



Reprogramming Our Use of Digital Platforms

In this lesson, youth will explore the culture of social media against a Christian vision of creation and image-bearing.

Duration: 60 minutes

ENHANCER OF JOY

Rest

DURATION

60 minutes

LESSON DEVELOPED BY

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GOAL

Finding Rest Outside Ourselves

TIPS TO PREPARE

To prepare for this lesson, the facilitator should acquaint him or herself with social media (either Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or Tumblr) and have a working knowledge of the creation story in Genesis 1-2.

MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- Bibles
- Projector and screen
- Internet Access
- Hand out sheet
- Various student devices

SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE

- Chairs should be available for when students enter the room. If chairs are not available, encourage students to have a seat on the floor.
- The size of the room does not matter. However, the less objects in the room to distract, the better for concentration.
- Music may be playing in the background, but not necessary. A soundtrack that has to do with image (e.g., being pretty, hot, handsome, etc.) could foster dialogue later in the lesson.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Genesis 1-2

Purpose

The aim of this session is to help students reflect on the culture of engaging social media, their intentions and longings as they post on social media, and possible alternative practices that can cultivate joy on and offline. The goal of this session is to help these students use a good gift like social media wisely and joyfully.

Objectives

Youth will discuss the culture of social media and how we tend to use these platforms; explore a Christian vision of creation and image-bearing in response to this culture; and engage in a counter practice that can inform and be implemented into students' everyday use of posting on social media.

Further Study

To better prepare for the session, the following are a few resources for the facilitator to consult:

On the negative practices and effects of social media culture, see:

Christin Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism" (The New Atlantis):
<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/virtual-friendship-and-the-new-narcissism>.

Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?" (NYT Magazine):
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/magazine/why-are-more-american-teenagers-than-ever-suffering-from-severe-anxiety.html>.

Graham Davey, "Social Media, Loneliness, and Anxiety in Young People" (Psychology Today):
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-we-worry/201612/social-media-loneliness-and-anxiety-in-young-people>.

On reading the habits and practices of culture, see:

James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos Press, 2016), pp. 27-55.

On the practice of meditation, as it pertains to other-centered thoughts, see:

Kyle David Bennett, *Practices of Love: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life of the World* (Brazos Press, 2017), pp. 59-76.

Introduction for Leaders

Researchers and educators have found Instagram to be a key social platform that young people use (see Further Study section). Particularly one that can inhibit joy. Other mediums such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter are used by young people and can negatively impact their lives, but Instagram is a different beast. Though there are features of Instagram strategically designed to allure young people—tapping in to their expectations and disappointments and thereby inhibiting joy, the focus of this lesson is on calling attention to how we use this platform and how we might use it more deliberately and joyfully. For many young people, the picture-culture of Instagram invites—even demands—they to compare their appearance to others. Users feel the need to “present” themselves (“selfies”), their significant other (e.g., “#mcm” = “Man Crush Monday” or “#wcv” = “Woman Crush Wednesday”), their environment, or their friends like everyone else. When they don’t match up to everyone else, as measured in “likes,” “comments,” or “shares,” young people get discouraged and even depressed. Idolizing oneself—or trying to set oneself up as an icon—on social media is easily caught by young people. The culture of Instagram is one of a constant pull to present and the ever-present impulse to prepare, compare, and evaluate. This can take its toll on young people. Oftentimes they experience anxiety before they post—worrying which caption or filter will invite the most engagement with the post— and anger or frustration afterwards—if they don’t receive the kind of interaction they anticipated or expected. Alongside parents and educators, youth ministers are at the front lines of young people’s use of social media platforms. Young people need to be taught and trained in how to wield their devices. How can they use it in a way that facilitates joy in their lives as opposed to anxiety and despair? How can they use it to glorify God and love their neighbor, as opposed to loving themselves and making everything about them?

