

Engage360 Podcast | Episode 39: Navigating Social Media's Influence

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Welcome back to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. We are glad to have you with us. Again, my name is Don Payne. I'm really privileged to be your host, but I'm also honored to be joined by our guest co-host this week, Tessa Thompson, who works in our student life department, which to me means that she gets to do a lot of fun things and never has to grade a paper. Tessa, welcome.
- Tessa Thompson: Thank you, Don. Yes, I do not have to grade and that's very intentional. Yeah, happy to be here though.
- Dr. Don Payne: Good. Glad you are here. Well, it's been quite some time since electronic communication technologies and social media crossed the line from luxury to necessity status, but since a lot of our world has shut down due to the Coronavirus pandemic, our dependence on those technologies and what they can do seems to have arisen to new levels. So our guest this week has given a lot of thought to these matters and we're really eager for some insightful conversation with her to help us illuminate a, a wise and faithful path forward. Jonalyn Fincher is an apologist, a cultural analyst, speaker, storyteller, I think kind of an all around fun person. Author of several books including *Ruby Slippers*, *Coffee Shop Conversations*, and *Invitation to Tears*. Jonalyn, welcome to Engage360. We're really glad to have you here.
- Jonalyn Fincher: Thank you, Don. It's good to be with you and Tessa
- Dr. Don Payne: And you're coming to us from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, correct?
- Jonalyn Fincher: That's right. The windy Rocky Mountains are right next to the continental divide and there's still snow slowly melting in my backyard.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, we're really glad to have you with us Jonalyn, if you don't mind first, give us a little snapshot of your own journey, your ministry, maybe some of your books.
- Jonalyn Fincher: Well, my husband and I both went to Talbot School of Theology at Biola University. That's where we met and married. And we were really concerned with the fragmentation of Christians everywhere, where people were just these incredible wizzes in maybe one field, but they didn't know how to connect that field to other areas of their love for Jesus. So we started a ministry that aimed to connect the whole person we called it soulation, kind of a connection between the word soul and celebrations, soul and formation. And that was before soul was really sexy. So that was the, for Starbucks, you sold a market coffee, but our

tagline was helping “Christians be appropriately human.” And that was before “human” was really big too. Now I'm like embarrassed.

Dr. Don Payne: Before it was cool to be human.

Jonalyn Fincher: That was before it was so cool to be human. And we really tried to connect the philosophy of religion, ethics training. We got it, Biola with what it means to live aware of our limitations and our creatureliness. And I am still such a struggler with that. I, it's so hard to accept how little we can control. You know, you feel like you're so strong, then you get married. That's a little like debt in your control abilities. And then you have kids and then you feel like this little feeble ant trying to mold these souls and then they get become teenagers and you're even more like just, just so humbled. So there is a reason, humility, humble, human, all have the same root word, native earth. And so that's what we, my husband and I really tried to do. And unite the whole person, your mind, your desires, your spirit, your will, your body, and to a whole experience where you're integrated, your beliefs, connect with your emotions, etcetera. So we did that together, speaking and writing as a husband/wife team for about 13 years. And then we closed soulation, it's a full year and four months now. And we've had a year sabbatical and we've really pivoted in some of the things we do. So but during those years, it's when I wrote my books.

Tessa Thompson: Okay. Yeah. So Jonalyn, I've been a fan of yours for a few years and one thing I love is what you just mentioned, of your ability to take things that we encounter in everyday life and to be thoughtfully, prayerfully wondering, okay, how does this integrate with the way that I want to live with Jesus? And I love that you can be here today. Especially as, in the social media online conversation. I've a few times wondered what you've been thinking about all this and about just the massive amounts of time we all inevitably are spending online, and kind of, yeah. What, what have you been thinking about?

