

ALWIN JACOB

SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS



Foreword by Dr. Samson Gandhi
Executive Director, Person to Person - Institute for Christian Counselling

Endorsements

“Great is my nephew Alwin Jacob’s thirst for personal evangelism and concerted are his efforts at counselling. His book “SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS” seeks to offer solutions based on biblical principles to the peculiar relational problems that the digital age has thrown up – issues that were hitherto unknown and unheard of. He meticulously explores the personal boundaries that need to be established in order to reap the benefits of social media. The author reminds us that even in this digital world, it is only an ‘Encounter with Christ’ that can heal broken hearts. This book is a must-read and is sure to be an asset to young minds.”

Linetta Sambathkumar, Retd. Professor of Chemistry,
Author of “*Seventeen & Seventy*”

“Fear of missing out (FOMO), Isolation, Cyberbullying, and Self-absorption are already bigger issues, and they are kindled more by social media which is growing leaps and bounds. Nevertheless, social media is a new geography to meet and engage with people and to create meaningful relationships. This book is fantastic in addressing the humongous portion of the iceberg through the lens of the Word of God and gives practical solutions to face them with the whole armor of God.”

Mark Visvasam, Global Hub Leader, Movement.org.

“Wonderful insight on how to live a healthy life in this perpetually advancing world of technology.”

Rev. Charles Finny Joseph, Maranatha Full Gospel Association.

“I know Mr. Alwin Jacob for about 24 years, a man who is passionate to help the young generation. I love this book, ‘SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS’. Anyone who is honest can identify with the title of this book. Most feel that the internet is a blessing, a few feel that it is a curse. This book from Mr. Alwin Jacob will help us to catch how to use and handle this tool for our own blessing and the blessings of the many. He helps us to understand the true issues of this platform and provides many practical tips and encouragement on the effective use of this tool for the blessings of the present generation. All blessings to the readers.”

Varghese Paul, Associate National Director, India Campus Crusade for Christ.

“It is exciting to know that Alwin has come out with the book “SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS”. Alwin does intense study on any subject before presenting that subject to an audience. He is deeply interested in helping individuals and families to be overcomers. He also has rich experience in counseling people. Today, Social Media’s impact on relationships is immense. May this book empower many to build and value their relationships in this age of Social Media.”

Godfrey Rajkumar, Director, Jeevan.

Amidst crumbling marriages when the sanctity of the institution of marriage and family life is under severe threat, Alwin has written SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS.

Written for a time such as this, the author has hit the nail on its head by dealing with sensitive topics which most would shy away from addressing.

Alwin's personal experiences coupled with those of his counselee's, offer hope and practical advice to all those being

throttled by social media pressures which keeps them busy but ineffective !

This book offers a ray of light from the Word of God to those stumbling along the dark, treacherous and painful path of life.

I pray that many may see the Light of Christ and find refuge.

Vinita Shaw, Founder & Managing Director of Lifeword Creations, New Delhi, India

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ALWIN JACOB

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Director of Lifeword Creations, New Delhi, India

www.lifewordcreations.com

Dedicated to

Everyone who longs for a real relationship

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FOREWORD

Virtual life is a poor substitute for the real. We are real people designed to experience life in authentic and tangible ways. But social media offers easy options to wear a mask, exist in shadows, and live a false life. Such a life puts us at risk of losing our true identity and a sense of well-being. Unchecked, we end up hurting ourselves and others.

Alwin Jacob captures the dilemma of the young and not-so-young as to how to safely harness the good of the social media without falling prey to its addictive and destructive potential. He presents real life scenarios to capture the imagination of the reader. Those that are in troubled water will quickly identify themselves in these stories.

If you sense that your life in social media is hurting you, then you will find practical help to set boundaries and reclaim your life and rewrite your story. If you are a counsellor, youth leader or a mentor the entire book offers a clear perspective to help someone struggling to come out of the clutches of the evil that is there in social media.

Leaders are particularly encouraged to be proactive and prevent youth from getting sucked into the vortex of the social media. This book can serve as a template to design and deliver seminars to students as early as possible. Principals of schools, Pastors of Sunday Schools and Youth Clubs must make every effort to spread this message in their spheres of influence.

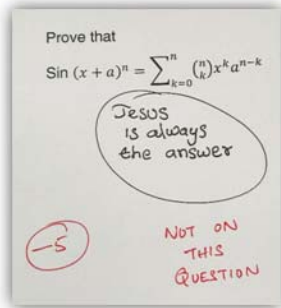
Alwin has carefully researched this subject and presents the matter in a lucid manner. Young and old will find it highly readable. Above all, he views the subject not only from a social and emotional perspective but also from a Biblical

perspective. The love of Christ can set us free from getting hooked to the loves on social media.

I commend this book to youth, parents and youth leaders and pastors. It must be in libraries, living rooms and lounges. Gift it to every young person. You may actually be saving a life!

Dr. Samson Gandhi, Executive Director, Person to Person
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Introduction



I was intrigued by this image that was circulated on certain social media platforms a while ago.

“Jesus is always the answer” is the standard answer often heard in Christian circles when someone talks about his or her pressing problem.

BUT WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Whenever I speak in counseling workshops, youth conferences, marriage seminars, or small group meetings, I have a habit of allowing the participants to ask their personal questions through writing. When I start answering those questions at the end of the meeting, I notice that everyone’s antennas are tuned to listen. Now, whenever I am invited to speak at an event, I collect the participants’ questions ahead of time through online forms and prepare my talk accordingly.

Moreover, listening to people’s problems regularly during counselling sessions has given me insights into the complexity of present-day’s relational problems. The more I get to know the unique struggles people go through, the more I feel indebted to look for answers from the timeless Word of God.

Nonetheless, the percentage of people who attend seminars, conferences, and small group meetings are very small. Very few people approach a counsellor for their problems. A majority of people feel that they don’t have a safe place to ask their personal questions.

This book is an attempt to engage people like you with the current issues that have emerged ever since the advent of Social Media.

My content is not about technology but relationships. In this digital era, relationships are highly dependent on technology. After the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, the number of people using Social Media has increased dramatically in number. When the lockdown was announced across the globe and when the schools, colleges, and offices were closed, social media platforms offered a wonderful alternative to stay in touch with our loved ones and peers.

However, those who spend an inordinate amount of time in Social Media encounter unique relational struggles, which others are alien to. They have questions and issues which can't be solved just by the search engine results. Their questions and concerns are from the heart. They are looking for answers from someone who cares. They have questions that never existed before the advent of social media and messaging apps.

The first seed I received to write a book like this was when a young girl asked a question during a one-day youth seminar where my wife and I were invited as guest speakers. She almost asked the question in anger. She said something like, "our elders are telling us 'stop using social media', 'social media is bad,' but nobody taught us how to use social media in a godly way." That particular incident created a sense of urgency to do something about this need. I talked to many people about that incident. Very soon I realized that the girl who asked the question represented a big number who are asking similar questions. In the next three to five months, I discussed this topic in my church youth group and received further first-hand questions and concerns that are related to Social Media. After collecting a good amount of information from people, I took extensive time to meditate on God's word to see things from His point of view. I am delighted to share

my findings with you. I know that the information that I have covered in this book is very limited compared to the huge need out there. I trust that this book will not only benefit you but also will ignite a passion in your heart to continue the conversation in your circles of influence and bring solutions to present-day's relational problems.

- If you are a person who wants to genuinely follow Christ but are distracted by Social Media, this book is for you.
- If you are a person who is addicted to social media and looking for a breakthrough, this book is for you.
- If your marriage or job is under attack because of your poor social media habits, then this book is for you.
- If you are a parent who is looking for ways to teach your children about social media relationships, this book is for you.
- If you are a Christian leader who wants to equip your congregation or small group about social media relationships, this book is for you.

This book will benefit anyone who wants to follow Christ in the digital era.

There are three parts;

In the **first part**, I have included 1) the bone-chilling questions that need to be answered in a safe and caring environment; 2) broken stories that need to be healed and rewritten, and 3) the cultural chaos that needs to be cleared with the truth of God's Word. I envision that this section will stir the readers' hearts to rise to the occasion and address such issues on a large scale.

In the **second part**, I talk about 5 boundaries every digital citizen must build to thrive safely in social media relationships. The boundaries are

1. **PERSONAL BOUNDARY:** How much time I will be available online?
2. **RELATIONAL BOUNDARY:** With whom I will interact?
3. **SEXUAL BOUNDARY:** What is my moral code?
4. **VERBAL BOUNDARY:** What is my content?
5. **PSYCHOLOGICAL BOUNDARY:** What is my need/ motivation?

In the **third part**, I am talking about one fundamental human need that is making social media popular – **the need for real relationships**. Humans are created and wired for love, connection, and a sense of belonging. Please note that I have not included “using social media for business purposes” but only the personal aspects. I also talk about how the deep need to be known, noticed, and cared for influences the way people express themselves in online spaces. I conclude the book with how encountering Christ will adequately fulfill people’s relational **need to be known, noticed, and cared for**. My personal story of transformation is included at the end of the book to attest to the content of the book.

Part - 1

BROKEN HEARTS

BROKEN STORIES

BROKEN DREAMS

It's heartbreaking to listen to the broken stories of people who open up their hearts (often with tears) in the counselling room. Their stories of sadness, pain, and raw emotions reveal the extent of human brokenness. At times, silence pervades the room as they struggle to find words to express the depth of their pain; sometimes they explode in anger as they try to come to terms with their deepest scars. Their stories reflect the darker side of life in the digital era.¹

1. My world collapsed when I saw a couple of hookup apps on my husband's mobile. We've been married for 10 years. Why did he install those apps now? I feel insecure whenever he is on the mobile but I fear talking to him about it. Should I talk to him about it? Sometimes **I feel tempted** to download hookup apps to vent out my pain and anger. Is there a way to handle this situation?
2. I casually forwarded a forwarded message to all my friends. Little did I know then that this will become a legal issue? I thought it was my personal choice to send any message to anyone on my contact list. **I am afraid** now. Is there a simple way to verify or identify fake forwards?
3. I feel that all of my friends and peers are having an exciting social life except me. Whenever I scroll down other's perfect pictures and activities, **I feel like a misfit**. My craving to attract 'likes' and 'comments'

makes me compromise my moral values. I know that I am pushing boundaries when I post sensual images and controversial posts. But I don't know what else I should do to get people's attention. **I feel outdated.**

4. During the lockdown, I lost my job. My relationship with my family started straining. It's becoming a new normal to indulge in a wired amount of time in social media. Most of the video content reminds my previous toxic relationships with multiple partners. Out of anger, I have broken my mobiles a couple of times. I notice that the time I spend on social media feeds my anger and leads to self-destructive behaviors. My sister tells me that I have turned out to be an angry monster. **I feel helpless.** Is there a way to calm down, relax and keep my anger under control?
5. I am 17 years old. I trust my boyfriend. Recently he started asking for my intimate pictures. Part of my mind says 'it's ok to send him because most of my friends are doing it'; but part of my mind says "wait for some more time" **I am confused!**
6. All my friends are active on social media during midnight hours. If I am not awake during that time, **I feel missed out.** Initially, I loved the late-night fun and endless chats, but now I feel pressured to be there. When I don't sleep well, it affects my body and mood. I often feel depressed during morning hours. Sometimes I become anxious for even small things. Is there a link between my overuse of social media and my negative feelings?
7. **I feel enslaved** in this relationship when my wife always asks for my social media password. She suspects that I have an affair. She complains that my love for her is not genuine. Why can't she simply trust me? I don't know how to prove myself to her without

losing my online privacy.

