

The Servant and Social Media

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every generation of Christians has had to think carefully about its new technologies — scrolls, codices, printing presses, radio, television. In our generation, the technology most intimately shaping souls is the handheld, always-connected, algorithmically curated social platform. A servant cannot simply ignore it: it is where many of the people we serve already live, and where many temptations and opportunities now travel. But a servant cannot simply immerse himself in it either: it is built on incentives that, left unexamined, work quietly against the inner life the Gospel asks of us. This lesson looks soberly at what social media is, what it does to the soul if used without thought, how the servant may use it without being used by it, and when to step away altogether. We aim not at rules but at wisdom — the wisdom of a servant who keeps his heart clear in a noisy age.

What Social Media Is

Let us begin by naming what social media actually is, because the word can hide its real shape. A social platform is a business built to hold our attention for as long as possible, because its revenue is a function of attention sold to advertisers. The content is not selected for our spiritual good; it is selected to keep us scrolling. The incentives that shape the platform are not neutral.

This is not, by itself, a condemnation. The printing press also had commercial incentives and still produced Bibles. The servant's task is not to flee every commercial medium but to use it with his eyes open. A servant who does not understand how a tool is built cannot wield it wisely; he will simply be wielded by it.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” Matthew 10:16, NKJV

'Wise as serpents' is our Lord's own instruction for a servant entering a new environment. The serpent is not naive. He knows the terrain before he moves through it. A Christian entering social media should know its terrain: that its algorithms reward outrage, that its metrics measure only what can be counted, that its endless feed is engineered to feel endless, that its visible life is curated and therefore not honest.

What It Does to the Soul

Sustained, unexamined use of social media tends to do several specific things to the human soul. The Fathers would have recognized each of them.

First, it fragments attention. The servant's soul needs long hours of unbroken attending — to Scripture, to prayer, to a person in front of him. A steady diet of thirty-second videos and micro-reactions trains

the soul into a shorter attention span, and that shorter span then shows up in our prayer, our reading, our conversation. 'Be still, and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10) becomes difficult to obey when stillness itself has grown unfamiliar.

Second, it cultivates comparison. Every social feed is a parade of other people's highlights set against our own ordinary day. The result, over time, is a quiet discontent with our actual life, our actual family, our actual parish. Comparison, as the previous lesson noted, is acid to the servant's joy.

Third, it encourages a curated self. We learn to present the version of us that performs well. This is not merely harmless presentation; it is the beginning of a small doubleness that the Scriptures call by an ancient name.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.” Matthew 23:27, NKJV

The servant whose online self is significantly more holy, witty, or successful than his actual self is in spiritual danger, because the platform rewards the gap.

Fourth, it ignites anger. Algorithms have learned that outrage is more engaging than gratitude, and they feed us accordingly. A servant who has spent an hour in the usual feed is often a more agitated, less gracious servant than he was an hour before. The Scripture is blunt:

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.” Ephesians 4:31, NKJV

Fifth, it erodes privacy and contemplation. The old spiritual life was made of a great deal of unshared silence: prayers said in private, thoughts held without broadcasting, consolations kept close. A culture that asks us to share constantly trains us out of this interior life. The soul that cannot be alone with God has lost something precious.

Chastity of the Mind

A specific danger worth naming is the way social media trains the mind to graze on images and words without discernment. The Fathers called this lack of guard over the heart *akrasia* — a kind of incontinence of attention. The ancient discipline of *nepsis*, watchfulness, is the opposite.

“Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.” Proverbs 4:23, NKJV

A servant who scrolls without attending is leaving the door of his heart open to everything the algorithm brings. A servant who opens a platform with a specific purpose — to answer a message, to post a Scripture, to see a specific piece of news — and then closes it, is exercising *nepsis*. The difference is not small. It is the difference between a disciple who guards his heart and one who merely allows it to be shaped by whatever passes through.

This extends particularly to the images the platforms freely surface. The servant must be vigilant about what his eyes take in. A temptation that a generation ago required deliberate effort to find now arrives uninvited in the feed. There is no shame in setting strong filters, deleting an app for a season, or turning the phone off at certain hours. These are not weaknesses; they are the intelligent disciplines of a servant who knows himself.

St. Isaac the Syrian gave a sentence long before phones existed that fits this moment exactly:

“Watch over thine eyes as over two lamps in thy temple. What they see long, the heart eateth at length, and the taste of it changeth thee whether thou wouldst or no.” St.

Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies XXIV (paraphrased)

How the Servant May Use It Well

None of this should lead us to a blanket condemnation. The Lord is present in every field of labor, and servants in our time have done real good through thoughtful use of these tools: a sermon shared with someone far from a church, a Scripture posted at the right hour, a message of consolation sent to a grieving friend, a group chat that holds a community together across miles.

The wisdom is not avoidance but discipline. A few concrete habits help.

