

Conquering Virtual Giants-From the Series "Hypernikao" (More than Conquerors)

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Text: Phil 4:4-9

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

I don't know if you've been watching the news or not, but Facebook had a very bad week. First, on Monday, Instagram went down for six hours around the world. Now, the fact that six hours without social media caused an international incident, should clue us in a little on what we're going to talk about today. But that wasn't the only bad thing that happened to Facebook. They also had a whistleblower. (I love a good whistleblower story, don't you?) So, there's a woman by the name of Frances Haugen. She used to be the director of civic engagement for Facebook, the department that makes sure people place nice online. Well, she resigned this past May and turned over tens of thousands of pages of documents to the Securities and Exchange Commission, and Tuesday she gave her findings to Congress.

She claims that Facebook and Instagram have a vested interest in presenting increasingly negative information in your news feed. Not surprising, is it? In fact, she says that what social media has learned is that the more negative feed we see, the more we engage with it in terms of clicks, likes, and angry emojis. The more riled up we get the longer we stay on; the longer we stay on the more ads we see; the more ads we see the more money they make.

And she says this negative downward spiral on social media is what creates an atmosphere where misinformation and radicalization can grow. She claims that Facebook used predatory behavior to entice people into clicking on negative content, that it's algorithms are set to prioritize negative content, that it is aware that acts in predatory ways towards teensagers, that it fosters violence and insurrection, and that it was a fundamental cause of a mass genocide in Myanmar in 2018, and that it turned off safety regulations after the 2020 US election, which allowed extremists to organize what eventually became the January 6 riots on Capital Hill. She

claims that Facebook and its subsidiaries, Instagram and WhatsApp, know what safety measures they can put in place to deliver to people a more holistic feed, but they refuse to do so, acknowledging that the more negative emotions that it can elicit in people, the more they will click through, getting exposed to more ads, and the longer they will stay on the platform. Basically, there is less financial reward for Facebook when we're seeing happy pictures of family friends and cute puppies than there is from seeing political posts, conspiracy theories and extremist propaganda. In short, she claims, Facebook and Instagram aren't actually showing you a feed based on your life and relationships, it is prioritizing content that will elicit responses, and keep you on longer.

Haugen also claims that the platforms know the potential harm for teenagers, especially preteen and teen girls, and yet continue to aggressively market to them anyway. She claims that their algorithms tune a feed so carefully, that a topic searched once by a teen, rewards them with an onslaught of recommendations for additional posts, groups, and people to follow who overwhelm their feed with similar, and increasingly more radical content. As you might be able to imagine, it's a scenario that is pretty innocuous if your child is searching for funny memes or cat photos, but can prove disastrous if a teen searches for items related to eating disorders, self harm, violence or political extremism.

So, how do we respond to this virtual giant in our lives, in our homes, and in our back pockets? Is the only solution to delete our accounts, sign off online, and disconnect from the larger digital community? In order to keep our kids safe, and in order to protect our own mental health, do we have to sacrifice the great things about digital community, like connecting with friends and family around the world, sharing our lives with the people we love, and having a way to be exposed to the people and events happening on the other side of the globe? If we're going to be "hypernikao" *more than conquerors* of these virtual giants in our lives, where do we start? What do we do?

The bad news is that the Bible doesn't have a particular chapter we can turn to in order to read what Jesus wants us to know about social media? There was just no precedence in the ancient world for this interconnected world that we're a part of today. But, we do know from 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that God's word is useful, for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." So while there's no specific chapter on social media, God's word does have plenty to say three things: how we determine what is true, how we discern our intrinsic worth, and how we, as believers, should interact with the world around us. So, in the next few minutes that we have together, I want us to look at the virtual giants in our lives through the lens of (1), the potential power they have over us, (2), the potential power we can have on how we use those platforms and what we're sending out into the world.

Let me say, "I don't have this all figured out-we're learning how to navigate this issue as a family. Also, I don't think we have to delete it-it's not going anywhere. And, it's not ALL bad-not

at all. But we do have to figure out how to navigate it in a way that protects our families, preserves our relationships, and bears witness to our faith in Christ.