8. **I am tired** of using fake accounts on social media. If only I have great looks like a celeb, I can be real and can get huge followers. Sometimes, I overwork in the gym to lose some kilos, but when I don't see improvements, I order pizzas and burgers online and eat crazy. I want others to like me for the way I am. I think it's an impossible dream. I have nothing to show off. I hate to be on social media. I feel angry at God for making me the way I am. When my mom says that God loves me, I don't understand her language.
9. **I feel that I am losing my motherly instincts** for the irresistible video content that is shared on social media platforms. I am a mother of a 2-month-old baby. There is so much good content in social media. I only watch good videos but there are too many good videos created and shared every day that I **am confused** to choose the needed ones. I secretly desire if someone else takes care of my newborn, I will be free to consume a lot of good content. But deep inside me, I know that I am wrong.
10. My ex is threatening me that he will share my nude pictures on social media if I don't sleep with him. **I feel trapped.**
11. **I feel restless** when I don't attend to every notification sound. In my office, my antennas are always tuned to hear the next beep. As a young entrepreneur, I find it difficult to efficiently participate in executive meetings as I am assuming if there might be any urgent notifications, though no such urgent messages came so far. I feel distracted throughout the day. Do I need to go to a psychiatrist to deal with this behavior?
12. I am in a relationship with a girl. She seems to be very loyal. Recently, one of her close friends told me

that her ex-boyfriend broke up with her for another girl. Out of anger, she has developed a sadistic habit of alluring smart boys in social media for some time and finally ditch them. **I feel like a victim**, but I can't imagine living without her.

13. It's been several months since my girlfriend broke up with me. I felt terrible picking up the pieces and moving on. Whatever I did to distract myself, the lingering feelings of grief and loss persisted. However, with the help of a counselor, I was able to work through my pain and started moving. But...a few days ago, I got crushed again when I saw my ex's picture on a social media platform, where she was with another man. It triggered my memories in ways I couldn't resist. I got mad since then. **I feel stuck**. Please help me!

If you identify with any of these broken stories,

It's time to rewrite your broken story!

It's time to pick up the broken pieces and rebuild your life again!

It's time to start afresh!

If you know someone who has a similar story,

It's time to bend down to lift them instead of becoming judgmental.

May your attitude be like Apostle Paul's who said, "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak" (1 Cori 9:22).

If you are disturbed by the social media sub-culture that contradicts Biblical values,

It's time to critically analyze how something like social media that is invented for good can do such harm to humanity. The stories we have seen were

non-existent a decade ago. What went wrong? What could have been done to prevent such a mess? What needs to be done NOW? Let's discuss these things in the upcoming chapters.

CULTURAL CHANGE

CULTURAL CHAOS

CULTURAL CLARITY

Have you ever been to a busy city junction where there are no traffic rules, no red light to stop, where any vehicle can move freely at any speed? Wherever there is no traffic signal system and no speed breakers, it results in a large number of accidents and deaths and can cause a massive disaster.

When such traffic chaos happens in the online spaces, how do you call that? Chaos or freedom?

The fact that “**anyone** from **anywhere** can connect to **anyone** across the globe at **any time** around the clock at an affordable price if only they just have an internet connection” is an opportunity for massive connectivity that our ancestors were unaware of. Such technological development is a blessing to those who live in this digital era. However, many who cherish genuine relationships feel that this massive open network is becoming an area of concern. They feel that when there is no basic level of personal or professional commitment in place, this open network can become a massive force of relational disaster.

The popularity of the Internet and Social Media in recent years have paved a way for the current generation to form distinct Internet subcultures, where they get immense opportunities to actively interact and express themselves within distinct groups based on their interests and needs. When a large number of people in this hyper-connected age are influenced

by new ideas, values, customs, beliefs, behaviors, and have different persons of references that are greatly deviant from their native cultures, it's a clear sign of a cultural shift. The emergence of the Internet has created a new way of life in the digital spaces and the rise of Social Media platforms has given birth to several subcultures.

A subculture is the ideas, art, and way of life of a group of people within a society, which are different from the ideas, art, and way of life of the rest of the society.¹

Subcultures develop their own norms and values regarding cultural, political, and sexual matters.²

When the sub-cultures that are emerging around social media networks challenge the traditional values and belief systems, we need to critically analyze both the emerging subcultures and the traditional cultures in the light of the Word of God. We are commanded to test everything and hold on to what is good (1 Thes 5:2). The timeless Word of God alone can guide people during such cultural shifts.

At a certain point of time in the nation of Israel, there was a leadership vacuum. There was no one to guide the nation according to the Word of God.

“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21: 25)

A lack of divine guidance (authoritative Word) corrupted their entire religious system. As it happened to the nation of Israel, when there is no divine guidance to online relationships, everyone will do what is right in his or her own eyes, which will corrupt the life of the Body of Christ and will lead to cultural chaos.

“What does it take to bring clarity in such a time of Cultural Change”?

THE PROACTIVE MODEL

As a nation, the Israelites were exposed to several cultures like those of the Egyptians, Canaanites, and Babylonians. When they came out of Egypt after long years of slavery and entered Canaan, God proactively gave them proper guidelines through his servant Moses. Even before they entered the land of Canaan, He made his cultural standards known to them. In Lev 18:3,4, we read,

“You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God”

“The Israelites moved from one idol-infected country to another. As God helped them form a new culture, he warned them to leave all aspects of their heathen background behind. He also warned them how easy it would be to slip into the heathen culture of Canaan, where they were going. Canaan’s society and religions appealed to carnal desires, especially sexual immorality and drunkenness. The Israelites were to keep themselves pure and set apart for God. God did not want his people absorbed into the surrounding culture and environment.”³

The Israelites have come out of one idol-infected country and are going to enter into another idol-infected and sexually corrupt nation. In Leviticus 18, we see God gives them an exhaustive moral code to follow. It is worth noticing the minute details he included in the guidelines. As a loving parent, He sets their sexual boundary. He has listed several ungodly aspects of sexual expressions – such as having sex with close relatives, sex with married people, homosexual

relationships, and having sexual relations with animals. The red lights (consequences of disobedience) are clear.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were well aware of the FREEDOM and BOUNDARY God allotted to them.

“The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Gen 2:9a).

“You may freely (unconditionally) eat (the fruit) from every tree of the garden” (Gen 2:16 AMP).
FREEDOM

“But (only) from the tree of the knowledge (recognition) of good and evil you shall not eat, otherwise on the day that you eat from it, you shall most certainly die (because of your disobedience)” (Gen 2: 17).
BOUNDARY

As He did in the Garden of Eden, He made his sexual code of conduct very clear to his people. They already knew that God is pro-sex. It was God who commanded them to be fruitful and multiply while in Egypt through sexual union, which is God’s first command to the whole of humanity as well. However, it’s time for them to know their sexual boundary. So, He takes an extended time to give specific guidelines (boundaries) to his people as they were moving from one ungodly culture to another ungodly culture. To get a grasp of the intensity of the guidelines, look at the specific words described in this chapter – nakedness of your father (v7), the nakedness of your sister (v9), your daughter’s daughter (v10), the nakedness of your son’s daughter (v10), the nakedness of your father’s wife’s daughter (v11), the nakedness of your father’s sister (v12), the nakedness of your mother’s sister (v13), the nakedness of your father’s brother (v14), the nakedness of your daughter in law (v15), the nakedness of your brother’s wife (v16), sex with your

kinsman's wife (v19), same-sex relationships (v22) sex with animals (v23).

The instruction is exhaustive. In nutshell, there are three reasons mentioned in this passage as to why they are not supposed to express their sexuality in ungodly ways.

1. **It will hurt their relationship with God:** The first reason is that they belong to a Holy God. "I am the Lord your God" (v2).
2. **It will hurt their well-being:** In verse 2 we read, "...by doing so one shall live" The sexual practices lead to disease, deformity, and death.⁴
3. **It will hurt their relationship with others:** We can notice why they are not supposed to have sexual relations with anyone who is not their spouse. It's because, "when you uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother, she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness (v7). Notice the phrase, "SHE IS YOUR MOTHER". It means, your relationship with your mother will be distorted. In the same way, you can see the phrase, "SHE IS YOUR SISTER" (v11); "SHE IS YOUR AUNT" (v14); "SHE IS YOUR MOTHER'S FLESH" (v13). As a closely-knit community, it was necessary for the Israelites to maintain a healthy and holy relationship with their extended family members. Immoral attachments would distort and destroy their close family ties.

During a huge cultural shift, God carefully provides enough information and guidelines to protect his people from ungodly influences. Not everyone followed the guidelines. Whenever they ignored His guidelines and lived their way, it resulted in chaos and damage. However, because they had specific guidelines to follow, there were always a handful of remnants in Israel who did not break their loyalty to God. (e.g. Moses,

Joshua, Daniel, Jeremiah, Deborah, Nehemiah, Ezra, to name a few). Such loyal people were significantly used by God to give leadership to the nation at various points in history. The God who gave specific guidance to the knit community (Lev 18), has specific guidelines for the present-day online communities.

To follow Christ in the social media platforms, people should know their freedom in Christ (Gal 5:1) so they will not become legalistic and swing to extremes, rather will use the positive aspects of the emerging Internet subcultures for good. At the same time, they should know the biblical boundaries well in advance so they will not give in to cultural pressures and reap the consequences (*as we saw in the 13 stories in the first lesson*).

RESPONSIVE MODEL

The responsive model is all about responding to cultural challenges as early as possible. Let's consider the City of Corinth, which is known for sexual immorality.

“Christians in Corinth were surrounded by sexual temptation. The city had a reputation even among pagans for sexual immorality and religious prostitution. It was to this kind of society that Paul delivered these instructions on sex and marriage. The Corinthians needed special, specific instructions because of their culture’s immoral standards.”⁵

The Corinthian believers were exposed to a new culture when they responded to the gospel and became children of God. God’s general message to the Corinthian believers may sound something like...

“You were raised in a sexually contaminated culture. Some of you were fornicators (all forms of pre-marital sex), adulterers (all forms of extra-marital sexual relations), male prostitutes, and sodomites (same-sex

relationships). But now you are washed, sanctified, and justified through Christ. Though you live amidst a sexually contaminated culture, remember that you are sanctified in Christ. You are the children of the Most High and Holy God. So do not practice the shameful actions practiced by the people around, but be transformed by changing the way you think and act differently.”⁶

Even though Apostle Paul taught them the general truths about Christian faith and holiness, they needed specific instructions for the various cultural issues that confronted their newfound faith in Christ. Apostle Paul is a genius in listening to people’s concerns and responding practically. In his first letter to the Church of Corinth alone, he has devoted about 60 percent content for answering their personal questions, starting from chapter 7:1 to 16:24 (10 out of 16 chapters).

He begins answering their questions with this statement, “Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter...” (1 Cor 7: 1 NLT). His letter is conversational.

Some of the questions that mattered to his audience at that time were concerning marriage, remarriage, singleness, eating food offered to idols, clothing in worship, the pattern for the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts, and resurrection. They had several questions about sex and marriage because of the sexual immorality that was rampant in Corinth.

The pattern Apostle Paul followed to deal with the cultural issues is a good model to emulate especially in times of cultural shifts.

Step 1: He took the time to understand people’s concerns.

The chapter begins with the words, “now concerning the matters about which you wrote...” These words give us the clue that Paul took sufficient time to listen to people’s concerns and questions. He also did the hard work of

responding to their questions to the best of his knowledge and ability. He developed an open communication system to mentor the believers. He would have often collected their questions and concerns and responded to them several times though we have got only two of his letters in the Scriptures. Understanding people's struggles, pressures, and needs is an integral part of a mentoring relationship.

Do you have a mentor or an elder to answer/respond to your personal questions and share your issues?

Step 2: He Connected the Scriptures to the Current Day's Problems.

Paul turned people's attention towards the unchanging Word of God. Wherever there is a direct command from the Lord for a certain problem or issue, he reinforced those commands. His counsel agreed with the Word of God. While talking to the married, he wrote, "to the married I give this command (**not I, but the Lord**)... (1 Cor 7: 10 NIV).

It is necessary to agree with the Word of God while addressing cultural issues that confront the Christian faith because, during times of cultural changes, the Word of God alone can bring clarity.

