

500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Rienke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Rienke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Rienke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now) that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not

ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Rienke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the “gossip” prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Rienke for causing people like me to see this issue for the first time.

[The Flag, the Protests, and Finding Some Common Ground](#)

(The NFL on REO Special Edition)

[Last week on The NFL on REO](#), I highlighted a few areas where the NFL needs change. While it was not my intention to use an entire article to deal with any one of those issues, sometimes events and cultural conversations become too large to handle in a paragraph or two. As most everyone is aware, over the weekend, President Trump made some very pointed and controversial comments about national anthem protestors in the NFL. The NFL and its players responded forcefully on Sunday during the games. That is the immediate context. The larger context is much more complicated.

Generally, I try to stay away from a few topics when I write about the NFL and the Titans. I avoid politics as much as possible. I avoid religion as well, for similar reasons. The majority of people that read articles about the NFL want to read about just that – the NFL. They don't want another political screed, diatribe, or pontification. I hope this is not that. But, this topic is so big, so intense, and so interconnected with the sport I love the most, I feel it would be a massive oversight on my part to completely avoid it.

Instead of simply writing down my thoughts on this issue, which are tangled and not entirely coherent, I decided to bring some of the other REO writers to the table for a conversation. Joining me today are Gowdy Cannon and my brother, David Lytle. Hopefully, something said here will help those of you that are struggling with making sense of all of this.

Phill: To kick things off, I want to lay down some groundwork. First, I believe I speak for everyone at REO that the NFL

players have a right to speak out and stand up for issues they are passionate about. Second, there are injustices in our country that need to be confronted, addressed, and corrected. And finally, this weekend was a mess.

Prior to this weekend, what did you think about the limited anthem protests that have been happening in the NFL for the past few years?

Gowdy:

Prior to this weekend my thoughts towards the protests were very mixed. My very first reaction was that the time, place and manner were unwise and that instead of creating dialogue and awareness, they only further divided the country along racial and political lines and brought about a new angle of racial justice promoters vs. Veterans and not just police. At first, I thought, that can only be a bad thing.

Yet at the same time I never for one second thought Kaepernick or anyone else should be disciplined or muted and especially not fired. Because of US history and current politics, I felt that could be yet another step to dividing us. I think the protesters need to be heard.

And as I have read and listened to people like Benjamin Watson, Lecrae, John Perkins and a whole host of others on racial issues in the United States, the more sympathetic I have felt towards the message behind the kneeling and I had changed my perception of it greatly. It may be divisive but I think I have to believe that either way, Christian black people are way off on this, or that attention desperately needs to be brought to racial injustice in the US in 2017. I do not believe the former is correct. For that reason, I think it is worth making some people mad to start the national discussion. Surely some people will never change their minds. But some, like me, will.

I had some disagreement towards Kaepernick and Michael Bennett

for reasons that were not specifically related to kneeling. But the act itself to me was something I would not condemn.

Phill:

I had a similar reaction Gowdy. If the NFL allows this sort of protest, which actually goes against the operations policy it distributes to each team, then these players have a right to kneel, or sit, or raise their hand. I have no problem with any of that. I'm not sure how much good it does in the long run, considering most fans didn't agree with the protests, but it was their right to do it. My biggest issue stemmed from Kaepernick's comments after his protest started and some of the other things he said, did, or the clothing he wore – police as pigs on his clothing. He made positive comments about Fidel Castro, which were ill-informed at best, and that completely ruined his credibility among many, myself included.

The issue was dying down. Most of the players that had protested with Kaepernick at the beginning had moved on to other ways of bringing awareness to what they saw as racial inequality in our country – one-half of one percent of the players were still protesting. The protests were going to be mostly gone, probably this season. And then Trump happened.