So, I did a little experiment this week. I got off of social media for a whole week. I know, big experiment, huh? I took it off my phone, took it off all mobile platforms, and I signed out completely. It was kind of nice. I have no idea what my neighbor ate for dinner last night, but that's ok! However, I realized that I had left myself a workaround. I deleted everything except my news app. Now, ordinarily, I wouldn't be that interested in the news app, but with nothing left to do, I found I was picking it up and reading more than I ever imagined. I was shocked how often I picked it up and turned it on before I was even aware that my phone was in my hand to begin with.

Studies say that we pick up our phones, on a minimum, 58 times a day! And, the average time we go after we put down our phones until we pick them up again? Three and a half minutes. I don't know about you, but social media has, in my life, over-promised and under-delivered. It promises happiness, it dangles fame. But when I think about Philippians 4, that we just read, social media hasn't really made me happier, more gentle, have less anxiety, become more thankful, have more peace. It hasn't delivered on any of those things. Maybe it can't.

But here's where Paul's text can help..he tells us what CAN deliver on those things, a focus on God and his Word. Now ,I don't want you to get in the car and say, "Kimberly says we should get off of our phones so that we can spend more time reading our Bibles." Less Insta; more Jesus. That's not exactly what I'm saying, although it's not a bad thing. No, what I am saying is that when I'm tuned into my relationship with God, and I'm growing in my knowledge of Scripture, when I'm firmly planted in my identity in Christ then I'm *less likely* to fell prey to the negative influences in the world around me, and I'm more gentle in my words and actions with others. It's not that we need more Bible and less Instagram (although we probably do), it's that in our culture we need *more* of God's Word so that we can *accurately filter* what social media and everywhere else is telling us.

Now, that's a situation that Paul could relate to. In this letter to the Philippians, Paul is writing under house arrest in Rome. Persecution of the Jesus followers was rampant. The Jewish leaders didn't like the Christians. They thought they were blasphemous. Rome didn't like the Christians. They thought their allegiance to King Jesus threatened Caesar. They lived in a politically charged and violent time, when people fought to the death for entertainment. Here comes Paul, though, who calls them to die to self, and he suggests they live lives of joy, love, compassion and generosity. The life that Paul called them to was about as different from the culture that they lived in as you can imagine. I think we can relate to that.

We live in a time that may be more divided than ever. We are divided politically, ethnically, and economically. We live in these political silios, and while it's not the same as Roman persecution,

we do live in a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christianity. So what can we learn from his letter? What do we do?

First, in Philippians 4:4 Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Joy is the fruit born of the quality of our relationship with God. Paul wrote from prison but still had joy. We want *joy* but settle for temporary *happiness*.

And social media does make a kind of promise of happiness. It entices us to scroll, and scroll, and like, then see who has liked our posts, and on and on. With each click we get this little burst of dopamine that keeps us scrolling, but then leaves us empty.

Do you know that researchers believe that social media actually makes us more depressed? Ironically, the more depressed we become, the more we get on social media to feel better, but then we become more depressed, and so the vicious cycle continues.

But when Paul talks about joy, that’s not what he’s referring to at all. JOY comes from the deep understanding that God is in control, and it’s not tied to what other people think....Joy is a fruit that is *slow* to grow, but *quick* to rot. It is born out of my relationship with God. When we’re cut off from that relationship with God, then that fruit begins to shrivel up. If I’m continuously struggling with a joy problem, then at its root I probably have a relationship problem. And social media plays a part in this. Because that fruit that is slow growing, takes faithful, consistent, intentional time with Jesus every day.

Do you ever get to the end of the day and think, “Where did the time go?” Well, let me tell you where the time went. This was a painful message to work on this week, because I had to face some of the ugly truths about my phone usage. An article in Forbes magazine in June 2021, said that in the last year, Americans, teens AND adults averaged 1300 hours on social media. That’s a shocking 3.56 hours a day! Every day. I have plenty of time! If I’m not spending time with God, I don’t have a *time*-management issue, I have a *priority*-management issue.

