Hold the Phone

Shaun Brauteseth 2 June 2016



In a recent Washington Post article depicting the lives of teens today, a 13-year-old named Katherine Pommerening is profiled. The article begins with a description of a trip home from school as she slides into the car, phone in hand. She proceeds to:

Ignore a question from the driver and open Instagram.
Scroll through three memes before closing the app.
Open BuzzFeed.
Read a story about Janet Jackson.
Read '28 Things You'll Understand If You're Both British and American.'
Close Buzzfeed.
Open Instagram again.
Open the NBA app.
Shut the screen off.
Turn the screen back on.
Open Spotify.
Open Fitbit.
Open Instagram again.
Open Snapchat.
Watch a sparkly rainbow flow from her friend's mouth.

Watch a YouTube star make pouty faces at the camera.
Watch a tutorial on nail art.

‘She feels the bump of the driveway and looks up,’ the article continues. ‘They’re home. Twelve minutes have passed.’(1)

This is a fairly normal interaction with a device (and lack of interaction, mind you, with a human nearby), and it’s certainly not just teenagers doing this. Phones have become an extension of ourselves, and never before have we been able to access so much information and entertainment so quickly. My 16-month-old daughter already knows what a phone is, and if my wife’s phone beeps in another room, she’ll toddle off to fetch it and bring it to her. She’s learning that it’s something we look at constantly, and I’m realising that it’s a lesson I don’t want her to learn.

Throwing Off All Distractions

What does a Christian do with this? What does a servant of Jesus do with the sheer amount of content available to us, which is able to literally fill every waking hour? How do we apply the freedom to be informed and entertained but avoid excesses, when the Western world today is virtually defined by excess? We have to start where Jesus started and work our way outwards from there.

In one of planet earth’s most significant moments, creation’s divine Architect was asked, point blank, about what He wanted most from us. If we’re ever going to pay attention to Scripture, this is the moment. His answer, found in Mark 12:28-31, is this: love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and then love your neighbour as yourself. In that order. What a privilege for us to devote our lives towards that end! And what a responsibility to throw off anything that would prevent us from doing so. Our lives will be defined by what we’ve done with those two commands.

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The Dangers of Indulgence

The more I’m entertained by what I read on my phone, the less I want to spend time with God. The more I depend on my phone to fill every silent moment in my day, the less I want to think about God in those silences. The more I fill my mind with exciting but unimportant things, the less

my mind wants to focus on God, because I'm constantly occupied but never satisfied. The more I feel a need to look at my phone, the less I feel a need to look at God.

Every time I wake up in the morning, reach for my phone and instantly check what happened in the world while I slept, I become less and less interested in engaging with my wife and daughter. Whenever I spend large chunks of time reading things or watching videos that interest me, I find myself less and less interested in reaching out to people who require some effort. Every time I enter my insular mini-world of entertainment and information, I become less and less receptive to the reality around me. And every time I ignore a person in order to check a message or read an update, I become less and less bothered by how rude it actually is.

In short, the more I indulge my own cravings, the less I hunger after God.

Each generation has had its challenges: the pent-up, stoic denials of the post-World War 2 era; the sexually liberated, drug-induced fallout of the 60s; the materialistic madness of the 80s; the lost innocence of the turn of the millennium. It feels like our generation has all of those and more, with an added twist: there are more ways to escape than there have ever been. More ways to tune out of reality and into kingdoms of our own making. More ways to use up precious time on things with almost no value. More ways to ignore each other. More ways to ignore God.

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Harnessing Self-Restraint

There is an answer, though: self-restraint. It's a fruit of being filled with the Holy Spirit, and in Christ we're fully capable of taking something that is a daily part of our lives and bringing it under submission to God. That'll mean putting it in the drawer sometimes, silencing it sometimes, hiding it away sometimes. It's maths, not magic. We just have to take ground back, one good decision at a time. As we do this, we teach our hearts, souls and minds that they were made to be focused on One who is more captivating than any pixels on a screen. And that there is a world of people crying out to be engaged, eye-to-eye, and to see something of the love of God up close.

I'll never meet Katherine Pommerening, but if I did, I would say this: 'You and me are both just normal people who get caught up in the things of this world. So let's stop being normal, stop wasting time, and fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal'.

REFERENCES:

1. ’13, right now’ by Jessica Contrera (washingtonpost.com)