Jonalyn Fincher: Well, I'm so delighted you asked me. I don't say yes to all my offers and I don't get very many offers. So it's a big deal that I'm doing this and I'm a little nervous because I haven't spoken publicly for so long and I'm really curious about what I'm going to say because I've done a lot of thinking about social. I haven't done a lot of speaking about social and I've been really impressed by how much social can change me. I, you know, let me, we should, we should define terms. So when I say social, I'm only speaking about Facebook and Instagram. I'm not speaking about Twitter because my Twitter account was recently completely deleted. I can't find it. No one at Twitter wants to help me find it. And so I don't want to speak with any authority on there since I'm not on there. And maybe, maybe I could include YouTube, but so when I talk about social, that's really what I'm primarily speaking into, not the other platforms and there's lots of others. But I've noticed that social is, I mean, I'll even dream about people I'm having conversations with on social. So the social world is not a fake world in the sense that it does change our souls, our bodies, our thoughts, it changes who we are.

And I have noticed most of the time I do not like who I am after I leave social. And that's really embarrassing. Like, I don't want to admit that, especially not publicly. So let's edit that out and let's ask the question again. I'm just kidding, and I think, I just think that's scary. Like I'm always trying, I'm a homeschool mom, I co-parent with my husband, we teach our kids together. And one of the things I've been talking to them about is like, I want you boys to find the activities that once you do those activities, when you're done with the activity, you feel clean inside. And then I use kind of like you feel after you get a carrot, you know, you're like, I feel satisfied but not like heavy. And my.

Dr. Don Payne: You could probably do better than that, but I get your point.

Jonalyn Fincher: Give me a better vegetable. And I said that to my son and my son's like, Oh, that's why you don't want us watching hours and hours of Minecraft YouTube videos. Like yes, yes. That is, that's why. So there are times I'm on social and I do leave feeling clean inside. And when I say clean, I don't mean like I went on Instagram and looked a bunch of like porn sites. That's not what I'm talking about cause that's, those are clear lines. I'm talking about the seduction of fame. I'm talking about the endless feelings of inadequacy and I'm talking about the, the delusion that you're actually getting the news. When you go through your feed, you know everything on social is filtered. It's already got a sieve. You're already getting a percentage of reality. And let's keep in mind, social itself is a show. It all hide it all culture. So everything I put on social has already been sieved through. I am going to show you with makeup on, or at least a really well rested face and you're going to see me with my hair done and a cute outfit. Not a grungy, scary outfit. So you're already getting a filtered me. So that's the, that's the height at all culture. But then we're pretending we're sharing and showing it all, right. Like hashtag #justwokeup. You know, it's all the delusions that we laugh about, but we forget we're watching a constructed reality and it hinders us from finding the truth.

Dr. Don Payne: Has the shutdown. Well, I don't think there's any doubt that the shutdown has driven more people to engage social media simply for fewer, for lack of other options. And I'm wondering, do you think that has merely intensified our engagement with and dependence on social media or has it altered it qualitatively in some way? Has it, and how has that in turn forming us? I've heard you speak about that before. How it turns informs us.

Jonalyn Fincher: Well I do agree with you. It does mean there are just less places to go. So we're hopping on those apps or those sites just to see what's going on more. So if when use goes up and exposure goes up, I do think that we end up relying on it more. You know, our very brains get formed around what we attend to. So it is a lot easier to grab my phone and check Instagram than it is to pick up the biography I'm reading right now. Or you know, so I always have about 20 books going at once. To me that's like ice cream flavors, just want certain things at certain times. So when I pop into Instagram, it's a lot lighter or enticing of an entry than it is picking up Viktor Frankl's, Man's Search for Meaning, which I'm reading right now about the Nazi concentration camps. But when I leave those

two experiences, I'm left with a lot less energy after I leave Instagram than when I finished something about a Nazi concentration camp and I think that is so counterintuitive. We just stopped picking up the books and I think this time of pandemic we have been so caught on our heels just Whoa, what, wait, what? I can't do that.