This has the potential to be a source of debate with our readers, but I don't believe Trump acted wisely by saying what he did. In fact, it all feels very opportunistic and calculating. Trump gets beaten up on a daily basis by the media, unlike any other president I have seen in my lifetime. He is criticized for things he deserves and for things he does not. The media reacts to him like a petulant, angry, child would. So Trump occasionally makes comments where he knows he has the majority behind him – and he does on this issue. [Most people dislike the anthem protests](#). His most rabid supporters hate the protests. Many of them have already turned their back on the NFL. He was preaching to the choir on this one and he knew it would ignite a firestorm because that is how he likes to operate. And the media played right into his hand, as we

all knew they would because that is who they are.

So, I guess my question is, how do we deal with this? How do we condemn what Trump said but still understand the anger and the frustration many Americans feel when they see wealthy athletes kneeling or “disrespecting” the flag, the country, and the anthem? And how do we do all of those things while acknowledging that there are real problems with injustice in our country?

David:

It is a shame that Trump is bringing a new level racial tension and political division into America’s favorite sport. By having such strong and vulgar words aimed at NFL players, he made standing for the National Anthem a referendum on his presidency, when it was just a side issue having to do with basically one former player. He backed NFL players as a whole into a corner and forced the issue. When bullied, people punch back. I was not upset with the Titans for staying in the locker room. It seemed like a respectful way to let the president know that he shouldn’t bully. It won’t do any good, because its Trump, but it was an effort. An effort that did not infuriate me as much as the President’s words, but still bothered me deeply.

Gowdy:

I will echo you guys that Trump’s comments Friday were a disaster as far as national dialogue and unity. It is incomprehensible to me that a US president would speak using those words, as loudly as possible, completely unashamed. Other presidents have definitely helped divide us but the whole spectacle was unprecedented in delivery and pejorative, at least in my lifetime. I’m not one who gets outraged about everything any president does or says, but I am still stunned by the comments. My sympathies for the kneelers are at an all-time high as a result.

I don’t have many answers. Something that I have seen good,

balanced Christians post to social media (that often gets drowned out) is James 1:19. As a Christian, I absolutely should be slow to speak, slow to anger and quick to listen. Yet this is so poorly practiced, by me and others quite often. But thanks to godly people in my personal life and on social media, I am trying to get better at it. I want to listen when Tim Scott, the only black Republican senator in the US, says that he had been stopped by police seven times in a year for driving a nice car and no other reason. I want to listen to Ben Watson when he says there is a fear in the black community of the police. I want to listen to an unnamed friend that talks about how they once had a gun pulled on them by police for playing their music loudly while driving. A good friend just lent me a book by "Coach" Wayne Gordon, a pastor in Chicago, called Do All Lives Matter? I read it in a day. It helps me want to live out James 1:19

I don't have to agree with everything someone says to listen to them. But I will not argue with a non-white on this topic, especially if they speak of their experience. Data can be argued but I will not even do that because I personally feel that is counterproductive in most cases. Others may feel differently and that is fine. This is a topic and a time for me to practice James 1:19. At the very minimum, I wish people would stop talking in cliches and posting and tweeting without trying to understand others. Especially face to face. (Tim Scott and others have launched a huge movement of inviting other races into each other's homes for Sunday lunch. Let's do this, people!)

However, I am not a veteran or a cop and if I were I may feel differently. I can only imagine what it is like to be in battle and view the flag as a source of pride. I can only imagine because I've never been in battle. Right now I remain convinced it is worth the controversy because many veterans and cops support the kneeling and because many protestors have tried to be clear that people will not listen unless we go to

extremes sometimes and they truly mean no disrespect to the flag, veterans or policemen. Based on US history, I personally am not comfortable constantly telling black people or other races or ethnicities how and when they should peacefully protest.

Phill:

I don't disagree with any of that. I completely agree that dialogue is important. Listening is important. Empathy is important. We do too little of all those things. We are quick to speak and quick to anger and very slow to listen. Here comes the but...

We could spend hours and way too many words discussing the validity of these protests. We could talk about statistics, evidence, facts, and all those other things. I'm not really interested in that and I am definitely not qualified to speak intelligently about it. I want to keep this focused on the NFL, Trump, and how everyone can do a better job of having this public debate.