For millennia, Christians have meditated on Scripture. God’s Word includes a lengthy and detailed account of who we are as creatures, our place in the world of creation, and our status before God. In this lesson young people will be invited to look at this account anew, with digital eyes, and to meditate on its meaning and significance. The story God tells us about ourselves is that we are broken, disoriented, and even rebellious. We constantly turn inward and assert ourselves to others. This brokenness, disorientation, and possibly even the rebellion many young people (and old!) feel and experience on a daily basis. Yet at the same time, we are told that we are God’s— that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14)—and that we don’t have to turn to ourselves. We don’t have to rely on ourselves. We don’t have to prove anything to anyone else. And that there’s nothing we need to do or can do to make Him love us anymore than he already does. When we meditate, we consider these words of wisdom, these nuggets of truth—as difficult as it might be to believe them. Most importantly, we tell ourselves them. We speak the truth God has said to ourselves, and we put them into practice: by believing them and acting confidently out of them. These words and this account given by God to us should give us pause in the face of Instagram culture.

Maybe, deep, deep down young people already believe this. But we all tend to forget it in the patterns and practices of our platform usage. Meditation can reinforce this. It can lead us to think twice about what we're posting and why we're posting it when almost every user around us is "presenting," "branding," or in some way trying to prove their worth. The truth that we must practice on and offline is that we don't have to "present." We don't have to impress. We don't have to make our feed about ourselves. In a sense, this medium can foster society without our being in the picture, or at the center of it.

Gather

Gather (5 minutes)

Greeting One Another

A strategic way to "round up" the students, given the topic of this lesson, might be to project photos from your personal Instagram account on the screen and begin telling them the backstory to each photo. If you don't have Instagram, perhaps Facebook or some other social media platform with pictures. Even a blog might do. As they come around to see and hear, say "hello." You might also say, "Hey, guys, grab a seat and take a look at this!"

Opening Prayer:

Once most or all have gathered, indicate that you are going to pray. You might consider the following prayer to spiritually prepare them for the lesson.

Heavenly Father, we are grateful for the minds and hands you have given us to develop technology and social mediums like [insert social media platform name] to share our stories and connect with others. While we are grateful for this great gift, we also recognize that everything you've given and we've made can become a weapon to hurt others or a means to perpetuate our own brokenness. Holy Spirit, as we explore our use of social media today, convict us of all wrongdoing. Open our eyes to see possibility and healing. Guide us and comfort us as we seek to use God's gifts more wisely and joyfully. Jesus, teach us how to live with you as king in a digital age. We ask this in your name. Amen.

Introducing the Session:

- Begin by taking a poll. Ask how many of them have social media accounts? How many have apps on their phone? How many open these apps and check their feeds one to three times a

week? How about four to five? How about five to seven? How many use these apps one to three times a day? How many more than three times a day?

- Tell them that today we're going to be exploring how we use social media and discussing how we might do this better—in God-honoring, neighbor-loving, and healthy ways.

Engage

Engage (30 minutes)

Activity 1: Discussion of “Are You Living an Insta Lie?” clip

- Set this clip up with some *rhetorical* questions: “Have you ever thought about your habits and tendencies on Instagram or other platforms?” “When do you use them? In the morning? Before bed?” “How often do you use them?” “What do you find yourself doing when you're on them?” (For students who don't use Instagram, invite them to consider how they use Facebook or Snapchat. If they don't have any social media accounts, perhaps gear it toward their use of email, Skype, or telephone interactions.)
- Play clip: “Are You Living an Insta Lie” video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EFHbruKEmw>.
- Discuss this clip as a group. Ask students general questions, such as the following. “Does this video resonate with you? Why?” “Which of these “characters” captures what you are most like to fix up, as it were, and “present” on your feed: yourself, to post a selfie; your party, to post a group pic; your significant other, to post a relationship pic, or your context, such as your desk, to post a context pic?” “Do you, like these people on this video, see others doing something that you want to do and feel pressured to ‘up’ your feed game?”
** Refrain from getting into specifics. Leave that for the one-on-one peer discussion time (see below).**

Activity 2: One-on-one discussion of personal social media tendencies

- Encourage students to find a partner for one-on-one groups. Because this discussion will involve a certain level of honesty and vulnerability, refrain from assigning partners (e.g., “counting off”) . Invite students to partner with a friend. If a student cannot find a partner, then assist as you see fit.