First, use it with a purpose and leave. Opening a platform should feel like entering a tool shed — we go in to pick up a particular tool, and we come out when the task is done. Aimless scrolling is the habit the platforms most reward and we should most resist.

Second, keep the morning. The first thirty minutes of the day set the soul's posture. A servant whose first look of the day is at his phone has ceded those minutes to whatever the feed decided was important. A servant whose first look is at the icon corner has placed his day, first, in the Lord's hand.

Third, keep the night. The last hour before sleep shapes the dreams and the next morning's mood. Screens in the bedroom are the most common small poison of the servant's sleep. Charge the phone in the kitchen; keep a physical book by the bed.

Fourth, observe a weekly sabbath from social media. The whole Lord's Day, from Saturday night to Sunday evening, with the apps off. Many servants who have done this report that it is, over time, the single most restoring discipline they keep.

Fifth, speak online as we would speak in a cathedral. We are always, on social media, in a room where many people can hear us, including people who do not know the Lord. Would we say this, this way, from the solea? If not, we do not say it here either.

Sixth, when a topic makes us angry, wait twenty-four hours before posting. The Scripture's 'let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath' (James 1:19) was written for one-to-one conversation; it applies tenfold to one-to-many platforms.

Seventh, do not outsource formation. Whatever we learn online is no substitute for the Scripture, the liturgy, the Fathers, and our spiritual father. Social media can give us a paragraph; it cannot give us a foundation.

When to Step Away

There are seasons, and there are some servants, for whom the most faithful response to social media is simply to step away from it. This is not defeat. It is a wise reading of ourselves. Not every tool that works for our brother works for us, and there is no shame in admitting that a particular platform is harder for us to keep clean than it is for others.

Signs that a longer break or a total departure may be needed: our prayer life has thinned noticeably since we became active on the platform; our anger is more easily lit than it used to be; we find ourselves returning compulsively, even when we do not want to; our spouse or confessor has raised a concern more than once; we have posted things in the last month we would be ashamed to read aloud in church.

“If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” Matthew 5:30, NKJV

Our Lord's language is intentionally strong. He is telling us that no digital good is worth the soul. A servant who steps away from a platform for a year, or forever, has not failed; he has simply chosen the deeper good.

The Great Sobriety

The ancient word for the virtue a servant needs in every technological age is sobriety — *nepsis* in the Greek, vigilance. It is the habit of a mind awake to its own motions, unwilling to be led into small slaveries by small conveniences.

“Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.” 1 Thessalonians 5:6, NKJV

Sobriety is not severity. It does not forbid enjoyment; it keeps enjoyment in its right place. A sober servant can use a phone and not be used by it; can post a Scripture and then close the app; can read a thread and remain unagitated; can love the persons on the screen without confusing them with the flesh-and-blood neighbor at his door.

The neighbor at the door is, in the end, the recurring test. If our online life is drawing us toward more patient, more present, more prayerful love of the actual people the Lord has placed in our path, it is serving us. If it is quietly pulling us away from them, it is not.

May the Lord who has placed us in this noisy generation keep our hearts at rest in Him. May He give us the wisdom of serpents and the harmlessness of doves in every feed and every thread. May He guard our eyes from what would darken them, our tongues from what would harm others and ourselves, our

attention from what would fragment it, and our prayer life from what would thin it out. May He give us the courage to step away when we must, the discipline to stay when it serves, and the steady grace to look up from every screen and find, still, the beloved face of the neighbor in front of us. To Him be the glory, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Review Questions

1. Social platforms are built to hold attention for commercial reasons. How does recognizing this shape the way we choose to enter, spend time on, and leave these tools?
2. Of the five effects named (fragmented attention, comparison, a curated self, kindled anger, eroded contemplation), which is most at work in us, and how have we begun to see it?
3. Nepsis — watchfulness — asks us to notice what we are letting into our heart. What is one habit of intentional watchfulness we could add to our phone use this week?
4. The servant speaks online as he would speak in the cathedral. Looking at our last ten posts, are any of them ones we would not say from the solea?
5. Of the seven disciplines named (purposeful use, protected morning, protected night, weekly sabbath, cathedral-speech, twenty-four-hour rule, no outsourcing of formation), which is already in place, and which is the next one to establish?
6. Are any of the signs of a needed step-away present in our life (thinned prayer, easier anger, compulsive return, concerns raised by spouse or confessor, posts we would be ashamed to read aloud)?
7. The recurring test is the neighbor at the door. Is our online life currently drawing us toward more patient love of the people physically in our path, or away from them?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- The Philokalia, especially selections on nepsis (watchfulness) from St. Hesychios the Priest and St. Philotheos of Sinai.
- St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues* (on the tongue and public speech).
- Fr. Thomas Hopko, *55 Maxims for the Christian Life* (wisdom for modern disciples).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes