

American Decency Association

PO Box 202, Fremont, MI 49412 231-924-4050 www.americandecency.org
Encouraging Christians to guard their hearts April 2019

Honoring One Another Online

by Matt Smethurst



The internet can be exhausting. And that's on the good days.

The pull of our screens—and the interactions they mediate—is often more spiritually taxing than we realize or care to admit. I have yet to hear someone return from a digital fast and say, “Wow, that was terrible.” Usually it's more like, “Wow, I feel human again.”

Scripture calls us to “honor everyone” (1 Peter 2:17). Obeying that command has never been easy, but has it ever been harder than in our social media age? Thankfully, Scripture gives us guidance. Here are four ways to be a faithful Christian online.

Take (Typed) Words Seriously

Most believers are aware that Scripture has a lot to say about the power of words. The passages are numerous. We know them. They are neither confusing nor obscure: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). “On the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36–37). “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29).

Do some of us still harbor the idea that typed words are somehow less direct, less real than spoken words? Surely, Jesus won't subject them to the same scrutiny. Twitter is too trivial for judgment day, right?

The reality is that when we stand before King Je-

sus, our “online selves” will be held to account. Our online selves are our real selves, after all.

Humanize the Other Tribe

In his book *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, Alan Jacobs reflects on the human tendency to be constantly clarifying—and widening—the chasm between our perceived opponents and ourselves. We depersonalize in order to delegitimize. Yet such social habits come at a steep cost—and not just to our enemy. Jacobs observes, “We lose something of our humanity by militarizing discussion and debate; and we lose something of our humanity by demonizing our interlocutors.”

This doesn't mean we should downplay truth. But love remembers this: people are far more than the sum of their sometimes mistaken positions. The image they bear doesn't ride on the views they hold.

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views are wrong, too. So we must proceed with humility. Not cowardice, not tepidness, not silence. Humility.

Give the Benefit of the Doubt

Jesus' words in Matthew 7:12—"Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them"—are so familiar that they're easily forgotten. But the Golden Rule is in effect each time we pull out our phones.

One of today's most insidious temptations—amplified by social media—is to slander and to shame. *Why assume the best?* we quietly think. *Why not pile on? It's not like they know me.* Plus, there are retweets to be had.

The word slanderer appears thirty-four times in the Bible as a designation for the devil. He is the great accuser. Mirroring his methods on social media is not unfortunate. It's not mistaken. It is Satanic. Slander is a form of van-

dalism, too. It defaces God's most valuable property on earth—human beings, divine works of art who bear His image. No wonder James says reckless words arise from hell (James 3:6). No wonder he anchors the whole discussion in the imago Dei (vv. 8–9).

Crafted in God's image, every person possesses divinely granted dignity and worth—and should be treated as such. This can be easy to forget when scrolling through a comment section or staring at a blurry head shot. But pixels can never shrink personhood. Our online interactions must reflect this.

Encourage Liberally

The Bible is filled with summons to give, to serve, to sacrifice, to lay down our rights. But one command is unapologetically competitive: "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10). So, how are we faring in this competition?

Biblical encouragement is a rare currency these days; therefore, it's deeply valuable. Assuming the best, seeing the best, and

identifying the best in others—to the praise of God's grace—isn't natural for self-absorbed sinners like us. It requires self-forgetfulness. But it showcases a more excellent way.

The Puritan Thomas Watson once said that a humble Christian "studies his own infirmities, and another's excellencies." If we reverse the order—studying our own excellencies and another's infirmities—we will likely grow a platform. We just might lose our souls.

[Used with permission: Tabletalk, February 2019]

"Human life is not sacred because we're human; human life is sacred because God made humanity in His image." "One of the consequences is the fact that we will never look at any human being as anything other than an image bearer of God. And thus defining human dignity entirely by the Creator, the thrice holy God who made human beings—human beings, every single one of them as image bearers, bearing His glory."

Dr. Albert Mohler at a recent Ligonier Conference



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