It’s not just social media. We are just over-plugged in any way you slice it. Gen Z kids (teenagers and below) spend an average of 9 hours a day on screens, including TV, streaming networks and YouTube. That 3,285 hours a year FAR surpasses the amount of time they will go to school, play sports, spend time with their friends, and spend time with their own family. If you’re a math nerd, that amounts to 137 (24 hour) days a year that kids and teens are on screens!!!

But it’s definitely NOT just a teen problem-American adults spend on average 7 hours and 50 minutes a day on all of our combined screens. Now, before you say, “well, I do my work on a computer, so...” Well, the researchers factored those hours out. American adults spend more time on screens than we get sleep. I get it. We use our phones to help us wake up. We use our

phones to help us fall asleep. Sometimes when we don't get to sleep because we're looking at something interesting on our phones. And on and on it goes.

So how is that much screen time hurting us, and what does it have to do with rejoicing? Well, in the last year, when screen time went way UP, Bible engagement went way DOWN. Lifeway did a survey of Christian adults and in statistics that have held for decades, they say that adult, Christian, American Evangelicals, about 34% of them say they read their Bible every day or nearly every day. In 2021, however, that reported number dropped to 25%. The lowest on record.

Because the thing about time is, there's only so much of it. And digital media will take what we're willing to give it. We only have SO much time. And how we spend that time begins to affect our other relationships, too.

Students-have you ever brought home a bad grade on a test or report card, and told your parents that you couldn't study because you just didn't have enough time?

Husbands and wives-Are phones getting in the way of date nights, conversation, intimacy? What a cheap trade off. I'm spending time scrolling through social media looking at people I may not even LIKE that much, and my spouse, that I *picked*, is right beside me!

And here's what I worry about. I worry that when I'm with my family, and I'm there in body, but I spend all my time scrolling on my phone, checked out, I'm worried that the message I'm sending them, whether I want to or not, is "I'd rather be with LITERALLY anyone else but you right now. I'll just take anybody."

But, we've somehow got to figure this out. In the world we live in, what does it look like to handle media in a responsible way? It's just going to be a huge part of our lives. Because there is this other invitation from Jesus to experience joy, not just the temporary happiness of the scroll, but true joy. But it takes time to cultivate it, and we have to be aware of what steals it.

Second, in verse 5 of the text, Paul directs us to “*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*”

Being gentle. Social media might be one of those places where we could use a little more gentleness. Gentle TO ALL...not just the people who look like me, think like me, vote like me. But gentle to all. Because we all know this idea of trolling, right? Where we have this idea that being behind a keyboard gives us permission to be mean. But Paul is saying we ought to have this gentleness that is evident to everybody. Let's ask ourselves this: is your online self and your real self the same?

If I never met you, and I scroll through your Instagram or Facebook, would I get an accurate reflection of who you are? Would you if you looked at mine? Because the thing is we get caught up in some of these arguments online, and really, most of the time, they don't matter that much. Prov 19:11 is a verse I used to say with my kids from time to time when they bickered. It says, *"...it is to one's glory to overlook an offense."* I hate to tell you, but no one will change deeply held beliefs based on what we post on Facebook. Their beliefs on politics, or vaccines, or Covid, or the economy, or immigration, it's just not going to change based on what you or I say online. That neighbor is NOT going to start obeying the HOA rules just because I rat him out on the Facebook page! It may make us feel good temporarily, but it might hurt our ability to have a relationship with them in the future.

The text reminds us why. *"The Lord is near."* When I was little my great grandmother had a sign that hung in her dining room. It said, "GOD IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE. THE UNSEEN GUEST AT EVERY MEAL. THE SILENT LISTENER TO EVERY CONVERSATION." It's not wrong. It kind of creeped me out as a kid, thinking about Jesus hearing every conversation, but it's not wrong.

Matt 12:26 says, *"But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken."* Or typed. Or allowed to penetrate my heart. But it's more than that. We need to be gentle because the Lord is near. Everyday that passes is one day closer to His return. Every day we age is one less day we have to say "yes" to His invitation. And I don't want my careless words to be something that pushes someone farther away from Him.