As David said, there has to be a better way to do this. And this is not saying minorities need to find less uncomfortable ways to protest. I would simply urge people to find wiser ways to protest – ways that will not give off the appearance of disrespect for our nation. They are less likely to change minds when you start from a position that puts people on the defensive.

The fact is, for too many, this protest is attacking everything they think the flag and the anthem stand for. For too many, these NFL players are showing contempt and disrespect for the flag and our country. These people will never be able to see past this form of protest. To them, it feels completely un-American. Kaepernick's original comments were very pointed in their criticisms of the US. Too pointed for many. And they made it clear that he was showing contempt for the flag and the nation because he felt the nation was

showing contempt for minorities.

And for people who agree with Trump, the NFL has only further confirmed in their mind that it is full of players that hate our country. I believe the overwhelming majority of these players love their country and meant no disrespect to the flag or anthem this weekend. But that is not how many people see it. And a productive conversation on this issue will never happen if we are starting on such polar opposite ends.

Without sacrificing their voice and their position, what can NFL players, the league, and the owners do to make their statements without alienating, angering, and inflaming millions of fans? And what can fans do to listen and understand what is truly being said through these protests?

David:

At the end of the day (or beginning of the game), kneeling for the anthem or even staying in the locker room is counterproductive. Perhaps attention is called to an area needing reform, but players can do a lot of good with their money and influence in ways that don't make the nation think they hate their country. The flag and our national song about it, however, stand for the ideals of this nation, not the problems. The first and greatest of those ideals is that "all men are created equal." Those who cannot stand up for this ideal are either tragically uninformed (like Kaepernick) or worse (like the dictator on his T-shirt).

I think Trump has been wanting to get back at the NFL going all the way back to his days as a USFL owner days. He resented being excluded from their club and now he is using his power to revive a dead issue and forcing the nation into a false dichotomy—Boycott the NFL or hate America. I won't be Trumped.

Gowdy:

The events of this past weekend are still fresh so this is a quick reaction and could easily be ignorant in hindsight,

*but...is it too idealistic to think what the Cowboys did is a reasonable alternative? If you missed it they knelt as a team, including coaches, staff and even Jerry Jones, **before** the anthem. Could this still bring awareness and yet placate many veterans and others who feel that honoring the flag and anthem are important? Again, my first reaction says it could work. But I also know if you try to please everyone you often please no one. I know there were boos by the Cardinal fans, though they could have been just a knee-jerk reaction/assumption without realizing what the Cowboys were actually doing. Or could be that they were just booing the Cowboys! And I can theorize on the other side some protesters still feeling silenced or unheard or feeling that kneeling before the anthem totally misses the point.*

So I don't know. Just some raw thoughts mere days after the incidents.

Phill:

My suggestions would be pretty simple: Listen more, react less. And while you are at it, ignore the media as much as possible. Don't allow the media or the fringes to frame the issue. Those that are angry about the protests are not all racists and white supremacists. Those that are protesting are not all anti-American traitors. In fact, I would argue that there are very few on either side that fit those descriptions. There are real problems with equality and justice in our country – so even if we disagree on what those problems are or how widespread they are – we need to be willing to listen to people that feel strongly about them. And for those that are on the other side of the debate, be willing to empathize with those that don't see eye-to-eye with your position and be very careful about labeling them as racists or evil because of their differing perspective.

We are much closer on most of these issues than the media, Trump, etc... would have us believe. Having real conversations where we really listen will go a long way towards helping us

see that.

Five Reasons Fall Is Better Than Summer

Fall in recent times has taken its lumps for the “pumpkin spice” craze that people seem to find annoying because here in America we love being annoyed. Historically, it has brought on the beginning of the school year, which causes groans from some people I’m sure. Although as a teacher I confess that I embrace the familiarity of a returning structured schedule and the newness of student lists that greet me every September.

Today we celebrate the finer aspects of this exquisite season. Here are five reasons to love fall more than summer.

Because Sports

Is there really a better stretch of the sports calendar than Fall? I’d venture to say that October is the greatest month for sports.