I can't go there. I can't buy that. We end up being a victim to our vices which is exactly how vices work. And I think that for lack of having the one-on-one face time, real face time with someone like having coffee with Tessa or going to your home, Don having you and your wife cook a meal for me and my husband, we end up filling who would have been giving us feedback with the people on Instagram. And you know, our friends are in Instagram too, not just strangers or Facebook. So what happens I think is we end up suffering from feeling inadequate and maybe not important based on how those devices rate our performance. You know, like I can go upstairs and hang out with my boys and my son can come over and wrap his little arms around my leg and kiss my knee five times. Well in the kingdom of God, that's worth about 2 million hearts. And if I got 2 million hearts on something I posted, I would be feeling differently than when my son kisses my knee. Because I've wrapped my ad, my adequacy around the experience the addiction of those hearts of those likes of those thumbs up. So the more time we spend there, the less we can tune our minds to what is being applauded in heaven. And the rating system there is very different. The stuff that makes the front page news in the kingdom of heaven, the stuff the angels and the Trinity are talking about right now, a little of it is on social.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, come on.

Jonalyn Fincher: Okay maybe one or two things. It seems so obvious, but ah. Yeah, go ahead.

Dr. Don Payne: Most addictions we're not aware of them while they're happening.

Jonalyn Fincher: No. And there's really no way to realize it unless we start changing things. So like what I did just this last couple of weeks, I moved my social icons on my phone into a new folder and into a new place, so that when I flip my phone, I do the face scan and I go in, if I put my thumb where it normally goes to go on Instagram, it's not there. I have another app there. You know, those tiny, it's like when you move rearrange furniture in your home. You just start to notice, Oh, I really like that chair. I really like that painting on the wall. You just notice things differently. That's the addictive side. Have you found that too Don when you're, when you go on Facebook or just, that feeling of maybe you don't post as much as other people, but do you sense that there's an addictive quality to social?

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, absolutely. And I know I don't use it as much as some. Some of that's probably generational, but I do notice that when I get on it, I have a hard time getting off. Because I want to pick one more feed, and I'm self aware, but I think to myself, I really need to go open a book. I need to go get some work done. But I'll just scroll down one more time.

Jonalyn Fincher: Or just one more. What about you, Tessa? Do you feel the same way or no?

Tessa Thompson: Oh, most definitely. I think what I'm, I've been struck by recently is you were kind of talking about social changing us in terms of maybe our dissatisfaction with who we know we are. But I've also noticed that changing me and in terms of who I'm following and the kind of things they care about also shifting my opinions really, really subtly that now I all of a sudden care much more about this social issue. Because I've seen stories about it or so I've just been grappling with where that's really positive, like things that I want to care more about and I want more access to stories that are going to impact me. But then also where that's negative, where it's happening, maybe without me even realizing it. So that's what I think I've been mulling on recently.

Jonalyn Fincher: Yeah, I can see that, telling you what's important.

Tessa Thompson: Right,

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. It's, yeah, it's dictatorial in a certain way, in a very subtle way, but no less formative way. Jonalyn, a few years ago, I don't know what, two or three years ago, I think you gave a talk at Viola on this kind of theme and I was really captured by some of the ways you put it. You, you talked about social media being a tool that can disciple us and the importance of discriminating what is going to help us be a better follower of Jesus. You were using that, both the, I guess, the literal functionality and the metaphor of following. Following someone.

Jonalyn Fincher: Yes. That talk was called Who Would Jesus Follow, right. And it was a play on that, those ideas, you know, following Jesus. But would Jesus be on social? And if so, who would he follow? Who would he, whose feed would he read? Because you know, Jesus came now, you know, all the disciples would have been on social and they all would have had the people they would have followed. And he says to them, be aware the leaven of the Pharisees and the [inaudible]. So you know that Peter was following Nico Demas and other Sanhedrin members because they were [inaudible] and they were attracted to the Pharisee and you know.

Dr. Don Payne: They had the Pharisee app.

Jonalyn Fincher: Yeah. That's right. That was probably a Pharisee social platform for them. You got in. Yeah. Yeah. I, I do think that we are all being disciplined. I mean, spiritual formation is not an option. Dallas Willard says we all are being formed. It just is how are we being formed? So one of the things that is particularly troublesome to me about is that the owners of these companies are not invested in our soul formation towards Jesus. So they filter out what they think you are going to want to see and the mystery of the algorithm, and what is it now and is it good or bad? That argument aside, there is an algorithm and there are things that are going to help you grow in the kingdom of God. That there is a vested interest in

the kingdom of darkness that you never see. So there are people in my, that I follow, that I wish I could see more in my feed, but I don't see them. And I'm not someone to say there's a human under every rock and that there's agenda or conspiracy theory that, you know, Instagram is trying to keep Christians from getting big.