The Bible is a book for all times, written in the first century but for ALL centuries.

The needs of the human heart and its sinful condition are the same in any century. All kinds of cultural chaos have their roots in the lies of the Devil, who is known as the father of lies (John 8:44). The weapon God has given to confront his lies is the Truth, which is the Word of God.

Step: 3: He Offered Spirit-guided Opinions.

The Corinthian Christians had a lot of complex questions. As much as possible, Paul answered them by quoting the Word

of God. However, when there is no direct command from the Lord, it doesn't mean that there are no Scriptural guidelines for that problem. He depended on the Holy Spirit and gave Spirit-guided opinions that are aligned to the Word of God (1 Cor 7:40)

“Now concerning the virgins (of marriageable age), I have no command of the Lord, but I give my **opinion** as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy” (1 Cor 7:25 AMP).

If Apostle Paul were to live in the present generation, I guess that one of the hot topics people would expect to discuss with him would be Social Media. He would have given his opinions in areas where there is much confusion.

But, the Spirit who gave insight to Paul is residing in all the children of God. When we live in union with Christ and depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us, He can guide us personally and will also empower us to guide those who struggle.

Step: 4: His teaching was balanced (He avoided extremes).

“The Corinthian church was in turmoil because of the immorality of the culture around them. Some Greeks, in rejecting immorality, rejected sex and marriage altogether. The Corinthian Christians wondered if this was what they should do also, so they asked Paul several questions: “Because sex is perverted, shouldn't we also abstain in marriage?” “If my spouse is unsaved, should I seek a divorce?” “Should an unmarried person and widow not marry?”⁷

Some of the Corinthian believers were misled by the Greeks, who believed sex is inherently bad and one should reject sex and marriage altogether to be religious. It appears that in their passion to follow Christ, some of them were trying to bottle up their legitimate sexual desires and were burning inside with sexual desires. On the other hand, some others

compromised their faith and succumbed to sexual temptations. Some of them acted more evil than non-believers. Look at this man -

“I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you—something that even pagans don’t do. I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother” (1 Cor 5: 1 NLT).

Paul saw people with these two extremes – those who avoided legitimate sexual relations and those who indulged in extremely immoral behaviors. He takes a balanced approach while talking to these two kinds of audiences. First, he talks about the importance of sexual intimacy between married couples. He urges them to put sexual intimacy on their high priority list. The only activity that can disrupt ongoing sexual intimacy between couples is specific times of prayer, that too for a very short period. (1 Cor 7: 3-5). At the same time, while talking about the man who lived in sin with his stepmother, Paul instructs the believers to remove him from the fellowship (1 Cor 5:2 b NLT).

It’s important to note that in all his answers to the questions people asked (7:1 -16:24), he never overrides their freedom of choice on practices not explicitly forbidden in Scripture.

During times of cultural changes, it is easy for sincere people to swing to extremes. When it comes to the context of Social Media, some say that social media is evil. They judge others who spend time on social media. Such a perspective leads to legalism. At the same time, certain people justify their immoral behavior by saying, ‘everyone is doing this’ or ‘I am not as bad as him/her.’

How about you? Are you going to extremes? Do you often justify your actions? Or do you judge people’s behavior and not care about their heart condition?

The Passive Model: Absence of Proactive and Responsive Interventions

During cultural shifts, in the absence of proactive or responsive interventions, everyone will continue to do what is right in his or her own eyes. When there are not many people to take responsibility to educate people about online behaviors, it will lead to serious behavioral issues, which are widely recognized as social media disorders or addiction.

- Can Social media become an addiction?
- Are there ways to use Social Media without getting addicted to it?
- Do you want to help someone who is struggling with Social Media addiction?

In the next section of this book, I am going to discuss these questions in detail. May the Scriptural truths that you will learn enlighten your mind, transform your heart, revive your spirit, and shape your online habits for good.

Part - 2

SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

&

THE FIVE BOUNDARIES

SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Have you ever noticed couples sitting face-to-face in a restaurant with their eyes glued to their phones forgetting each other?

Even though social media is a great platform to find new friends, touch base with family members, and exchange information with anyone around the globe, it's getting problematic as it substitutes real-life relationships and disrupts other important aspects of life.

“Social media addiction is a behavioral addiction that is defined by overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable urge to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas.”¹

Social media addiction involves

- Using social media compulsively.
- Unable to stay in the present moment.
- Withdrawing from family and face-to-face relationships.
- Losing interest in real-life activities once enjoyed.
- Neglecting important areas in life as more time is spent online.
- Preoccupied with social media when offline.

- Compromising sleep to stay awake for late-night interactions.
- Entertaining short-term hookups rather than taking time to cultivate healthy relationships.
- Evidence of depressive symptoms.
- FOMO: Fear of Missing out on any event or information while offline.

If you have any symptoms of social media addiction, it's high time to pause, slow down, and make changes in the way you use social media. God has called us for freedom. Freedom from social media addiction means the ability to use social media based on Biblical guidelines without getting addicted to it. The rest of this chapter is devoted to educating, equipping, and empowering you to pursue freedom from social media addiction.

As Social Media in itself, is not sinful, unlike other behavioral addictions like pornography - which is a direct violation of God's moral law - we must restrain from becoming legalistic about Social Media usage. Social media is an excellent tool for communication, building relationships, learning, and business. However, it can become an addiction when we use it without healthy boundaries. I want to recommend 5 Biblical boundaries to protect you from social media addiction. They are;

1. PERSONAL BOUNDARY: How much time I will be available online?
2. RELATIONAL BOUNDARY: With whom I will interact?
3. SEXUAL BOUNDARY: What is my moral code?
4. VERBAL BOUNDARY: What is my content?

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL BOUNDARY: What is my need/
motivation?

Once you learn to build these five boundaries, you will have the freedom to thrive safely in the world of social media.

PERSONAL BOUNDARY

Personal boundary answers the question, “how much time I will be available online?”

No man is an island. Living with others in meaningful ways relishes our hearts. Building our social network face-to-face or online is vital for our well-being. Spending time with our loved ones lowers our stress levels and contributes to our psychological health as well. Jesus very well socialized with others. He attended weddings, partied with others, told stories, and mingled with others. He called his disciples as friends as he disclosed his heart to them. He urged his followers to make friends by using perishable wealth (Luke 16:9).

Yet, He didn't let His social life steal his time for Himself - for rest and renewal. He balanced His social life by withdrawing Himself to be alone with the Father. He intentionally disconnected Himself from the crowd to connect Himself with the Father. “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). Jesus set a personal boundary for Himself in which he was accessible to minister to people, yet withdrawn for personal renewal.

“Jesus was both accessible and withdrawn. It is often said that He was always available to those who sought Him. But he was not always so. Again and again, he would either send the crowds away or withdraw from them. True, he knew how to socialize. Luke's account shows him spending a great deal of time going from one dinner party to another.”¹

Setting a personal boundary is essential for self-care. Around the clock, there will be someone to interact with us online. Many people compromise their sleep to be available online to interact with others.

“Using electronic devices before bedtime can be physiologically and psychologically stimulating in ways that can adversely affect your sleep. It suppresses the release of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, and makes it more difficult to fall asleep.”²

“An ongoing lack of sleep has been closely associated with hypertension, heart attacks, and strokes, obesity, diabetes, depression, and anxiety, decreased brain function, memory loss, weakened immune system, lower fertility rates, and psychiatric disorders.”³

Knowing that depriving sleep can seriously affect your physical and mental health, if you have difficulty logging off your devices at least 30 minutes before going to sleep, to get into a sleep mode, it is a matter of serious concern.

We must personally set a boundary as to how much time we will be available online and how much we will withdraw for personal renewal, rest, and uninterrupted goal-oriented activities like spending time with family.

Have you noticed that your online habits affect your personal or professional life? A good place to start taking care of yourself is to develop a personal boundary plan that can guide your screen time.

A Sample Personal Boundary Plan:

1. I will not be available on social media after _____pm
2. I will not be available on social media till _____am

3. I will not spend more than _____ hours on social media per day

(This is based on our life-purpose - certain people may spend about 3 hours in social media and still be in God's will; some others spend just 30 minutes but outside God's will)

4. _____

5. _____

Note: Find a true friend and share your boundary plan. Ask him/her to hold you accountable for your plan, pray for you and help you overcome any barrier to stick to your plan.

RELATIONAL BOUNDARY

RELATIONAL BOUNDARY answers the question, “with whom I will interact?”

The advent of social networking sites, and messaging apps, has taken online interactions by storm. They provide unlimited possibilities to interact with any number of people across the globe. Yet, we have the responsibility to consciously choose the kind of people with whom we want to interact. This happens when we let God filter our social relationships. Based on the writing of late Dr. Billy Graham:

“When Jesus is the Master of our social life, it’s reflected by the friends we keep, the relationships we nurture and is even reflected by how we entertain ourselves. All we do should glorify the Lord.”¹

God’s Word guides us to take conscious decisions in matters such as choosing friends.

“Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is helpful. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not allow anything to control me” (1 Cor 6:12 ISV).

In other versions, the word “helpful” is translated as “beneficial” (NIV); “profitable” (NASB); “good” (NLT).

Everything is permissible, but not everything builds up (1 Cor 10:23 ISV).

In other versions like NASB and NKJV, “builds up” is translated as “edifies”.

These guidelines are to protect ourselves from toxic

relationships that can enslave us.

If you are single:

You are free to build relationships that are helpful (beneficial / profitable), that build you up in the Lord and in His purposes. One practical step you can consider is to make up your mind to pursue any romantic relationship (for marriage purposes) only after a certain age (at least you are financially independent and stable enough to support a family). Such determination will give you much freedom to spend your time and energy in numerous goal-oriented activities during your youth that'll put you far ahead in life. Daniel's decision not to defile himself with the king's food helped him to stick to a higher standard during temptation (Daniel 1:8,12). In the same way, your decision to stay single till a certain age will protect you from tragic breakups and short-term hookups.

Even at the appropriate age, if you are using an online dating service to find your mate, it is good to have an elder, parent, or accountability partner to be with you during the process. Many who use dating apps are not there for long-term relationships and hence it may not be beneficial to you, rather you may be tempted to experience the thrill of just being there, which leads to evil.

“In our techno-sexual era, the process of dating has not only been gamified but also sexualised, by technology. Mobile dating is much more than a means to an end, it is an end in itself.”²

Ask this filter question whenever you are in questionable situations like - getting a friend request from a stranger, whether or not to block someone who uses flirty language, interacting with someone from the opposite gender, and so on.

“Is this relationship helpful (beneficial / profitable) to pursue my God-given purpose?”

If you are married:

In the olden days, marriage provided a safe relational boundary for couples. Strong social structures coupled with individual commitment protected marital bonds (exceptions were not rampant). Whereas, in the digital era, the possibility of anyone (single or married) of any age (teenager or senior citizen) instantly connecting with anyone living anywhere around the globe is cracking the marital boundaries. Marital discomforts and conflicts may trigger couples to either log into dating or hookup apps in search of new relationships or search for their past love. Certain social networks remind you about what happened a few years ago, which may include your memories with several friends of the opposite sex. Moreover, many married couples struggle to break the emotional bonds with their ex. Some get into a nonstop pursuit of analyzing their ex's every update on social media and try to see if they are happy, and so on. Such constant obsession over their ex's activity seriously disrupts their marital fulfillment. Despite these conditions, staying true to your partner for the long haul requires building a strong relational boundary.

Here are a few practical guidelines that might be helpful to anyone who wants to protect their marriage from online infidelity.

1. Intentionally spend quality time with your spouse regularly than on social media.
2. Avoid having secret accounts.
3. Share your passwords with each other (gadget & social media passwords).
4. Don't check your ex's activity on social media.
5. Keep some ground rules for accepting a friend request from strangers, especially from your ex (if

any).

6. Discuss with your spouse if you should be social media friends with your ex.

7. Don't share your feelings or problems with members of the opposite sex (especially the matters that you don't share with your spouse).