First, you have the baseball playoffs which are second to none. Yes, we know that MLB players are known as “the boys of summer”, but it’s during the Fall when we are treated to the payoff for the long grind of the regular season: post season baseball! Legends are born in the post season. From Schilling’s bloody sock to Morris’ 10 inning shutout in game 7 of the World Series the post season produces memories that will last a lifetime. Home runs become mythical feats that transcend the sport. Remember Kirk Gibson’s walk off homer on

two bad knees in his only plate appearance of the 1988 World Series? Or Joe Carter's World Series winning home run in 1993? Everything about post season games is magnified. Albert Pujols pretty much single-handedly altered Brad Lidge's career in the post season. And who could forget the Red Sox coming back from 3 games down in a best of 7 series against the Yankees! Whether it's the excitement of the winner takes all Wild Card games or the thrills of a 7 game series something special happens when you take a sport known for its "there's always another game" attitude and have the outcome determined by only a handful of games. If you have your doubts then you don't have to look back beyond last post season which produced one of the most exciting, dramatic World Series of all time.

Also, October has historically been the only month where you can get games that matter in the NFL, NBA and MLB (though November is now joining it...which is still in fall!) Imagine a world where on Sunday, October 15 we get a full slate of NFL games, on October 16 we get Game 3 of an ALCS with Boston battling Cleveland and on the 17th we get the NBA tipping off with the Cavs battling the Celtics, fresh off that mega-trade this Summer. What a world!! Only in Fall.

Plus, it gives us some outrageously big college football games, high school football, the beginning of college basketball and the beginning of hockey. It's a veritable feast for sports fans during the fall months.

– Gowdy Cannon and Mark Sass

You can stop being hot and humid and sticky and sweaty 24 hours a day.

I know that many will recoil in horror at this notion, but I really don't care for summer that much. Much of this is due to the oppressive weather. You go outside for just a little bit and that extra strength antiperspirant you just put on is gone

in ten minutes and a river of sweat is coursing from every sweat gland of your body. In no time at all you can smell your own stench which is always a bad sign. And then this stench attracts every gnat and mosquito from miles around with no pest repellent known to mankind able to withstand the insectile attack. And night isn't that much better. I am one of those unfortunate souls who can't sleep very well unless there are lots of covers caking me. So it's annoying when the nights are so oppressive that you are forced to use only a sheet or two at most. But then autumn falls and its quite literally a breath of fresh air. Gone is the air so thick with humidity that it's like the mask of death itself. Gone are the days when your sweaty clothes cling to your body's every orifice for dear life. Gone, making way for the cool, cool winds of fall.

– Ben Plunkett

Bonfires!

I love a good bonfire. I love sitting outside, when the weather is cool, enjoying the heat and light of a crackling fire. I love roasting marshmallows and hot dogs. I love eating said marshmallows and hot dogs. (I like both of them a little charred. Come at me.)

I've enjoyed bonfires with our church's youth group, with friends, and with family. It's always a special time. Hanging out with people you care about, seeing their faces light up in the glow of the fire, spending hours and hours talking, joking, and laughing – there are very few activities I know of that inspire the kind of camaraderie and fellowship like a bonfire. And outside of the Fall months, the chances are slim you are building a bonfire.

– Phill Lytle

Movie Marathons

Namely, every year my wife and I enjoy a Halloween marathon and a Christmas marathon. For Halloween we do NOT watch things that are gory or filled with obscene language or content. But that still leaves tons of great options for being innocently scared, especially if you include TV. For example, [last year my wife and I watched several episodes of Doctor Who](#), that are entirely Halloween-esque yet not an assault on morality and decency. This year we will watch the Yang Trilogy from the TV show *Psych*, an incredible run of three consecutive season finales from a TV show we adore.

But this year is extremely special for another reason. This year *Stranger Things 2* comes out. And even though I have learned that the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry, our tentative plan is to watch several movies that helped inspire this Netflix original series (*Ghostbusters*, *Stand By Me*, *Poltergeist*, etc.), then rewatch Season 1 from October 23-26 and end the marathon watching the new season from October 27-31. I have purposefully watched less TV September this year in anticipation of this event. If the Cubs make the World Series again, we are going to have some serious decisions to make.