Now there is this command to let our gentleness be evident to ALL PEOPLE, and I don't think I'm stretching the text too far to say: we need to be gentle with ourselves, too. Social media doesn't care about your self image or mental health. It does care about keeping you on the platform. It cares about making money. But did you know, according to the research done by Facebook and handed over to the SEC by this whistle blower, that they found Instagram makes body image issues worse for one in three teenage girls? In the last decade, since Instagram became a major social media platform, mental health issues among teens have increased exponentially.

Instagram in particular holds us up to unachievable unrealistic expectations of perfection. So we take and retake photos, then we filter them, then we crop, edit, etc then we post. Then we're making ourselves crazy counting our likes to see if other people approve of a version of us that wasn't even real to begin with. But it's not just the unrealistic standards of beauty. There has been a huge increase with teen depression/anxiety that began around 2011-2013 when Instagram really began to grow as a major platform for Gen Z teens.

Since 2011, cutting, and other forms of self harm among teen girls (ages 15-19) is up 62%, and in preteen girls (9-14) up 182%. It's the same pattern with suicide. Since 2011, suicide attempts in teen girls up 70%, in preteen girls up 151%.

Why? Maybe because Gen Z is the first generation that got on social media in Middle School. And we haven't even touched on episodic angry outbursts from spending too much time playing video games. We haven't touched on cyberbullying, which more than 75% of teens say they have experienced. There's just not enough time to explore it all.

And students, this just breaks my heart. I'm so sorry that my generation handed you the keys to an engine this powerful and we hadn't even read the owner's manual yet. We have not served your generation well.

And I look at you guys, and some of you I've known since you were little preschoolers down in the children's building. And for some of you, I bet, even this very weekend, social media has made your life worse—the party you saw but you weren't invited to, the snarky comment that someone made about you, the thing that you thought was awesome that nobody reacted to, the dark trail that you started clicking on that's got it's hook in you that you don't exactly know how to get out of.

And what I wish I could do is take each one of you by the shoulders and look in your eyes and tell you how deeply and exceedingly precious you are to the heart of God. In another letter to a church in Ephesus Paul wrote, *“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”* Eph 3:17b-19

Your heavenly Father has an unconditional love for you. He accepts you just as you are—no touch ups or filters needed, and He wants you to tap into that kind of joy and love and purpose. Because when we know how much we are loved by the King of the universe, that kid in math class' opinion matters a little bit less.

And here's the deal—students—adults—you DO have some control over this. If Instagram makes you feel worse about yourself and your body...you can get off of it. You're allowed! If social media makes you feel anxious or depressed...delete it...you will survive. You might even find you like it better that way. When your friends have to actually text you or call you. You might learn who your real friends are.

You could try logging off—for a day, a week, a month. In religious vocabulary we call that a fast. It's when we temporarily give up something we enjoy so that we can focus on something better. So, if this is becoming an issue for you in your life, here is a question to consider: *how badly do you want to feel better?*

But it's possible that at the root of some of this is that there may be someone here today and you've never by faith stepped into that kind of relationship with God before. You could do that today. It doesn't matter if you're eight or eighty. When you by faith confess Christ as your Lord you become a part of His family. And that may not change circumstances on Earth right away, but it will start to change YOU right away...knowing you are loved and accepted by God will start to change your perspective on everything else.

Third, today's text tells us to be Prayerful over Anxious- *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* vv 6-7

We have to stop thinking about these influences in our lives as emotionally neutral. The question becomes, "is what you're doing working?" In regard to social media, does it make you feel less anxious, or more anxious? Does it give you more peace or less? Does it make you love people more or, I suspect, love some people less?

For many, myself included, we need to moderate our time on platforms to moderate our anxiety. We may need to limit ourselves to a shorter amount of social media exposure a day. The best thing you can do is PRAY about it. Ask God to show you. Parents, talk about this as a family. Talk about it around the lunch table after church today. "How are we doing in this area, and how can we do better?" And then let's ask God to give us wisdom in conquering this virtual giant.