8. Whatever conversation you will not have in the presence of your spouse, don't do it online.

9. Keep your couple's picture on the profile (often or at least once in a while).

10. Don't snoop on your partner. Instead, trust him/her and build your relationship.

Relational boundary is nothing but staying true to your relationship with God and your spouse (if married).

SEXUAL BOUNDARY

SEXUAL BOUNDARY answers the question, “what is my moral code?”

Social media sites give access to the personal accounts of others and many become addicted to habitually viewing others' profiles and staring at their airbrushed and sexualized images or videos for hours. The sexual content scattered in social media attracts a large number of people to engage in sexual interactions. Moreover, the possibility of having private interactions through messaging apps easily drives people towards sexting. Many push the boundary too far and engage in non-consensual sexual content sharing which violates the sexual privacy of others.

“In a recent study, it was discovered that only 19% of Indian women use online dating apps to find a partner for hookups or long-term or short-term relationships; about 62% of Indian women use the same apps for sexting.”¹

In such a digital atmosphere, establishing proper sexual boundary is critical for protecting ourselves from illegitimate sexual connections, sexual pressures, and sexual exploitation.

The first step towards establishing sexual boundary is to take a firm decision not to seek sexual fantasies through social media.

When teenagers or singles get a crush on someone, they might show much interest to get to know the other person's private life through social media. That may be a natural part

of their sexual development. Though little they can do to stop noticing others at a distance, they can choose not to dwell on sexual fantasy or express themselves sexually in social media. Youngsters must be taught to protect their sexuality until they are mature enough to enter into a romantic or marital relationship. By focusing their time and energy on pursuing worthy goals based on their strengths and gifts, they can free themselves from sexual fantasies. For those who are married, it's absolutely dangerous and sinful to visit others' profile pages and sift their pictures or videos for sexual stimulation.

The biblical prescription for God's people is;

“But among you, there must not be even a **HINT** of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or greed, because these are improper for God's holy people” (Eph 5:3, *emphasis mine*).

As per Cambridge Dictionary, 'hint' means, 'a very small amount of something.'² In our present context, consuming even a very small amount of sexual content is not acceptable for God's holy people. This is the standard that God wants His people to trust Him to achieve. Is it possible for anyone to live according to such a high standard? What is impossible with man is possible with God (Luke 18:27).

The second step towards establishing sexual boundary is to take a firm decision not to have any sexual interaction through messaging apps.

This may involve using commonly used messenger apps or specific dating or hookup apps for sexting. Such impure interactions are improper for God's people based on Eph 5:3. Moreover, when we sexually exploit others, the wrath of God will come upon us.

“Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires” (Col 3:5b NLT)

“Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming”
(Col 3:6 NLT)

The third step towards establishing sexual boundary is to become actively vigilant to resist any form of online sexual pressure or exploitation.

One pattern I have been observing among God's people is to be in a passive mode when under online sexual pressure. They simply give in or feel helpless when pressured. However, the Bible instructs His people to stay strong and secure by resisting sexual pressures with the help of God. The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about handling sexual pressures and gives specific strategies to handle sexual pressures.

My child, **if** sinners entice you, do not consent (Prov 1:10, emphasis mine)

Based on this clear instruction, I want to recommend biblical ways to handle “5 ifs” that are related to online sexual pressure. It gives you some ideas if anyone entices you in the following ways.

If anyone overly flatters you...

If anyone makes bold sexual moves...

If anyone pressures you by assuring safety...

If you are vulnerable or weak at times...

If you come across any erotic content...

If # 1: “If anyone overly flatters you, don’t get instantly attracted to them.”

It feels good to hear words like, ‘you look good’; ‘you are fantastic’; ‘you look gorgeous in this picture’, ‘you are amazing’ etc. You feel like a celebrity even when someone simply throws these words at you. Feeling special for someone is sometimes very intoxicating, especially for those who grow

up in homes where love is not expressed verbally. I have seen teenagers who got hooked into online romantic relationships just because someone said a few good words about them. In no time those relationships turned out to be abusive and brought tremendous heartaches to them. Not only teenagers, but many discontented couples also find such online flattery conversations irresistible. In the book of Proverbs, we read;

“For the lips of a loose woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
but in the end, she is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death;
her steps follow the path to Sheol” (Prov 5: 3-5, NRSV)

The loose woman in this passage represents anyone (male or female) who flatters and seduces others through sugarcoated words. In the end, such relationships lead to unbearable pain and loss. So, when someone overly flatters you or says nice words about you without much reason, stay calm and don't get attracted towards them.

If # 2: “If anyone makes bold sexual moves, escape immediately”

Many are spending a huge amount of time online looking for strangers to connect with sexually. They quickly build a small rapport for a few seconds and send their nude selfies or seductive forwarded messages just like that. Many innocent people are hooked on sexual activities through such non-consensual yet bold approaches. The Bible describes their aggressiveness this way -

“She is **loud** and wayward; her feet do not stay at home; now in the street, now in the market, and at every corner, she lies in wait. **She seizes him and kisses him**, and with a bold face, she says to him...” (Prov 7:11-13 ESV, *emphasis mine*).

In this passage, we see that such sexually immoral people are loud, bold, and expressive. The phrase, 'she seizes him and kisses him' describes any non-consensual actions like sending sexual content, sexually explicit forwarded messages, etc. They send enticing invitations like -

"Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love" (Prov 7:18 ESV).

"She **calls out** to those passing by on the road, who are minding their own business" (Prov 9:15, ISV).

Many who mind their own business are interrupted by such sexual invitations, which can be instinctively appealing to some but intimidating to others. Whatever the case, God's Word instructs us to ESCAPE immediately.

"But when you are tempted, he will also provide a **way out** so that you can endure it" (1 Cor 10:13, *emphasis mine*).

In ESV, 'way out' is translated as 'way of escape'. When we are suddenly tempted this way, we must look for a way of escape, and escape immediately.

A simple-three-step ESCAPE strategy:

- 1) Block or unfriend that person immediately - whoever he or she may be.
- 2) Go offline immediately and do something else to distract and refresh yourself.
- 3) Trust God to protect you from this person in the future. Claim God's promise in 2 Chr 16:9a, for such vulnerable situations.

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, **to give strong support to** those whose heart is blameless towards him"

If # 3: “If anyone pressures you by assuring the safety, don’t believe”

Many so-called smart people assure false security and pressurize others to engage in illegitimate sexual activities. They say assuring words like, ‘nobody will come to know this’, ‘it’s just between you and me’, ‘you can trust me’, and so on. Many who relied on such false security have lost their reputation, marital relationship, children, and career. Let’s take a sample from the book of proverbs, where the immoral woman assures a naive!

“Come, let us take our fill of love until morning;
let us delight ourselves with love
For my husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey
He took a bag of money with him;
he will not come home until full moon.” (Prov 7: 18-20
NRSV)

The words she uses are assuring the naive who might be concerned about his safety. So she gives convincing reasons that their intimate relationship is not going to hurt him anyway. But that’s not the truth because God’s Word says,

“Whoever takes crooked paths will be found out” (Prov 10:9 NIV)

In other versions, ‘found out’ is translated as exposed (NLT) / discovered, and punished (AMP).

The damage or loss is not just temporary, but a permanent one. When we continue to read the seventh chapter, we see the permanent fate of the naive who heeded the voice of the immoral woman.

The road to her house leads down to the dark world of the dead. Visit her, and you will never find the road to life again (Prov 2: 18,19 CEV).

The word pictures, 'dark world of the dead' signifies utter hopelessness. As there is no hope for life once dead, his future is doomed forever.

Don't believe any such assurances and give into sexual pressures. No one can give us security apart from God.

"For the Lord is your security. He will keep your foot from being caught in a trap" (Prov 3:26).

If # 4: "If you are vulnerable or weak at times, don't take the unfamiliar route at that moment"

Everyone has vulnerable moments and that's the time we lose control over our sexual choices. There are times our body gets weak, the mind gets dull and our emotions become dry and empty. Countless men and women succumb to sexual temptations during such moments. In the book of Proverbs, we see that a young man takes the road to the immoral woman's house when everything shuts down.

"I observed among the youths,
a young man without sense,
passing along the street near the corner,
taking the road to her house,
in the twilight, in the evening,
at the time of night and darkness" (Prov 7: 7b - 9 NRSV)

When we desire to live a life of purity, the enemy, the devil, always takes advantage of our vulnerable moments to attack us fatally. He tempted Jesus during His most vulnerable moment. He was alone, tired, and hungry after fasting for forty days and nights (Luke 4: 2-13). The devil is constantly on the lookout to attack us as he did with Jesus.

"Your enemy, the devil, is like a roaring lion, sneaking to find someone to attack" (1 Pet 5:8b).

That's why in the earlier part of the same verse, we read,

“Be on your guard and stay awake” (1 Pet 5:8a, CEV).

In other translations, we read, ‘stay alert’ (NLT), be sober, be vigilant (NKJV).

I want you to pause for a while and see the connections in this verse. As the devil is sneaking to find out someone to attack, we must always stay alert, sober, and vigilant. But during vulnerable moments, when our body is weak, the mind is dull and our emotions are empty, the devil is more active to attack us.

During such vulnerable moments, normally at the end of the day after heavy work, it is not advisable to casually spend a long time on social networks or doing something that is not familiar - like accepting an unknown friend request, chatting with a stranger, etc. Rather, try to talk to a person who cares for you (online or offline), or just go offline and do something else, or go to sleep for physical and mental refreshment.

If # 5: If you come across any erotic content, just ignore - don’t take action.

Erotic contents are widespread on the Internet. You may stumble upon things like an erotic teaser, a link with sexual subtext, a pop-up with sexy overtones, or a hookup app that promises to take away your loneliness. Advertisers of these contents are well aware of the psychology of human need. They use subtle and erotic words to get your emotional attention and to pull you into their products or services for their advantage. It’s exactly the way the wicked woman in the book of Proverbs promotes her service, which is compelling. She says,

“Stolen water is sweet,
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (Prov 9:17 NRSV)

“With much seductive speech, she persuades him;
with her smooth talk, she compels him” (Prov 7:21).

She’s loud enough!

‘Stolen water’ refers to enjoying something inappropriate in secret. It’s compelling to click the link with a sexual overtone or to download a hookup app because it’s all done secretly. Every time you click on sexual content, you open a new door for legions of digital demons to enter and corrupt your life. If you want to protect yourself from corruption, you must realize that what seems to be a secret is not at all a secret because God sees everything.

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable” (Heb 4:13 NLT).

When you live in the awareness that God sees you in secret, the power of secrecy is weakened, and you can choose to block every sexual trash from infecting your precious life.

Sexual Integrity ensures Sexual Privacy:

Unfortunately, there are unknown digital enemies (eg. the devil, our spiritual enemy; unknown hackers; or an angry ex-lover) who constantly look for ways to invade the sexual privacy of others. We must do our part in creating boundaries and trust God for what we can’t do. Below is a pathetic incident published in Indian Express recently -

“With only three days to go for the wedding, the bride-to-be received a call from her fiancé. Nothing could have prepared her for what he had to say. Hundreds of links had suddenly appeared in Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook flashing extremely obscene pictures of the woman.”³

“While the police may succeed in collecting evidence

and prosecuting the perpetrators of such crimes, it can do little to clean up the mess left behind on the Internet, the root cause of the victim's suffering. Reporting of such non-consensual content by victims to the concerned social media platforms is often of no avail. The scale of the problem can be gauged from the half-a-million reports revenge porn per month by Facebook alone.”⁴

Such non-consensual sexual content sharing shows the dark side of digital platforms. It's becoming a cool thing to violate the sexual privacy of others and cause severe loss to them. Yet another distressing reality is the danger of morphing - merging two images as one, to ruin the reputation of others. Below is the voice of one such victim.