But I am concerned that there are things that are true that always reveal things that are evil and there's so much vested interest in my own heart that I don't want to see them. So I think we have to be shrewd when we approach social, we have to think through how can we gain the system. You know, if we really want it to disciple us, to be like Jesus, we may have to create multiple accounts. I have multiple accounts where I have like fun names that I will never reveal to you that I have created where I'll go into that account just for my news. I only follow like less than 20 people there and they're not major news networks, they're smaller people who are doing the hard work on the ground, who are experts in their field and I'm reading what they have posted. And so when I want the news, I go there. I don't trust my artists friends that I follow on my main feed where you can find me on Instagram to give me any news about the news because they're artists for crying out loud. They didn't study political philosophy and most of them don't know Jesus on a close, tight level. So I don't want their view on the news and that's not, that's not rude. It's just recognizing they have limitations.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, yeah, everybody, it has their wheelhouse and I've always found it curious when celebrities, sometimes including pastors, professional athletes are asked opinions on political matters.

Jonalyn Fincher: I know, but they're so sexy. I just want to listen to just Brad Pitt. Just tell me what you think about voting. I'll just do what you think. I'll follow Scarlet Johansson if she's going to teach me how to seduce my husband. Okay. I don't care what she thinks about abortion. She's probably dead wrong because she hasn't lived a life of integrity with men. So I don't care what you thinks about sex. I care about how she portrays her body sexually in movies. I think that has huge import culturally. And I know she understands things about sexiness that in a thin slim area might be useful, but I don't, I don't her to teach me about the ethics of sexuality or the importance of having an exclusive vocabulary of sexuality with my husband. She doesn't have a clue about that. And that's not to insult her, it's just to recognize she is human as I am and she has limitations in her, in what she studied and what she has formed her soul around.

Dr. Don Payne: It does focus or it does highlight, I think this curious phenomenon where because of the, something about the nature of social media, maybe perhaps media in general, the simple fact that someone can say something gives it a level of influence or credibility that it has no right to necessarily so people can influence. People have the opportunity to influence people far beyond there competence to do so or there right to do so.

Jonalyn Fincher: What a great observation. It is almost a democratization of opinion without the credentials to back it up. And what I've noticed is I will look at something longer because it has, you know, 10,000 likes and I'm spending a lot of time thinking about it and working on it. So I'm, I think that most people don't take Sabbaths from social or think through like I'm going to weed through all my followers again. I think most of us are just like, Oh follow someone else, follow someone else. And then we unfollow people too based on sometimes terrible criteria. But what worries me is that we sometimes go to social to relax and we don't realize we're being reprogrammed when we go there because our guards are down.

Tessa Thompson: One other phenomenon that I've noticed that fits into that there's almost a social pressure that if you care about something, you need to reshare it, repost it, and that you can't claim to actually care unless you show up publicly in these spaces.

Jonalyn Fincher: Oh yeah. Wow. Talk about like the loss of freedom of conscience, a deeply Christian concept. You know that your views, I respect you so much as a human that I believe your views are not only private to your body and soul, but I don't have the right to bully you into carrying a slogan for my campaign without having the friendship and the conversation with you, to hear why you might think differently. Yeah. The social bullying, and it doesn't even go by the name of bullying, it just goes by the name of being socially conscious or concerned about justice. But you know, evil always wears these beautiful masks. Evil always looks like safety or justice or kindness. That's actually one of my biggest concerns today is that so many Christians in public places have become so timid and so tentative and so afraid that we will be labeled the haters, the unkind ones, the bullies, like we are so afraid of the word game, the word war, that we've become these tentative little mice and I'm speaking to myself too. It's scary to actually speak what you think on any public place.

