

PROPER 25 A

Matthew 22:34-46

### **No Time for Phubbing**

Our relationship with our smartphones is often more important than our relationship with the person we're with.

This is the conclusion of new research on the subject of the social impact of mobile phone usage.

Try this: Walk into Norm's coffee shop or any restaurant and look around. Chances are, you'll see some couples sitting across from one another and not speaking but checking their phones instead.

This is not unusual.

Some 81 percent of Americans check their phones while dining out at restaurants, which means they're not looking at the people across the table from them.

We neglect personal contact in favor of the virtual sort.

A typical American, checks his or her mobile phone 46 times per day,  
and those between the ages of 18 and 24 do so even more,  
averaging 74 looks per day.

This behavior – giving our attention to our phone instead of our friend –  
is called "**phubbing**," (short for "**phone snubbing**")  
and it is causing problems in real human relationships,  
especially those of the romantic sort.

A recent Baylor University study concluded  
that the more one partner in a relationship is distracted  
by his or her phone  
the less the other partner feels satisfaction with the relationship.

And all God's people said, "**Duh!**"

We know this is true, but our phones still buzz insistently  
and we still want to check them.

As the kids say, it's a **FOMO** thing (***Fear Of Missing Out!***)

But what we are really missing out on is real life and real relationships.

We weren't wired this way, of course.

We were created in the ***imago Dei***

to take care of creation and each other.

The first humans were created for relationship with God and one another

and, notably, they were also created naked –

which meant they originally had no pockets

in which to keep smartphones.

Their full focus was God and each other.

(Picture Adam and Eve in the garden standing there in the buff

texting each other on their – wait for it – **Apple** phones:

***"Hey Adam, about this apple ..."***

You recall, of course, the Apple logo, right?

Someone's taken a bite out of the apple ...)

In fact, love of God and the other is the full focus of God's commandments throughout the Scriptures.

That is the reality at the heart of Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question in Matthew 22.

This passage, set during the week between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11) and Jesus' arrest and crucifixion (26:47ff),

is part of a series of questions fired at Jesus by various religious groups who are all trying to trap him into saying something controversial that might get him killed.

Jesus had already silenced the Sadducees

with their goofy hypothetical question about resurrection

in which they didn't believe in the first place (vv. 23-33).

Now the Pharisees were up and their question was

about which of the commandments was most important (v. 36).

The Pharisees were students of the Mosaic law, of course, and believed that the rule of God would become a reality

only if all of God's people obeyed that law.

Had they carried cell phones, they would no doubt have had an app with the Torah in the primary dock.

The problem was that they often were so focused on the text that they missed the people right in front of them.

They had already been locked in controversy with Jesus over the Sabbath (12:1-8) and hand-washing (15:1-9) among others – all of which are examples of how they elevated the text over meta-text, the letter of the law over the spirit of the law.

Jesus always pointed them to the primary intention of the biblical text: love for God and neighbor.

The question about the "**greatest**" commandment was a loaded one, because rabbinical teachers generally viewed all of the 613 commands in the Torah as equal

and any ranking of them would have been scandalous  
and indicative of one's human preferences.

The question the Pharisees ask is thus

***designed to get Jesus to disparage some part of the law.***

But Jesus turns from a debate about laws

to stating the one thing that comes closest to

a universal creed in Judaism: a recitation of the Shema

from Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Love of God with the heart, soul and mind was such a vital commandment

that Jews were to bind it on their hands and foreheads

as well as the doorposts of their homes.

In other words, it was not just the text that mattered –

it was the way the command to love God was lived out in one's thoughts,

one's actions and in one's home.

It was a call to engage in a real relationship with God on a daily basis.

The prayer was to be recited several times a day

and lived out in between. It was not just a text but a life to be lived.

One of the primary ways that we can express our love for God

is to love our neighbor.

**"Neighbor"** is a word or concept

which Jesus has already expanded to include one's enemies (5:43-48).

In fact, it is love for enemies that brings a person

closest to God's brand of perfect love and makes him or her

a child of God (5:45, 48).

If we are to give our full love and attention even to our enemies,

how much more should we be giving our love and attention

to those closest to us?

Smartphones make it possible for us to hold people at a distance –

to shoot off a quick text instead of leaning into a conversation;

to peruse the details of people's lives on social media

(many of whom we don't know personally)

without actually interacting with them;

and to react with an emoji rather than real compassion and emotion.

Jesus denounced the phubbing Pharisees as more concerned with

the text of the law than the spirit of the law.

They spent so much time thumb-twitching texts

about the right way to do this and to do that,

that they missed the most important person right in front of them:

their neighbor. And in missing this, they were ignoring God.

Jesus told the Pharisees that all the text of the law and the prophets

was summed up in the command to love God and neighbor.

Thus, they couldn't merely hold people at a distance

by measuring them against the law.

They needed to actually put the law into practice,



getting their nose out of the scroll and looking people in the eye.

This was the essence of Jesus' critique of them

as people who had **"neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith"** (23:23).

Jesus' warning about the Pharisees is one that we need to hear as well.

We might **"gain the whole world"**

by tapping into the instant information

and gratification of our technological age,

but **"forfeit"** authentic relationships

characterized by cross-bearing,

sacrificial, face-to-face love for God and others (16:26).

Our **"phubbing"** of the people in front of us

can quickly become a snubbing of humanity in general.

In the end, God doesn't care how many **"likes"** we got

on our most recent post –

God only cares that we have loved God and the people of God  
with all the attention our hearts, souls and minds can muster.

Well, it might begin with some anti-**phubbing** discipline.

Consider what one group of friends does when they are at a restaurant.

All their phones are stacked at the edge of the table

and the first one to grab his or her phone before the meal is over

has to pick up the check.

Consider making a "**no phones at the table**" rule

in your home for mealtimes

or consciously counting the number of times

you check your phone during the day.

You may discover what you've been missing,

and it isn't the latest cat video. You'll discover that real relationships

trump the virtual ones every time.

More broadly, however, we might consider

how we might be more intentional about loving our neighbors.

We might address the question of who are our neighbors –  
specifically.

We might give thought to how we might love, help, encourage and support  
those we deem as less than friendly to us, that is,  
people who are hard to work with or who have stood in our way.

We might consider how we might help a few of the unfortunate neighbors  
we have in our lives.

Because, in a sense, phubbing is not just about smartphone use.

It's also about anything to which we give priority  
above the attention God and our neighbors deserve.

It's not just a suggestion.

It's a command! Two commands, really.

It comes from Jesus: Love God and love your neighbor.

May we all heed this advice! Amen.

**Sources:**

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