“Morphing ruined my social life for a while. Someone uploaded a questionable morphed picture of me on Facebook and it went viral, defaming my character. I didn't use social networking for about an year after that.”⁵

We should never participate in such notorious, anti-social, and criminal activities like morphing images for ridiculous purposes. Not only that, we must trust God to protect our sexual privacy from such online dangers. God's Word assures us that,

“Whoever walks in integrity walks securely” (Prov 10:9a NRSV)

Sexual integrity is critical for online sexual security. When we walk in integrity in the online world, we will have the confidence to trust God to protect us from any online dangers that are too complicated for us. In Zechariah 2:5a, God says;

“For I, 'declares the LORD, 'will be a wall of fire around her (protecting her from enemies)”

When God surrounds us as a wall of fire, we can walk in safety.

What an advantage for those who trust and obey God!

VERBAL BOUNDARY

VERBAL BOUNDARY answers the question, “what is my content?”

Communication originates from God Himself. He reveals Himself as a personal and relational being. He created us in His image, as relational people. Since the beginning of time, humans are finding new ways to communicate and connect with others. The development of the Internet and online chatting apps in the last few decades has revolutionized the way people communicate with each other. The possibility of sending instant messages conditions our minds to think and communicate faster.

On the flip side, the ability to quickly express our thoughts and feelings through instant chatting can bring much pain to others when our chatting habits are not driven by genuine love and respect for others. Verbal boundary involves letting God’s Word guide our online conversations. Herewith, I have given a few guidelines to build a verbal boundary, which will not only protect you but also will **BLESS** others.

Build authentic relationships instead of superficial followers/friends.

Language: Use decent words instead of filthy expressions.

Engage in meaningful conversations instead of aimless chats.

Share verified facts instead of fake news.

Spread Positive Vibes instead of Toxic outbursts.

Authentic Relationships vs. superficial friends/followers

Social Media platforms offer unlimited opportunities for communication. However, you must make a conscious decision about the kind of relationship you are seeking online.

What do you want?

Are you looking for a large number of superficial contacts in the name of friends or meaningful connections with a handful of people based on trust, honesty, and mutual understanding?

“The man of too many friends (chosen indiscriminately) will be **broken in pieces and come to ruin**, but there is a (true, loving) friend who (is reliable and) sticks closer than a brother” (Prov 18:24 AMP).

Here is a clear warning to those who choose many friends indiscriminately (not choosing carefully). The consequence of such a choice brings severe damage.

At the same time, God’s Word encourages us to form friendships that are reliable - deep and authentic. But it takes time to build such reliable friends, based on common interests, values, or anything that seems to be worthy of your time. Though little effort is needed to have superficial friends, developing a handful of quality friends requires much time, effort, and commitment.

Decent Words vs. Filthy Language

God’s Word talks about a man who deceives his neighbor and says, “I was only joking” (Prov 26:19 NIV)

When someone uses the phrase, “I was only joking”, it might be a red flag. Do you remember receiving texts, emojis, or flirty images with double meaning from someone who later said, ‘I was only joking? Such deceptive messages seem to be innocent at first but have” the potential to push you into the dark. Responding to such messages needs much wisdom

and careful thought.

“The heart of the righteous thinks carefully about how to answer (in a wise and appropriate and timely way)” (Prov 15: 28a, AMP)

Moreover, God’s Word instructs us not to use foul, profane, worthless, vulgar, filthy, silly, coarse, obscene, and joking expressions in our conversations. We must let God’s Word guide and filter our digital conversations.

“Do not let unwholesome [foul, profane, worthless, vulgar] words ever come out of your mouth, but only such *speech* as is good for building up others, according to the need *and* the occasion, so that it will be a blessing to those who hear [you speak]” (Eph 4:29 AMP).”

“Let there be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse [obscene or vulgar] joking *because* such things are not appropriate [for believers], but instead speak of your thankfulness [to God]” (Eph 5:4 AMP)

Rather, we are instructed to use words that will build, motivate, encourage, and inspire others for good.

Meaningful Conversations vs. Aimless Chats

Humans are hardwired for meaningful connections. So, when you get a message from a stranger, your first instinct might be to quickly respond to see how far you can take that relationship. In social media, you will always have ample opportunities to respond to messages from strangers. This can eventually” lead you to never-ending-aimless-chats instead of striking up meaningful conversations on purpose.

“The one who guards his mouth (thinking before he speaks) protects his life; the one who opens his lips wide (and chatters without thinking) comes to ruin” (Prov 13:3 AMP).

The dictionary meaning for the word chatter is

- ☐ to talk informally about unimportant matters or
- ☐ to talk for a long time about things that are not important

Be it talking through video chats or texting, chatting without thinking leads to ruin. There is no (relational) protection in such conversations. Entering into conversations with clear purposes alone will protect your heart. Meaningful conversations/connections can take you to infinite heights, while aimless chats will wreck your life.

If you filter all your social media chats through Proverbs 13:3, how much time you can save per week?

Verified Facts vs. Fake News

In this Age of Information, the amount of information available to an individual is beyond his or her processing capacity. Such information overload blurs the decision-making ability as well. Thus, the digital atmosphere is becoming a breeding ground for the spread of fake news. The susceptible audience easily buys into fake information, which may come in various forms like edited videos, memes, unverified reports, and so on. Based on their curiosity, the information further gets spread like wildfire across social media outlets. The below research shows how false news spreads faster - just in one social media platform.

“A team of scholars who studied 126,000 rumors and false news stories spread on Twitter over a period of 11 years found that they traveled faster and reached more people than the truth. Their findings included:

- ☐ false news stories were 70% more likely to be re-tweeted than true stories.
- ☐ It took true stories around six times longer to reach

1,500 people.

- True stories were rarely shared beyond 1,000 people, but the most popular false news could reach up to 100,000.¹

God's Word guides us to make informed decisions amidst the massive spread of false information. Here are a few practical tips from the Scripture to handle fake information.

1. Do not get overly curious about stunning posts:

"The naive or inexperienced person (is easily misled and) believes every word he hears, But the prudent man (is discreet and astute and) considers well where he is going"—(Prov 14:15)

2. Do not act quickly before verifying the facts.

"A quick-tempered man acts foolishly and without self-control" - Prov 14:17a

- Do not act quickly when you come across an interesting product ad.
- Do not make hasty financial decisions.
- Do not form hasty alliances.
- Do not respond to any message thoughtlessly.
- Do not subscribe to something contrary to your values.

Remember that 'acting on one single unverified information can lead you to disastrous results.'

3. Suspect danger before acting on particular information:

“A wise man suspects danger and cautiously avoids evil, but the fool is arrogant and careless”(Prov 14:16)

4. Do not spread/share any unverified content:

“Do not plan harm against your neighbor who trusts you” (Prov 3:29 AMP).

“A righteous man hates lies, but a wicked man is loathsome, and he acts shamefully” (Prov 13:5 AMP).

Sharing unverified content is equivalent to spreading lies and thus inflicts harm against your neighbour (social media contacts).

Remember that if you are active in social media, you cannot escape receiving fake news in your account. However, you must have the ability to spot fake information by taking some extra seconds to verify the source. You must also double-check before sharing with others. This small effort will protect you and others from potential dangers.

Always ask this simple question before forwarding a message to others, “If those who receive my message take any action based on the content, will it cause any kind of harm to them?”

Positive Vibes vs. Toxic Outbursts

Many who use social media platforms, struggle to control their impulses. They lash out their feelings on their contacts just to cope with their inner turmoil. Though some of them feel guilty after some time, it becomes too late to reverse the damage caused by their offensive words. Rather, one of the best gifts anyone can bring into the digital spaces is their positive vibes.

“Vibes are the emotional signals a person gives out to those around them with their body language and social interactions.”²

Everyone needs a few people in their lives, whose company enriches them emotionally, which in turn, equips them to bring positive emotions into their online interactions. Unfortunately, many people do not have even one single person to invest emotional energy in them. Such people always seem to be an irritation to be around. They spill venom through their words at everyone because of their inner restlessness. However, that does not mean they cannot reverse their emotional condition. By choosing to spend time with emotionally healthy people, they can be empowered emotionally.

People across the world have testified that their emotional maturity has been positively impacted through their relationship with Christ.

In His (Christ) presence there is

- fullness of joy (Ps 16: 11).
- rest (Ex 33:14) to the inner person.
- refreshment (Acts 3:20) to the soul.

Those who spend quality time with Christ consistently experience inner joy, rest, and refreshment in their inner person irrespective of their external situations. As a result, they will be able to bring a positive presence into their online networks as well.

King David was a man of good presence (1 Sam 16:18 – NRSV). His presence combined with his musical skill brought relief to Saul whenever he was distressed by an evil spirit (v23). David's inner being was enriched by God's presence (v18) and thus he was able to relieve the distress of others.

How do you want to be known in the digital spaces? For your toxic outbursts or for spreading positive vibes?

PSYCHOLOGICAL BOUNDARY

***PSYCHOLOGICAL BOUNDARY answers the question,
“What is my need/motivation?”***

Social networking habits are largely driven by people's psycho-social needs (need for identity, meaningful relationships, and making a significant contribution). However, addiction to social networking is becoming a self-defeating strategy to cope with unmet psycho-social needs.

“Addictions were once considered a moral issue based on the weak will of the user. Then, addictions became classified as a disease under the medical model. More recently, addictions are often viewed as an ineffective way to cope with unmet life needs.”¹

- Ø Do you restlessly stay alert around the clock, craving for the next notification?
- Ø Do you tirelessly showcase your made-to-be-perfect pictures, one after another?
- Ø Is your online persona altogether different from the real ‘you’?

If you say ‘yes’ to any of these questions, you may need to double-check whether your social networking behavior is effectively helping you to meet your inner needs. The following two psychological boundaries help you to **reBUILD** your social networking habits in a way that fulfills you from the inside out.

1. **Build your identity** based on truth, not on people's perceptions!
2. **Build your relationships** based on trust, not on fear!

Building your identity based on truth, not on people's perceptions!

"Nobody said 'I was beautiful', except him" was a teenage girl's statement for continuing her relationship with a boy. For so many years, she believed that she was unlovable and unworthy. So, when this boy casually sent a flirty text online, she was instantly intoxicated by his words. Later, though she came to know that he was a fraud and ruining her life, she got stuck in that relationship. Her faulty view of herself (as unlovable and unworthy) forced her to get hooked into a cheap relationship.

Today, many who spend a lot of time in social media have this faulty view of themselves as unlovable, unworthy, and insignificant and thus get stuck in cheap and even abusive relationships.

How do you see yourself?

How do you value yourself?

How do you feel about yourself?

Answering these powerful questions based on truth will rebrand your personality. If you have a cheap view of yourself, it will reflect in your behavior as it was for that teenage girl. Instead, if you learn to see yourself based on the truth (about yourself), you don't need to strive to derive your identity from others' opinions about you. You don't need to get addicted to whether or not others will 'like' or 'comment' your posts or pics.

People's opinions are like broken mirrors that cannot agree with the real you most of the time. If no one liked your posts, you easily conclude that you are less valuable. When many people 'liked' a particular picture of yours, you feel more valuable that day. When you are too much concerned about what other people think about you, you are empowering others to control you. People's perceptions may not be true most of the time as it may depend on their mood, situations, attitudes, needs, etc. When you choose to believe others' perception of you as the absolute truth, you can never be able to stay true to your real self.

E.g., if a few people 'unfriend' or 'stop following you' on social media, you may strongly sense that you are not a friendly person. When someone you admire doesn't notice you, you may feel that you are in some manner fundamentally flawed and tend to spend a lot of time seeking other people's attention to fill the identity gap. In such situations, you completely lose your self-concept, which leads to low self-esteem. There is a two-fold solution to break this pattern.

1. See yourself as God sees you, irrespective of others' opinions about you.

E.g., God sees you in the following ways.

- You are God's masterpiece, created on purpose.
- You are the light of the world and your life is significant.
- You are complete and competent in Christ.
- You are the son/daughter of the Most High God.