Dr. Don Payne: Right? It's quite vulnerable.

Jonalyn Fincher: It is. And they're high costs.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. You've used the phrase social without social? What do you mean by that?

Jonalyn Fincher: Well the word itself has been so confusing. So we talk about social distancing, right? And it's not really social distancing. I mean, we're all, we're being very social right now. We're physically distance, but we're not socially distance. So that's a confusing non-helpful term that's now become popularly used. I mean, I use it and then I can be very social with someone through a private text without going on social, so to call, you know, Instagram and Facebook and other places, social. It's a nice shorthand way to refer to it. But like for example, for Good Friday, my husband and I got a group of friends together all through texts to watch Babette's Feast together at the same time across, you know, three different time zones. And we had this group of 20 people and we were watching the movie simultaneously. Like, we're at the Lion, start. Okay. You know, and we're watching it and Oh my gosh, can you believe he said that? I'm like, Ooh,

that guy's creepy. You're, Oh, this is so beautiful. And so we're all texting. While we're watching being social, but we didn't put a toe into any social platform.

Dr. Don Payne:

What do you think we're in for? When and whatever shape it takes that this pandemic passes, what are going to be the new normals we ought to anticipate? And like our relationships, our communities, our churches because of the role electronic media is playing?

Jonalyn Fincher:

Well, I think that electronic media social is all teaching us to tag and label things and the way the world itself has responded. It's taught us to tag, for example, what is an essential and a nonessential business. And we're learning very quickly that our taxonomy of what matters in the kingdom of God is not considered essential. Whereas here in Steamboat, you know, all the pot shops are open because they're essential. I don't care what your politics are about this, but saying that church members cannot meet or Jewish friends and family cannot meet is creating a hierarchy of what matters. And when things become law, they change hearts. And when hearts are changed, if we begin to believe that what is illegal or legal is identical with what is good and evil. Well, the evil one is one we always know about the laws of Caesars are never in complete correspondence to the laws of God. So we're living in many ways in a state that has taught us so much fear and I don't think that fear will evaporate. I think we're going to see more bingeing more.

I mean let's do the negative and positive cause there's both sides. We're going to see more bingeing, more extremism after some of the doors open up. You know, I've got to get this trip in, I've got to go do this, I've got to go party, I've got to go do the things that I was forbidden from. And then we're also going to see that the people who take pain and suffering as an invitation from God, they will grow their souls from it. And that's the positive side. You know, there's so many people now who are already sharing. Wow, we were running right ourselves ragged. So many activities, so many commitments. I mean, most of my friends secretly are saying, it's so nice, I don't have to go to that thing because we're not supposed to go anywhere. Well, why the heck are you doing it anyways? You know? So there are going to be some people who say this, this is an invitation from the spirit to do less. They're going to find, Whoa, I have a friend. She's like, I can't homeschool my kids. I can't believe it. You know, I'm an introvert and I'm a number five on the Enneagram. I don't think, I didn't know if I would be up to do this and now she finds she can do it.

So there will be good changes from the same people who would have let any suffering in their lives change them. I know that's just the laws and the pandemic that's not to speak of the thousands of lives that will be lost. And when grief comes to us, we are always invited to change. To take stock of what we've lost and to weave that loss into our lives, rather than deny it and become addicted. And in perpetual like state of running. And you know, most Americans live in a perpetual state of running from some pain or another. So with this much death and this much sudden change, there's a lot of grief work that can be done. And I think the more grief work we do and, Don and I, we both written

books on grief. We couldn't say more good about grief, like grief work can actually reconnect people to their souls, to their uniqueness, to the preciousness of what we have. So I think that the pandemic in those who are open to the spirit, I think it will create more depth than the American people. And I think that's going to be great, but we won't see only depth. We'll see the opposite too.

Tessa Thompson: Hmm. Yeah, that's beautiful. I think the invitation to step into what has been difficult is so present right now. And even as we've talked about social media and we use that as an escape from things that paint us. And I love hearing that maybe even as the, the hope for how we make wise choices right now in our media intake. Could you maybe speak a little bit more to that? It's not just to avoid disintegration, it's not just to avoid these feelings of inadequacy, but like what's the hope for us making wise decisions and maybe even exercising self control in the way that we scroll through our feeds?