- Set this discussion time up with the following remarks. “It’s easy for us to get ‘caught up’ in the culture and practices of social media. In the next few minutes, we’re going to take a step back to look closely at our tendencies on these platforms. How do we use them? What are we anticipating, expecting, and longing for when we use them? What are we hoping to get from them? [...] Though these platforms seem harmless, we might actually find ourselves treating them like idols (i.e., false gods) or sacraments (i.e., means of channeling hope and joy to us).”
Distribute the handout of questions (below).

Reflect

Reflect (20 minutes)

Despite how our friends use social media, our feeds do not have to be inward-focused. We don’t have to competitively “present” ourselves to keep up with the digital “Joneses.” Nor do our pics have to be perfectly posted.

This time to “Reflect” will afford students the chance to imagine and even practice other possibilities. Instead of presenting themselves or their world through “selfies,” encourage them as a group to draw attention to the presence and natural beauty of other things in God’s creation. Changing the way that young people perceive themselves and correcting the idols they catch online will take many lessons and prayers after everyone has gone home. It won’t happen overnight. But we can, through increments, help young people begin imagining and practicing an online presence that isn’t so self-oriented.

Activity 3: Brief meditation on Creation

- Read the creation narrative aloud. Use a translation that your tradition, denomination, or church sees fit. If there is some flexibility in this, the Message translation is particularly evocative. You can find it online here:
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1&version=MSG>.
- Comment on the passage, noting the place of human beings in the rest of the creation story. Namely, how human beings are called to steward and care for the rest of creation.
- We are called to image God to the rest of creation. What if we applied this to our digital world? What if our social media platforms were not simply platforms for us to build ourselves up, but to give “voice” to God, our neighbor, and other creatures and living things. What if our Instagram feed captured more instances than simply those with us in them? What would

it look like to image God in our social media use?

Option 2: Recreating Our World exercise

- John of Damascus said that “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.” Tell students that for the next 15-20 minutes, we’re going to find the face of God in his creation and capture it through images.
- Invite students to get into groups of three to five. Have them designate one person as the photographer and one person as the time-keeper. Their task will be to take six pictures based on the creation narrative.
- The first picture should reflect the dynamics of light and darkness.
- The second picture should capture the sky, something in the atmosphere, or something upward.
- The third picture should be of land, plants, or something downward.
- The fourth picture should be of stars, if it is evening. If not, have students take a picture of an object in movement.
- The fifth picture should be of any kind of insect or animal.
- The sixth picture should be of another human being besides themselves. If weather doesn’t permit going outside, have students complete as much as they can indoors.

Send Forth

Send Forth (5 minutes)

Commission/Challenge

- It’s easy to get caught up in the practices of social media platforms. “That’s just what everyone else does”, we tell ourselves. Challenge and commission your students to post differently this week. Tell them that they have “homework.” This week they need to practice an outward-focused approach to posting. Give them freedom to think creatively about this. Inform them that when they return to youth group the following week they will be sharing their stories with their peers.
- By default, they could follow a similar procedure as practiced in Activity 4. Instead of doing it all one day, though, they would practice it for an entire week. On the first day of the week, have them only take pictures of light and darkness. And then follow suit in the following five days. Then, on the seventh day, they would take a Sabbath from their social media account

- until they reconvene at youth group. You could call it “Creating a New Insta World.”
- Another option would be to have them practice a week of “Insta” Each day they could post a photo of someone’s grandmother (e.g., in the neighborhood or a retirement home) with a story about her in the caption. They could call it “Insta*grammy*”

Closing Prayer:

Close in prayer. You might consider the following prayer to edify and challenge them for the week.

Heavenly Father, bring us to state where we are awestruck by the vast array of creatures and things you have created and called “good.” Including us, who you have designed and invited to bear your image. Help us to reflect you and not make ourselves the center of your world. To find rest in you and caring for your world. Holy Spirit, prompt us to see the dignity and worth in others and to promote them as much as ourselves—physically and digitally. Gently convict us when we feel the need to “present” ourselves instead of imaging our creator. In Jesus’s name we pray, Amen.