When you derive your identity from truths about you, you can be untouched by other people's opinions about you.

2. Esteem yourself based on the faith God has given you, irrespective of your success in social networking.

As per Romans 12:3 (AMP), God has given each of us a degree of faith and a purpose that is designed for service. Some of us are given exceptional skills to develop true friends online and have a huge following. Some of our God-given purposes are linked to social media networking. This may require us to spend a considerable amount of time on social networking. Those who are not naturally gifted to attract people in social media can develop online social skills if doing so helps them to move forward in God's plan. However, those who are not efficient in building relationships in social media might be good at something else. Such people can choose to limit their online activities and they don't need to believe in the lie that they miss out on something significant in life. Rather, they can spend their time doing something that uplifts them. The bottom line is we must not derive our esteem based on our success in social networking, but in following God's purposes in any given field.

When we begin to build our self-concept from God's opinion about us and not on our success in social media, our digital persona will dramatically change. Then, the way we will be known in the digital world will be based on our authentic selves. We will be "liked" for who we truly are! This is an important aspect of psychological freedom – FREEDOM TO BE YOURSELF.

ADDICTED TO 'LIKES'?

In today's social media contexts, 'likes' act as a digital drug. Based on research, 'likes' activates the pleasure centers in the brain. More than actively interacting with others at a deeper level, people want to express themselves through pictures and updates and crave to be 'liked' by others.

"Using MRI scans, scientists found that reward centers in people's brains are much more active when they are talking about their own views, as opposed to listening to others."²

In January 2017 The New Statesman wrote an article on social media likes. Tellingly one quote stands out:

“Likes are always an indicator of social standing, at my age,” says an anonymous 17-year-old survey respondent. “As someone who gets anxious and occasionally struggles with self-esteem, the amount of Likes on my posts can be both hugely uplifting or depressing.”³

Doing anything to get ‘likes’ is becoming the norm. This mainly involves portraying a false self to attract a lot of comments and likes. People present a false self by...

- posting airbrushed profile pictures.
- posting pictures that portray a happy and enviable social life.
- pretending a perfect and dreamy life.

When they receive likes and comments, the reward centers in their brain become active and it boosts their self-esteem. To retain the happy feelings, they post more and more perfect, happy, and dreamy pictures. On the contrary, their happy mood is constantly interrupted by feelings of depression when they compare their pictures with others who get more likes and comments. Now, they are pressured to constantly update their false selves to constantly get more attention from others. Eventually, they lose the freedom to be themselves. The only way to come out of this psychological bondage is by breaking this vicious cycle of presenting a false self.

FREEDOM TO BE YOURSELF

“Others don’t like the real me, so I tirelessly present myself in a fake way so that others will notice me” is the unheard cry of countless men and women who are active in social media. Those who are caught in the pointless pursuit of presenting

a 'perfectly fake self' know the emotional pain of perpetually hiding their true self. Their true self longs to be accepted for who they are but the fear of being rejected by others makes them inauthentic. They soon reach a point where most of the stuff they post represents what they are not, but still crave to be liked for what they are not. This deep psychological craving or hunger to be accepted for who you are can't be adequately satisfied by 'likes' and 'comments' on social media.

That's why the gospel is very attractive to a hungry heart!

Christ accepts us as we are. He demonstrated his love for us by dying on the cross while we were sinful and weak people. He sees that we are created in God's image and have infinite worth. Being accepted for who you are gives you the true freedom to be yourself in the virtual world irrespective of people's opinions.

Those who enjoy God's acceptance experience a measure of happiness in their heart that exceeds the momentary thrills that come with 'likes' or a 'huge following' on social media.

David says, "You have given me greater joy than those who have abundant harvests of grain and new wine" (Psalm 4:7)

In the modern context, "You give me greater happiness and joy than those who have a huge following with countless likes and comments for their posts".

Building relationships based on trust, not on fear!

A large number of social media relationships are driven by fear.

- We fear rejection.
- We fear losing our close friends.
- We fear that we will be misunderstood.

- We fear if our secrets will be safe in the hands of our friends.
- We fear that we will not be accepted for who we are if we show our real selves.

When our relationships are driven by fear, we become anxious, depressed, and unfulfilled in our social life. The solution to come out of this fear trap is to build relationships based on trust. The Relationship Funnel Model presented below is a framework to cultivate trust-based online relationships.

The Relationship Funnel Model (5 Filters)

Trust does not develop automatically unless someone intentionally initiates and works hard at it. The Relationship Funnel Model is based on the trust-building patterns observed in the life of Jesus, mostly from the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John.

Filter # 1: Acts of Compassion

When Jesus saw a vast multitude, he felt compassionate towards them and miraculously fed 5,000 people. The supernatural deeds of Christ attracted people towards himself. People saw the sign (miracle) that Jesus performed (Jn 6:14).

Building a trust-based relationship starts with genuine acts of kindness. When we offer a comment of appreciation, a word of encouragement, a note of inspiration, a word of comfort to the hurting, people notice our gesture of kindness and like to stick around us. It may also involve actively participating in mass-level campaigns that are directed towards helping the helpless or underprivileged.

What are some of the unique ways you are attracting the crowds?

Filter # 2: Negotiating Motives

The people who experienced the miracle were ‘looking for Jesus’ (John 6: 24b). When the people found him (expecting to be fed again?), Jesus wanted to take his relationship with them to the next level. He never wanted a stagnant relationship. He expected them to be associated with him for the right reasons. As part of the filtering process, he negotiated their motives for following Him.

“...you have been searching for Me, not because you saw the miracles and signs but because you were fed with the loaves and were filled and satisfied” (John 6: 26).

Many will follow you online for personal benefits and that is ok for some time. However, God’s purpose for your online presence is greater than people’s immediate needs.

For what kind of reasons do you want people to be associated with you? If you answer this fundamental question and relate with your online relationships on purpose, your relationships will never get stagnant but grow. At the same time, those who are attracted to you for wrong reasons will slowly move away from you and you don’t need to get anxious when they are no more on your friend list.

Filter # 3: Self-Disclosure

“Jesus replied, I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to Me will never be hungry” (Jn 6: 35a AMP).

Self-disclosure is a process of revealing facts about yourself to others. This may include sharing your personal opinion about a wide range of topics like politics, culture, religion, and occupation. Another dimension of self-disclosure is sharing more personal aspects of your life, which may include your feelings, dreams, values, convictions, talents, fears, achievements, and failures. It is letting others see your real self.

Self-disclosure is a risky step because we cannot predict other people's responses. However, this is a crucial step to form trust-based relationships. Many people get stuck here because of fear of rejection, fear of misunderstanding, and fear of losing friends.

Jesus had firm confidence that God is sovereign over his relationships. He was able to appropriately disclose himself to others to form real relationships. But the moment He revealed a part of His identity (I am the Bread of Life), many reacted negatively.

“Now the Jews murmured and found fault with and grumbled about Jesus because He said, I am (Myself) the Bread that came down from heaven” (Jn 6: 41).

His self-disclosure exposed and filtered out the wrong crowd. As a result, many people left him.

“After this, many of His disciples drew back (returned to their old associations) and no longer accompanied Him” (Jn 6: 66 AMP).

Once this filter is done, Jesus was able to identify the people whom the Father has selected for Him to go deeper in the relationship.

Note: In social media, there are unlimited possibilities to connect to as many people as possible for any amount of time. If this step (filter) is not processed well, we will spend a major portion of our time with the wrong crowd, which will result in wasted energy, wasted time, wasted efforts, and eventually a wasted life.

Filter # 4: Ask Tough (Trust-Building) Questions

Many walked away from Jesus except a small group. It is natural to assume that this small group also might walk away. But Jesus didn't build his relationships based on mere

assumptions but reality. So he asked them a tough question.

“Will you also go away?” (Jn 6: 67 AMP).

Hats off to Jesus!!!

What a powerful question to filter out the right people to be a part of His inner circle!

“Simon Peter answered, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words (message) of eternal life. And we have learned to believe and trust, and (more) we have come to know (surely) that You are the Holy One of God, the Christ (the Anointed One), the Son of the living God” (Jn 6: 68, 69 AMP).

Did you notice Peter’s words in verse 68, **‘we have learned to trust?’**

When Jesus noticed a level of trust, He continued to disclose more about himself to them. However, He asked them questions to find their readiness to receive more. Once he asked them,

“Who do you say I am?” (Mt 16:15).

When they gave a satisfactory answer, Jesus disclosed more intimate things with them.

“From that time on Jesus began to show His disciples (clearly) that He must go to Jerusalem and endure many things ... and be killed, and be raised (from death to life) on the third day” (Mt 16:21).

Nonetheless, Jesus never shared with them more than they could handle

“I have much more to say to you, but right now it would be more than you could understand” (Jn 16:12 CEV).

This is a very important principle we must learn when it comes to self-disclosure, knowing the appropriate time, and the audience's readiness.

It is also to be noted that sharing deeper things can bring conflicts and contradictions. When Jesus shared about His upcoming suffering on the cross, Peter rebuked Him that those things should never happen to him (Mt 16:22), for which Jesus gave a forthright reply, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me..." (Mt 16:23).

Peter rebuked Jesus and Jesus rebuked Peter (vv. 22, 23,) but as this is a relationship built on trust, they didn't "unfriend" or "block" each other, but continued journeying together with greater intimacy. Within a few days, Jesus disclosed more of Himself to Peter, even glorious things.

"After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt 17:2).

This is how trust-based relationships grow!

Filter # 5: The Ultimate Test of a Trust-Based Relationship: Sharing Raw Emotions

The relationships that pass through the above 4 filters arrive at this level, which is a level of greater transparency, where we can be real even at the feeling level. This is the ultimate test of a trust-based relationship. We don't need to have the fear of losing our friends. There is total freedom to express who we are authentically. The highest expression of such a trust-based relationship is evident when Jesus was also honest about his feelings at the garden of Gethsemane.

He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the

point of death” (Mt 26: 38a NLT).

Some other terms used in other translations for the phrase “crushed with grief” are, “overwhelmed with sorrow” (NIV), “very sorrowful”(ESV), “exceedingly sorrowful” (KJV), “deeply grieved” (NASB), and “I am almost dying of sorrow” (AMP).

It’s a very risky sharing because He was not just a spiritual leader who taught about the Kingdom and performed supernatural miracles, but He claimed Himself as God. Showing such raw emotions was neither manly nor godly in the culture He lived then (even today!). He may lose his credibility as a spiritual leader as well. Nevertheless, He developed a level of trust with these men, where He could be real and honest about his raw feelings.

We can observe that what He did in Gethsemane, He did not do in Gennesaret or Galilee while meeting vast multitudes for the first time. He reserved sharing deep feelings only with those who pass through several layers of relationship filters.

This is a big mistake happening in social media platforms where before establishing trust in proven ways, people skip the natural process of developing relationships (filter 1-5) and find shortcuts in developing close relationships.

For Jesus, building a trust-based relationship was not an easy process; it took time. Today, He has more true followers in the world than for any other person who has ever lived on this planet earth.

Likewise, when we apply this Relationship Funnel Model in our online relationships, we will be able to develop meaningful, fulfilling, and purposeful relationships, which will last forever!

Part - 3

Broken Boundaries?

When the boundaries are broken, the heart is not safe. An unsafe heart is always an advantage to the enemy to attack, which can result in heartaches. If you have used Social Media in the past without any boundaries, you might have noticed the damages it has caused to your heart. In Part 3, you will learn that it takes just one real relationship to heal your broken heart.

THE POWER OF ONE REAL RELATIONSHIP

One Real Relationship *can*

- Heal your broken heart;
- Rewrite your broken story; and
- Rebuild your broken dreams.

Humans are hardwired for real relationships.

Social Media appears to help meet this need for relationships. That's why people endlessly search for real relationships in online spaces. They look for ways to express themselves creatively and connect with others deeply. Those who spend excessive time on social media are those who crave authentic relationships. Their heart cries are heard across the world of social media.

