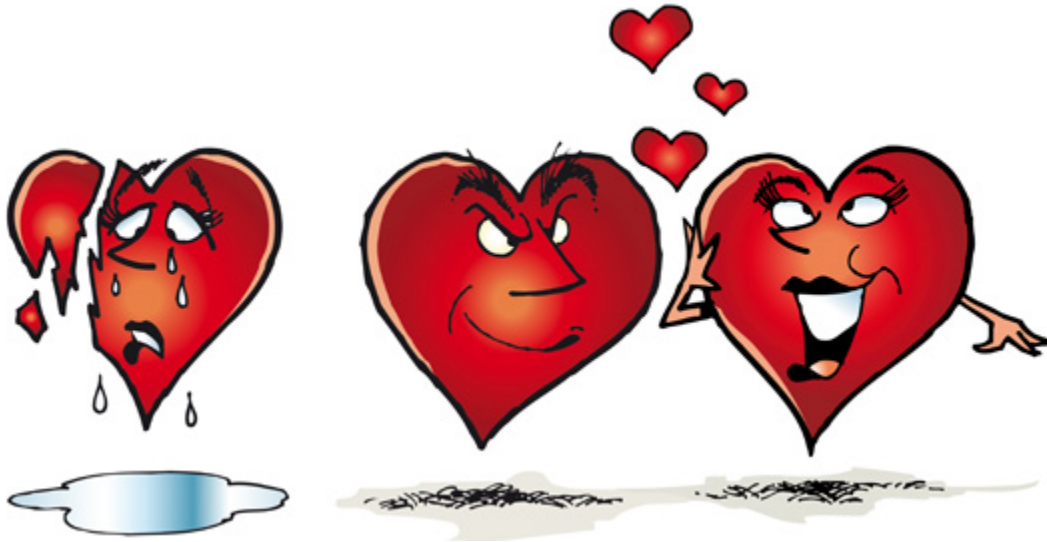


IS FACEBOOK THE DEVIL?

BY MATTHEW J. MILLER, PSY.D.



Recently, I have seen an increase in the number of extramarital affairs where Facebook, a social networking website, has been implicated. What does this mean? Some people have suggested that Facebook itself is evil and should be avoided at all costs. Others see no danger in the site at all. Like with many issues, the answer lies somewhere in the middle.

Whenever there is a new form of technology, there are those who will be threatened by it. Radio, television, the Internet, and even the printing press have all faced their share of criticism. The argument typically revolves around the blaming of the new technology for the further degradation of society. This is a dangerous position to take. To blame the technology, which is inanimate, is to absolve us. By absolving ourselves, we do not have to deal with our sin nature.

Certainly, we all have experienced the benefits of technology. Turn on your television, and you can see things that you previously could only talk about with your children. The educational opportunities are amazing. Those growing up in a low socioeconomic status can now experience sights and sounds that, heretofore, were reserved for those more fortunate. This has all been done through technology. The Internet is a great source of information. Ask anyone what it was like to write a research paper prior to the Internet. They will tell you about things that you may have never heard before—carbon paper, typewriters, etc. One can only imagine a world without a printing press. The fact that we can have and read our own Bible is a luxury brought to

us by the printing press. Technological advances have resulted in further developing our individual relationship with God.

However, all of the technology described above can be perverted. Turn on the television and you can see graphic images that you do not want your children to see. Turn on the radio and you can find disturbing content.

The Internet is different from other form of media, for several reasons. First, the Internet provides a certain degree of anonymity. When I was growing up in the eighties, I was told if you wanted to see graphic sexual or violent content, you needed to jump over many hurdles. First, you would have to go to a movie theater. If you were not of age, you would have to buy a ticket for another film, and then try to sneak into the movie that you actually wanted to see. This also depended on whether your parents would allow you to go to the movies without them. If you were an adult, and wanted to look at pornography, you would have to go to either a local video store, where the “adult” film section was separate from the other films, or to a “porn shop—” an all brick building with no windows. To do either would run the risk that someone you know might see you. These structural boundaries hindered people from engaging in these activities, but the Internet has removed those boundaries.

Second, another implication of the example in the previous paragraph is that if you wanted to see graphic content, you needed to plan. There were enough boundaries in place that there was time for the conscience or the Holy Spirit to convict you. Now, the process of acting out our thoughts and feelings is instantaneous. Before we have time to consider the consequences, we are facing them. In addition, there are many who say that these are victimless actions. However, the true victim is you. The actions change you. They change your heart. They can change your personality. It is in this more subtle way that the actions impact others. In arguing that the absolute right to privacy does not exist, Robert Bork, Supreme Court nominee during the Reagan administration, stated that what you do in the privacy of your own home can change who you are as a person, and who you are as a person then interacts with others in society. So, even if you are never “found out,” these “anonymous” actions have relational consequences.