Jonalyn Fincher: Oh, that's a great question. Okay. well I don't, I mean I definitely don't have the playbook on how to engage social welfare everyone, but let me just give you my, my practices and then adapt them as is best for you. So I'm a two on the angiogram with a one wing, which means I'm a people pleaser. I love to help and I'm super perfectionistic when I'm stressed. When I'm really stressed, I get super bossy and I get my angry eyes on. That's what my boys say. So given that and I'm an extrovert, social's like, woohoo, let's go there. Let's go as often as possible. It's figuring out how to get more followers. So I'm very easily attracted to not just looking and scrolling, but to posting. So there's two sides of this. There's, what do you do? Like who do you follow? And then what do you post? So let me take those individually. I've already mentioned, I think it's wise for me and I recommend it for anyone interested is link your accounts to multiple users. You can have accounts for what you need. So when I'm ready to get news and I'm in that space of I'm ready to sift and think about political stuff, I'll go to my political user account and I'll just study that.

And then I will study it with an intentionality and a goal in mind. I don't go into Instagram without a goal. I'm going to find out what people are talking about right now. Okay? I go in, I'm there for maybe five minutes and then I come out and then I take that information and I talk about it with my husband who is very skilled at understanding news. Now you don't have to have a husband, do they even have a friend do that. But it's a great way to use social as a springboard instead of a landing pad is I want to get some information over in social and then I want to actually be social with a real friend off the lines and maybe do a zoom call or do a text. I read about this, did you see this? What do you think? And then you're actually engaging with someone privately, personally. And I find that's where the real knowledge happens. You've moved out of the hide, I'll show it all delusional world and you've moved into a friendship. So that's the first thing I'd say, especially when it comes to news. And I think we kind of lie to ourselves and say, well, I have to stay up on things and that's how we go to social. But let's be honest, we also go to social to relax or to laugh or to get ideas.

I use Pinterest for most of my ideas. Pinterest is unique that way. It is one of the only platforms that wants you to get off of it and go do something. Whereas the other platforms want you to stay in and keep clicking and keep scrolling. So I go to Pinterest for recipes. I go to Pinterest for watercolor ideas for references. If I'm going to connect with a friend, I will, I'll, I will sometimes see a post they put on social and I'll be like, Oh, I wonder how they're really doing. And I might say, Oh, you know, that's such a cute pic that reminds you of blah, blah. I'm going to text you. And then I get off of social. I find them, I mean, it's so much work, right. Typing their name and in your texting app and finding them, but it's worth it for the conversation that you can have. And then I recently started going into like, just the relaxing kind of mind numbing. I'm going to go into Instagram, I'm going to go to Facebook. And my goal is to read one person's posts that I care about and write one thing to encourage them. And then once I write that one thing, I get off, it's like I punched my time card.

Tessa Thompson: Your social time card.

Jonalyn Fincher: My social time card.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, that's an amazing, and it's such a commendable discipline that may be really at the root of a lot of things you've mentioned to us is the discipline, the discipline of not only schedule but the discipline of soul to engage these media in ways that are going to be productive and not damaging. Because as you and you've said this, and or at least alluded to it, that these things are always forming us. We're always being, and if we could put it even perhaps more bluntly, they use us, they use us. And if we're not aware of that, we play into the hands of that to our own detriment. Jonalyn, thank you very much for all your insights. Great to spend some time with you. We want to invite you back with us next week can and before we sign off, I'll put in another plug for Jonalyn's books, Jonalyn Fincher, and we really would love for you to check out more of what she does and what she has written. For Tessa Thompson and for the rest of our production team. Dusty Di Santo, Christa Ebert, Aaron Johnson, Michael Roberts, Maritsa Smith, and Andrea Weyand. I'm Don Payne and we, all of us here at Denver Seminary are really grateful for the time you spend with us, but we'll sign off for now and hope to speak with you again next week. Take care.