When someone often posts stories through pictures and shares **too much personal information** about themselves, their heart cry is “know me”.

When someone tirelessly posts **attractive content for others to notice**, their heart cry is “notice me” & “like me”

KNOW ME. NOTICE ME. LIKE ME.

With this heart cry, they respond to every notification, post content tirelessly, respond to every friend request,

compromise their sleep to stay active overnight, trust everyone who comes across their path blindly, and so on.

Day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year, they repeat these behaviors, and still, their heart cry is “know me, notice me, and like me”.

Has Social Media delivered what it promised – Real Relationships?

How about you, my friend?

If your heart cry is “know me, notice me, and like me” for a long period, probably you are tired of social media.

The reason why your craving for a real relationship is not fulfilled is that “social media is not designed to satisfy your inbuilt need for relationship.” It’s because your need for a real relationship is embedded in your spirit. Only Jesus Christ can offer you a real relationship that can go deep into your spirit and adequately satisfy your relational need. No other tool (like social media) or a person can adequately meet the real needs of your heart. In this chapter I want to bring your attention to two individuals who were searching for a real relationship - one is a **relationally active woman** and the other is a **relationally passive man** (so to say).

A Relationally Active Woman seeks Real Relationship

The first person whom I am going to share with you is a woman who lived with multiple men. It is said that this woman lived with five different men and is now in a live-in relationship with another man. She did not know the reason behind her relationship failures until one day she met Jesus out of a blue. Interacting with Him for a while helped her to see her repeated relationship failures in a new light. Look at the enlightening words of Jesus;

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,
but whoever drinks the water that I will give him will

never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4: 13,14 ESV).

‘This water’ refers to everything that appears to satisfy the needs of our hearts (e.g. social media, multiple relationships, etc.) but will leave us empty.

‘The water that I give’ refers to a permanent, never-ending, life-satisfying relationship with Him.

The woman, who knew many temporary relationships so far, was completely blown away by the offer (of a permanent / eternal relationship).

What the woman experienced is the experience of so many individuals in this hyper-connected age, where people ditch old relationships as soon as they get hooked up with a new relationship. The social media practices such as ‘blocking’ and ‘unfriending’ wire the human brain to become anti-relational. As a result, a high percentage of young people go through multiple breakups before formally committing themselves to a marital relationship. Such high break-up statistics attack the foundations of marriage at least in two ways.

First, it exponentially increases the divorce rate. During pre-marital counselling sessions, my wife and I hear young adults struggling with their feelings. Many of their statements are like, “I am still not able to forget my ex. I don’t get any feeling toward the person I am going to marry.”

Second, those who go through one or more breakups become so insecure in marital relationships. They live in constant fear that this relationship may end up at any time. The previous scars (hurts and memories) come alive at any time and give perpetual heartache. My wife and I have seen newly married couples who struggle to emotionally connect because of the effects of previous relationships.

Entering into a permanent (never-ending) relationship with Jesus heals their relational wounds caused by previous relationships. The woman in John 4 recognized that this Man, Jesus, offers something entirely new than those whom she had known earlier. This Man exactly knew where she comes from. He knew her past. She was fascinated by the fact that someone had known her life in detail. **Her search for a real relationship got fulfilled in Jesus.** Unable to contain the joy and excitement, she went into the city and told everyone,

“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did” (Jn 4: 29a ESV).

It’s a satisfying feeling to know that someone knows you for who you are and still loves you. You can be real with such a person. You don’t need to hide your flaws and appear to be smart.

You might have had relationship failures like this woman in the past. Jesus knows your broken heart, your broken story, and your broken dreams. A dynamic relationship with Jesus can heal your broken heart, rewrite your broken story and rebuild your broken dreams.

He invites you to come to Him for a real relationship.

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink! He who believes in Me [who adheres to, trusts in, and relies on Me], as the Scripture has said, ‘From his innermost being will flow *continually* rivers of living water’(Jn 7:37,38 AMP).

If you are hungry for a real relationship, why don’t you respond to His invitation and run to him by faith?

A Relationally Passive Man seeks Real Relationship

Have you heard about passive social media users? They spend a lot of time in social media, only to scroll through the

news feeds, viewing other people's posts, analyzing other people's profile pages, but never directly interact and engage others.

They long for a real relationship but are somehow disconnected from others because of their unique profession, personality, and past relational failures. People don't like to send a friend request to them. Their occasional posts may not attract people's engagement. Even though such people may display exceptional skills in their professional life, they lack relational skills. No one recognizes their craving for real relationships. No one hears their heart cry that sounds, 'know me, notice me, and like me'.

One day when Jesus was traveling, he heard the heart cry of one such man who was financially secure, professionally efficient but relationally disconnected from everyone. No one cared enough to get personal with him. His name is Zacchaeus. It appears that being a chief tax collector, he was despised by everyone.

"Tax collectors were among the most unpopular people in Israel. Jews by birth, who chose to work for Rome, were considered traitors. Besides, it was common knowledge that tax collectors made themselves rich by gouging their fellow Jews."¹

The moment he heard that Jesus was passing by his area, he desperately wanted to meet him. So he ran ahead and climbed up a tree to see him pass by. Many people approached Jesus to receive physical healings and miracles. But here's a man who wanted to just see him. Probably someone would have told him about the goodness of Jesus.

Jesus knew his relational need!

He knew his name! (*In Jewish culture, knowing a person by name signifies an intimate knowledge of that person*).

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and called him by name and offered to spend a day with him in his home. The quality of relationship Jesus offered in a short time transformed his life forever. **His search for a real relationship got fulfilled in Jesus.** You can read more information about him in Luke 19: 1-10.

Are you someone who is disconnected from others but craving for a real relationship?

Jesus knows your name.

He is willing to come into your life and give a new relationship to you. Will you open up your heart for him?

A simple test of real relationships

In this hyper-connected and information overload era, is it realistic to build real relationships that are permanent and life-satisfying?

There is no one-word answer. However, one of the marks of a real relationship is the commitment to remember and cherish the minute information shared by others.

How many people (in your opinion) will remember your posts for more than an hour? Or more than a day?

“Social media is crowded, fast, and loud. There is an over abundance of content that moves by too quickly to make a meaningful impression on anyone’s short-term memory.”²

“...think of your short-term memory as an empty glass and the internet and social media as extra water being poured into it. As you pour more and more water into it, the glass begins to overflow and the excess water spills outside the glass. In a sense, social media is this overflowing of information. If you’ve ever tried to take in

the rapid influx of information from different social media streams, you'll know that the majority of them are instantly forgotten about, your attention becoming selective as to what links or messages you check out. Many of these links are gone before we know it and therefore don't register on your radar."³

Researches confirm that a majority of content shared online is instantly forgotten. Everyone in this hyper-connected age suffers from information overload. People quickly forget the status update they see. No one cares to remember anything they read or seen. What if nothing you post registers in people's minds? What if the impressive contents you post on social media spill out of their minds like the excess water that spills outside the glass?

If your heart-cry behind your every post is 'know me, notice me, and like me', how much of your longing has been fulfilled so far? Your relational fulfillment mainly depends upon being cherished for who you are. That's why the level of satisfaction is very high for those who experience a real relationship with a loving God. Look at the way God cherishes His people;

"Indeed, I have inscribed [a picture of] you on the palms of My hands" (*Is 49:16a AMP*).

"...I have tattooed your name upon my palm..." (Is 49:16a TLB).

He has inscribed (tattooed) a picture of you in his hands.

He wants to get into a deeper relationship with you.

He knows your heart behind every social media post. When you are longing for real relationships in the online platforms, He knows your relational need. He hears your cry, "know me, notice me, and like me'.

He also knows your unspoken words and unexpressed feelings. He knows your pain points. He knows the cracks in

your heart caused by people's unfairness, which could be childhood neglect, abuse, a bad breakup, or losses. He also knows the bright side of your life, your unique gifts, and talents, your dreams, and plans. He cares about these minute details.

He wants to meet you at the point of your need and wants to build a true relationship with you that will last for eternity. If you have gone through a breakup, a divorce, or relational abuse, you may wonder how in the world such real and lasting relationships exist. But the good news is,

Jesus gives a real relationship that can heal your broken heart, rewrite your broken story and rebuild your broken dreams.

He invites you with these words,

“Look! I (Jesus) stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends” (Rev 3:20 NLT).

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink!” (Jn 7:37 AMP).

If you want to respond to his invitation, you can do it right away by saying this prayer of faith.

Lord Jesus, I need you. I have been searching for real relationships on social media for a long time. Still, my heart's longings have not been fulfilled. I have been hurt by various online relationships and my life is broken. I am also guilty of cheating others for selfish purposes. Thank you for dying for me on the cross for all of my sins, including my online habits that are deviant from your commands. Forgive my sins. Give me a meaningful and life-satisfying relationship with You. Amen!

FREEDOM FROM SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

True freedom is the ability to follow Christ without any restrictions (internal / external) or compulsions.

Using social media without building the boundaries discussed in this book can lead to bondage. Not only that, when the online safety walls are not in place, there is no protection there. If you don't take time to build boundaries, you give a foothold to the devil. Apostle Paul says,

“...and do not give the devil an opportunity to work” (Eph 4:27 ISV).

“...Neither give place to the devil” (KJB).

“...and do not give the devil a foothold” (NIV).

If you give the devil a little space to just keep his foot, he will gain new grounds day by day. He is the old serpent who deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden. He still can step into your life if you give him space or opportunity.

Without strong boundaries, you can't prevent the devil to get into your private online world. Those who don't have strong online boundaries give full permission to the devil to do anything with their lives. If he gets a foothold (a little space to keep his foot), at least he will do three things in your life.

“The thief comes only to **steal** and **kill** and **destroy**” (Jn 10:10a NIV).

The devil is a thief who comes to

1. Steal your joy

He promises to give you happiness through unhealthy social media practices, but the fact is that he will steal your real joy that comes through a loving relationship with Christ. He is a joy-killer.

2. Destroy you

He promises to give you momentary thrills, but in fact, he destroys your reputation, marriage, health, profession, and the blessed life God has promised you. He is a destroyer.

3. Kill you

He promises to give you the ultimate experience in the online spaces, but he will suffocate and kill you. He will take you to a point where you will be 'broken beyond repair'. He is a killer.

Have you given any space, foothold, or opportunity to the devil in your life?

In Mark 5: 1-20, we read about a man who gave full access to the devil in his life. His life became so miserable to the point of death.

- He was completely isolated from society - he lived in the tombs. (v3).
- His behavior was violent and uncontrollable and nobody was strong enough to handle him (v4).
- He was constantly crying (v5). The actual meaning of this cry is 'inarticulate shouts that express *deep* emotion.'¹
- He was cutting himself with sharp objects (v5).
- He longed for a real relationship (v18).

I repeatedly notice these five aspects manifested in those who are addicted to social media or any other form of gadget addiction.

- They are isolated or disconnected from their family and loved ones. They seek to be alone just with their gadget. They lose interest in the things they enjoyed doing before.
- They show violent and aggressive behavior when confronted, including breaking gadgets in anger, hurting their loved ones, screaming, and so on.
- Amidst their violent behavior, they still long to be understood. They cry inside with deep emotions. Many wake up in the night hours and sob in their bed. Some spill toxic emotions around them showing their emotional helplessness. The language of their cry is: “know me, notice me, and like me.”
- When their constant cry is not noticed or understood, they hurt themselves violently. Many of them cut their hands repeatedly. During counselling sessions, I have seen deep scars of people who hurt their bodies because of their relationship problems.
- They appreciate whoever seeks to understand them. When they come to the counselling center with a wounded heart, just listening to them with empathy does wonder.

Will their heart cries ever be heard?

Will their behavior ever change?

Will they be delivered from the influence of the evil one (devil)?

Will they be able to live an exciting and meaningful life again?

Yes.

They need someone who is both compassionate and strong enough to help them.