Fourth, we need to keep thinking and doing what is morally and spiritually excellent- *"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."* v8

We need to focus our minds on exalted things, true things. Jesus says He *is* the truth. When you hear something online, ask, "is this true?" The second question we need to ask is, "Does it matter?" When I'm feeling alone, anxious or afraid, and my mind tells me I'm not good enough, the question I need to ask is, "is this true"? We know it's not. Our theme verse for this whole series tells us that. Romans 8:37-39 says *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us..."* You see, Jesus' truth is truer than anybody else's truth. And when we commit to focus on what is true, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, then there's not much room left for the enemy's lies to take root.

And finally, verse 9 says *"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice."* v9a"

It's not just a commitment to be aware of what we take from social media. No, it's more than that. We have to think about how we are affecting the world of social media. It's what we contribute to it as well. It's a two-way street. Social media is different from other forms of communication in that way. If I read a book, the book speaks to me; I don't speak to the book. If I listen to a playlist online, the playlist sings to me; I don't sing to it. But social media is this other thing where we are both receiving it and we're contributing to it. Paul says what they had seen in him, the church at Phillippi should put into practice. The same is true for us. We can be truth tellers. But not the kind of truth teller that just whacks people over the head with truth. No, we can be a truth teller like Jesus-truth spoken in love. We can refuse to like, comment, share or repost anything that is divisive or insulting to any person for any reason. We can take the extra step to use Google to fact check news we get through our social media, so that we can be fairly confident it's trustworthy before we share it. We can put out into the world what is lovely and admirable about Jesus, not what we think is worthy or admirable about ourselves. We can resist the urge to play up our own accomplishments, beauty, or financial success. We can talk about our children and celebrate their uniqueness and the joy they bring us JUST BECAUSE they exist, and not based on some accomplishment, so that they know we love them regardless of what they do. We can be gentle with ourselves and with others. We can talk to God about our anxiety, and we can refuse to feed things that we KNOW make it worse. We can choose to remember who we are in Christ, and that we are already loved and accepted. We can remember that our days and the hours in those days are short, and so we can look for ways to limit what is temporary, to make space and time for what is eternal.

So, what am I saying we should do? I'm NOT saying we should delete all of our social media, unless that is clearly what the Lord is asking you to do. I AM saying that's time for us to take stock of what our social media may be doing to us, and have some honest conversations with our spouse and kids about how we can use social media in a more positive and responsible way:

Here's a few things that might be helpful for you to consider:

One, if you have kids that aren't on social media yet, consider postponing it until high school. The truth is, the greatest group that is suffering from anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts is preteens aged 9-14. They simply don't have the ability yet to accurately filter what they see and hear through the lens of truth. If they are on social media already, have a discussion about limits, including places where phones and devices CAN go, like open areas, and where they shouldn't go, like bedrooms. Set time limits on phone usage so that kids, and grown ups, get adequate sleep, and take them up at night. Install web monitoring on your child's phone. The web is a predatory place. No software is perfect, but every little protection helps fight against exposure to toxic material and exposure.

Two, talk to your kids and teens about anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. TALKING about anxiety and suicidal thoughts does not GIVE someone suicidal thoughts. Make sure that your kid knows who the safe people in their lives are, including parents, coaches, pastors and

counselors that can help them if they ever have harmful thoughts, or know of a friend who does, or sees someone post about it online. Getting help for someone who is considering suicide is NOT tattling-it is the most compassionate, loving thing a true friend can do.

Adults, don't fall into thinking that toxic social media is only a problem for adolescents. Overuse and dependency on social media and technology is robbing us of our time, our health, and our most meaningful relationships. While there are many benefits to living in a digitally connected world, there are many downfalls as well. Figure out what healthy technology usage looks like in your family. Let's commit today to show up and be fully present for our most important relationships in our lives: Jesus, our spouses, our children, our friends, and our real, living, breathing physical community that's right around us. Let's see digital connection for what it is: a substitute for true relationships and intimacy. Let's get that back.

Finally, let's decide to only speak, engage and share what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. If it doesn't meet that standard, let's keep on scrolling. Or better yet, let's get offline and reconnect with the people who are most important to us. Hypernikao. We can conquer a giant, even one we can't see, if we'll focus on God, and on His Word, and on the quality of the relationships we share with one another. Let's pray.