How does all this relate to Facebook? Well, some of the allure of it is the same as the Internet itself, which was discussed above. Facebook can potentially be more dangerous because of the presumed innocence of connecting with others. For sure, Facebook has many virtues, such as: the ability to keep in touch with loved ones, the chance to deepen our involvement in the community during hectic times, and the opportunity to reconnect with friends that we have lost touch with over the years. While all of these are positive, the negative is that since people see these contacts as innocent, they may not consider using the same safeguards in some of those relationships that they would use in face-to-face relationships.

There is a commercial that runs in movie theaters. It shows people running through a record store, taking CDs, and sticking them in their jackets, pants, etc. The narrator says, in describing the scene, “You would never do this, but you would do *this*.” The scene then shifts to someone sitting at his computer, illegally downloading music. The commercial is saying if you illegally download music, you are doing the same thing as stealing CDs from a store. This is a very effective ad. Why is this ad necessary? For the same reason that reconnecting with people on Facebook can be dangerous—the behaviors are victimless and innocent.

Let’s say that you innocently set up a Facebook account. You start compiling friends as if compelled by some type of high-school-esque competition to see how many friends you have accumulated compared to others. While trolling for new friends, you come across the name of an

ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend. You then send your “ex” a request to sign on without thinking. The “without thinking” is part of the problem, which has been described above. He or she agrees. You feel a slight flutter of excitement, but so slight it may not register. You exchange catch-up messages, and you may stop there. There may be some people with whom you will have little to no contact with once you agree to be “friends.” But, what if it does not stop there?

Maybe you find you have some things in common with your friend. Maybe they are things that you wish you had in common with your spouse. Maybe you are feeling a sense of disconnection from your spouse. Before you know it, and without your spouse being aware, you begin to connect more and more through Facebook.

You may think it innocent because you are not meeting the person publicly. However, you are engaging in a relationship with him or her. Once you reach this point, you have broken one of the relationship rules that I give all couples in counseling, you should not engage in any opposite sex relationship that is exclusive of the marriage. This does not mean that you cannot have opposite sex friendships. However, your spouse needs to know about your friendships. If you do not share that information, you have to ask yourself a very important question, “Why not?”

You should avoid having any opposite sex relationships that are exclusive of the marriage.

Once, I had a friend who started dating a non-Christian girl. Soon after they began dating, his relationship with Christ began to visibly suffer. A short time later, he stopped going to church and Bible study and left serving in a church ministry. His friends became upset and blamed his girlfriend. It may appear a Jezebel lured him away from Christ, but it was not so. The signs of his deteriorating relationship with Christ, visible only after they started dating, were just the tip of the iceberg. If his relationship with Christ were strong, why would he be attracted to a relationship in which no spiritual life existed? As you can see, the steps toward the fall began well before the first date. If you are engaged in an opposite sex friendship online that your spouse does not share, it is likely that the fractures in your relationship are already present. This is a very dangerous situation indeed.

Because you see the Internet as “innocent”, you are less likely to deal appropriately with these dangers. You would never regularly meet an ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend for dinner, but you might allow yourself to have long conversations with him or her online. Essentially, they are one and the same. This is where your infinite ability to rationalize your actions comes into play. You tell yourself, “It is not the same” or “Since there is no physical relationship, it is not inappropriate.” As an experiment, ask your spouse what they would consider more damaging to the marriage, a one-night stand with someone you met on a business trip or a long-term emotional affair? Most people I have asked said the long-term emotional affair is more damaging, for two major reasons. First, the emotional bond you share with your spouse is at the center of your relationship. Second, an unconfessed one-night stand, though deceitful and very painful to the one victimized, often pales in comparison to the deliberate and long-standing deceit of an emotional affair. The break down in relational trust from an emotional affair may not be repairable.

While you may never have intended to have an affair when you began communicating, the continued contact over the Internet begins to build a closer relationship. After a while, physically meeting seems more and more desirable. In addition, while you are engaging in an emotional relationship with someone over the Internet, it is likely that the emotional relationship

with your spouse will continue to suffer, as the proper amount of attention is not being provided. Perhaps the only affair that starts as insidiously as an Internet relationship is the one that begins at work. When working with others, you get to know them in a “safe” environment. They do not often become friends outside of work and, so, your spouse may never know them. However, if you allow a relationship with the opposite sex to deepen, you become more vulnerable to having an emotional or even physical affair, even though it was not your initial intention.

In the end, the question you may be asking is, “What do I do about using Facebook?” I am not advocating avoiding Facebook, but rather following these basic guidelines:

- 1. Think before engaging in any Internet relationship.*
- 2. Do not permit an exclusive relationship with the opposite sex.*
- 3. Husbands and wives should share a Facebook account, rather than have their own private account.*
- 4. Husbands and wives need a mutual accountability, which allows for monitoring the other’s use of Facebook.*

Finally, we are in an age where many of the structural barriers, which have limited people’s access to pornography and even affairs, no longer exist because of the anonymity the Internet provides. The availability of old and new “friends” on sites, such as Facebook, offer unique opportunities, but also pose new dangers to unsuspecting participants. We all would do well to be cautious, thoughtful and active in erecting personal barriers or boundaries to help keep us on the right track. The Christian community, though far from perfect, can be a great resource of wisdom, support and needed boundaries that encourage godly living.