In the case of the man we see in Mark 5:1-20,

- Jesus heard his lonely cries. He visited the region of Gerasenes just to meet this man. Right after liberating this man from the clutches of the devil, he got into his boat and left the place right away.
- Jesus was not intimidated by his wild and uncontrollable behavior as he is stronger than the forces of darkness.
- Though he was broken beyond repair, Jesus made him whole again (v15)
- Jesus gave him a new purpose to pursue. He went to the Ten Towns of that region and showed how Jesus made him whole and everyone was astonished (v20).

Are you struggling with social media addiction? Do you think that it's too late to make changes in your online habits? He knows your cries. Even if you are broken beyond repair, so to say, He can restore you and give you a new purpose to pursue. Jesus died on the cross for your sins. He rose again on the third day to give a new life to those who believe in Him. You can trust Him to come into your life and to bring you out of your addiction. Christ has called you to freedom. He has also promised to give freedom to anyone who comes to Him and trusts in Him.

“For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3: 17 NLT).

“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn 8:36 ESV).

“And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NLT).

God desires to give you freedom from social media and gadget addiction. You can express your trust in Him and His Words through prayer right now.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I need you. I agree that I used social media without any healthy boundaries. As a result, I messed up my life and my online relationships. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I turn from the sinful behaviors that I practiced in the online networks. I surrender myself and my gadgets into your hands. Please forgive me and transform me by your power. Amen!

My Story

I once was hooked, but now I'm free

I once was hooked...!

I once was so fascinated by the irresistible content people share on social media sites and video channels. Binge-watching videos became a habit for me.

I reached a point in life where...

- the first thing I did as soon as I woke up was to spend time on my mobile.
- the last thing I did before sleeping was binge-watching videos for entertainment purposes.
- whenever I wake up in between my sleep, I sure spent a few minutes on my mobile

Based on Research

✓ 61% of people check their phone immediately after waking up.

✓ Checking your phone in the morning will immediately limit the rest of the day.

✓ You limit your days' worth based on a like, an email, or an update.

✓ Using your phone in the morning sets up how you'll spend the rest of your day.⁴

- whenever I was upset, instead of dealing with the issue, I calmed myself by watching videos for a weird amount of time.

My online habits affected my top priorities...

1. My relationship with God grew weak.
2. My relationship with my family suffered. I still remember sitting in restaurants with my spouse and children only to swipe through my mobile.
3. My work efficiency came below average as I often seek breaks to use my mobile.

Deep inside I knew my life was messed up. One day God confronted me saying, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3 NRSV). The footnotes in the study Bible I used helped me to understand this verse better;

Based on another research

✓ Using electronic devices before bedtime can be physiologically and psychologically stimulating in ways that can adversely affect your sleep.

✓ It suppresses the release of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin and makes it more difficult to sleep.⁵

“Today we can allow many things to become gods to us. Money, fame, work, or pleasure can become gods when we concentrate too much on them for personal identity, meaning, and security. No one sets out with the intention of worshipping these things. **But by the amount of time we devote to them, they can grow**

into gods that ultimately control our thoughts and energies”¹(emphasis mine).

I not only devoted a large amount of time to binge-watching but also depended on it to meet some of my basic psychological needs. As the Israelites ignored God and lusted after other gods and bowed down to them’ (Judg 2:17b NRSV), I too became insensitive and ignored God through my online behavior.

I felt ashamed...!

In sharp contrast, when I read about the experiences of men and women of God who walked with God in the previous generations, they were more fulfilled in the Lord and fruitful for the Lord. They were always connected to the source of all goodness – God Himself.

They spent the **early hours** of the day connecting to God. **At night**, they meditated God’s Word while falling asleep. The psalmist said, “On my bed, I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night” (Psa 63:6). The line of communication between God and them was unbroken.

I felt guilty...!

I went to God with a repentant heart...!

I deeply felt that He was inviting me to make it a habit to depend on His love for my emotional and psychological needs. This warm verse penetrated my heart.

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases

His mercies never come to an end

They are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22, 23a ESV).

This is a sure promise of God to send His fresh love to

nurture my heart every morning. To receive His fresh love every morning, I had to make some radical adjustments in my lifestyle, which I called 'partial gadget detoxification'²

Some of the key adjustments I made include,

1. Not to use gadgets at least one hour before going to sleep so I can go to bed early.
2. Not to use gadgets in the fresh morning hours.
3. Intentionally receive His unfailing love in the morning by faith based on His promise in Lamentations 3:22,23.
4. To feed my mind with His Word before falling asleep.
5. To cut down on my mobile usage during the daytime. Use it only to respond to emergencies.
6. Involve in physical workouts for recreation purposes.
7. Learn something new.

I trusted God to observe this partial gadget detoxification for about 90 days. During those days, God restored my heart by the power of His love. He rewired my brain by the power of His Holy Spirit. I still remember praying over this below verse again and again.

“For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17).

I experienced a breakthrough in my online habits.

Since then, I am completely free from unhealthy attachment to gadgets. It is as if I have come to the other side of the tunnel. I can see a positive change in these vital areas

- **Spiritual:** My relationship with God became vibrant

again. Every day, I can engage with the God of the universe and walk with Him in freedom.

- **Relational:** I can give undivided attention to my spouse and children and can love and serve them better.
- **Vocational:** My efficiency in work and productivity has increased a hundred times (so to say).
- **Emotional:** My emotions are better now. No unnecessary displays of stressful anger, because I have ample amount of time to refresh myself in healthy ways.
- **Personal:** My general life satisfaction has reached new levels that I enjoy a new kind of freedom in Christ like never before. I can do whatever I want to do that is in line with God's priorities.

I have learned three life lessons during this journey.

1. Life will become messed up when our online habits are not 100% controlled by God.
2. Taking radical steps to turn to God and His purposes will result in freedom and transformation.
3. Life will become super-productive when our gadgets are surrendered (set apart) to God and His purposes.

At present, I am extensively using mobile, not for entertainment or self-serving purposes, but to serve God's purposes. My life satisfaction has tripled as I stopped depending on gadgets to meet my emotional and psychological needs.

And now I'm free...

I can walk with Jesus in the digital spaces with freedom! It's a life-changing and life-satisfying experience. In the words of Neil Armstrong, who walked on the moon,

“I walked all over the world; I walked on other worlds without a knowledge of God, and it was an exciting adventure and I’d do it again but it was not enough. The walk on the moon lasted three days but the walk with Jesus lasts forever... the walk on the moon did not change my life; the walk with Jesus has changed my life.”³

Walking with the God of the universe in the digital spaces on purpose is an exciting adventure. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). In The Message Bible, we read,

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, **bringing out the God-colors in the world**. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re **going public** with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you **light-bearers**, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—**shine!** (Emphasis mine)

Those who walk with Christ have the unfair advantage to go public and bring out the God-colors in the digital world.

The Samaritan woman’s two-sentence-testimony (“*Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?* – Jn 4: 29) enlightened and brought the entire village to Christ. In the same way, a single tweet by a person who truly walks with Christ has the potential to dispel the digital darkness that pervades the online world and bring people to the saving knowledge of Christ. When hundreds and thousands of true followers of Christ bring out the God-colors in the digital world through their online presence, the glory of God will be manifested in ever-widening circles till everyone who lives online gets an opportunity to hear the life-transforming message of Christ.

It’s your turn!
Your story matters!

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Notes

Chapter - 1

¹ These stories are derived from various sources including my personal counseling experience, my interaction with people, and my research. I have consolidated hundreds of real stories into 13 personas in such a way that the privacy of real people behind these stories is protected.

Chapter - 2

¹<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/subculture>

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³*The Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989. Print. Notes on Leviticus 18:3

⁴*The Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989. Print. Notes on Leviticus 18:6-27

⁵*The Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989. Print. Notes on 1 Corinthians 7.1ff

⁶ Based on 1 Cor 1: 2; 6: 9-11, Leviticus 18:1-3 and Romans 12:2

⁷ *The Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989. Print. Notes on 1 Corinthians 7:3-11

Chapter - 3

¹ <https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media->

addiction/ (accessed 09 Nov 2020)

Chapter - 4

¹Transforming Leadership: Jesus' Way of Creating Vision, Shaping Values & Empowering Change, Leighton Ford, InterVarsity Press, Illinois, page 129

² <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/why-electronics-may-stimulate-you-bed> (accessed 10 Nov 2020)

³ <https://www.sleephealthsolutionsohio.com/blog/10-effects-of-long-term-sleep-deprivation/> (accessed 10 Nov 2020)

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³ <http://www.google.co.in/amp/s/indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/call-social-media-to-account-6708724/lite/> (accessed 15 Nov 2020)

⁴ <http://www.google.co.in/amp/s/indianexpress.com/article/>

opinion/columns/call-social-media-to-account-6708724/lite/
(accessed 15 Nov 2020)

⁵ <https://m.timesofindia.com/city/chandigarh/Net-threat-Morphing-pictures-for-revenge/articleshow/47981141.cms>
(accessed 15 Nov 2020)

Chapter - 7

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-43344256>(accessed 04-02-2021)

² <https://www.yourdictionary.com/vibes>

Chapter - 8

¹ <https://steverosephd.com/why-we-are-addicted-to-likes/>
(accessed 08 – 02 – 2021)

² https://ed.ted.com/best_of_web/qQzsdX2Y#watch
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³ <https://medium.com/swlh/likes-on-social-media-87bfff679602> (accessed 14 May 2021)

Chapter - 9

¹ *The Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989. Print. Notes on Luke 19:1-10

² <https://www.americaninno.com/boston/social-media-memory-recall/> (accessed 11 Oct 21)

³ <https://www.americaninno.com/boston/social-media-memory-recall/>

Chapter - 10

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/2896.htm> (accessed 14

October 2021)

Chapter - 11

¹ *The Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989. Print. Notes on Exodus 20:1-4.

² Gadget Detoxification means abstaining from using gadgets for a specific period of time.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRAYiuigsME> (accessed 23 October 2021)

⁴ <https://www.google.co.in/amp/s/www.uncoveryourpurpose.com/check-phone-first-thing-morning/amp/> (accessed on 27 March 2020)

⁵ <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/why-electronics-may-stimulate-you-bed> (accessed on 27 March 2020)



In this digital era, relationships are highly dependent on technology. After the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, the number of people using social media has increased exponentially. When the lockdown was announced across the globe, social media platforms offered a wonderful alternative to stay in touch with our loved ones and peers.

However, those who spend an inordinate amount of time on Social Media encounter unique relational struggles, which others are alien to. They have questions and issues which can't be solved just by the search engine results.

In his publication, ***Social Media Relationships***, Alwin Jacob provides biblical guidelines on how to use social media without falling recklessly into the pitfalls of addiction. This book is for you if

- You want to genuinely follow Christ but are distracted by social media
- You are terribly addicted to social media and looking out for a breakthrough
- Your marriage or job is under attack because of your poor online habits
- You are a parent or Christian leader who wants to educate your children or anyone about social media relationships

“ I commend this book to youth, parents and youth leaders and pastors. ”

Dr. Samson Gandhi
Executive Director, Person to Person



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alwin Jacob is qualified and a certified counsellor and a psychotherapist. He has a growing counselling practice in pre-marital, marriage, mental health, addictions, and related matters.

His three-level training in Advanced Biblical Counselling, Parental Counselling, and Addiction Counselling from Person to Person – Institute for Christian Counselling, have prepared him to offer spiritual and yet practical counselling. Professionally, he has a Master's degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy and a Post Graduate Diploma in Psychological Counselling. Additionally, his master's degrees in English and Transformational Leadership (International School of Leadership, Manila, Philippines) have given him the felicity to counsel people from different backgrounds.

Alwin has responded to God's call and trained himself to be a counsellor after serving the Lord as a Full-time Missionary with Campus Crusade for Christ for 14 years. He and his wife Golda are blessed with two children, Goldwin and Goldlin. They make their home in Tirunelveli, India.