is not an emotional response. We can't really respond emotionally to systemic evil because it's not intuitively obvious. We're shaped so much by the individualism of Enlightenment liberalism that we can't react well.

We need to remember James' injunction to be slow to anger and quick to listen. We need to educate ourselves, learn the outline and logic of the systems that deny human dignity.

And then we need to plan carefully - like the boycotts of the Civil Rights era that ended segregation on public transportation or in restaurants.

We're not going to find these by reacting on our social media feeds. Coming out of evil systems takes care and consideration.

Friends, we don't serve a God who rushes to cancel sinners. Rather, in the face of human sin, God launched a careful, considered plan to overcome our evil with God's infinite goodness.

And now God invites us by the power of God's own Holy Spirit, to follow God's example in rejecting those powers in our world that seek to crush human dignity. Will we choose to be slow to anger and quick to listen? Will we take the time to listen to God and discern how to come out of those evil systems?

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to a table that's an act of resistance to evil systems.

When in the last week have I spent time with the Holy Spirit and my church considering what God is calling us to next?

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 considering a faith-filled response to injustice?

Assignment + Blessing