My wife doesn't enjoy the Halloween marathons as much as I do, but I appreciate her being a good sport. And she did enjoy Season 1 of *Stranger Things*. But she is more into Christmas movies and starting around December 1 we will enter another glorious time of bonding over some of our favorite Christmas stories told on the big and small screens.

– Gowdy Cannon

Fall means Halloween and Halloween means CANDY!

First, let's address the elephant in the room: Halloween is evil and of the Devil. As Christians, we do not participate in any Halloween activities. Ever. (Sidebar: Ladies, I would like to use this opportunity to urge all of you to not use Halloween as an excuse to dress like a prostitute. You are better than that. Be better than that.) But change that name to *Fall Festival*, or *Trunk and Treat*, and we are totally cool with that! All of that presupposes that candy is involved at these alternate celebrations/activities. If there is candy, all is well with the world. [We love candy.](#)

Little known fact: This time of year is one of the best reasons to have children. You get way more candy that way because your kids come home from their "Fall" activities with mountains of candy. And you, as their loving parent, get to partake in all that bounty. Be fruitful and multiply people! There is a mother lode of candy in your future if you do!
– Phill Lytle

[It's Past Time to Pay College Athletes](#)

No intro today. Let's get right to this. Here are five reasons why it is ludicrous that we are not paying college athletes in 2017.

1. Three Words: Fair Market Value

This idea was presented to me by friend and professional

financial advisor, Chris Wright, when I used to argue against college athletes being paid. The concept is simple: Fair market value says a seller and a buyer come to an agreement on price based on what is reasonable in an open market. There is a reason that the NBA will always bring in tons of more money than soccer or the WNBA in the US: People are willing to pay more to watch it.

The NCAA has a \$10 billion TV contract for the basketball tournament and \$500 million for the football playoffs. Many athletic departments in the NCAA bring in nine digits a year. People are getting rich off of this. Very rich. But not the players. In 2013, when my dad bought tickets to take my three brothers and me to Florida for the Outback Bowl, we paid a lot of money to watch Jadeaveon Clowney knock a guy's helmet off and Steve Spurrier go for the TD bomb with 30 seconds left. Yet one man got a big check for that game while the other got no compensation from our expenses.

2. Scholarships are not the same thing as salary

The obvious retort is that they get scholarships: an average of \$100,000 over four years at a D1 school, I have read. Yet this rejoinder is faulty for at least two reasons. First, because fair market value says some players in the big money sports deserve much more than that. [At least one source](#) says that the projected fair market value of the average college football player was \$178,000 per year from 2011 to 2015, while the average college basketball player for the same time was \$375,000. That is the average. A quarterback like Johnny Manziel would have been worth much more, with Texas A&M being a huge revenue school.

Secondly, the scholarships cover things like tuition, books and fees. They are not truly paid to play. And at times, the scholarships aren't enough to live reasonably. At the end of

the 2014 NCAA Men's Basketball Championship game, UConn's Shabazz Napier took advantage of being in front of a microphone on CBS to tell the world, "We go to bed hungry at night." I was so unaware of what he really meant that at first I thought he was speaking figuratively, as in, "We go to bed hungry *for a championship* every night." No, he was being literal. How fair is it that a player who brings in far more money for his school than an average student on academic scholarship, should ever have too little money to eat because of NCAA rules?

Like it or not, capitalism rules the US. It's time to pay these athletes what they are worth.

3. The NCAA is a complete and utter dumpster fire

You may remember a few years ago when six Ohio St. football players were caught selling athletic equipment, rings and similar things for cash and tattoos (which was illegal but were *things they owned*...think about that for a second), and the NCAA banned them for five games the next year. But they let them play in the bowl game vs. Arkansas. The reason they were allowed to play the bowl was because they didn't fully understand what they were doing was wrong. What?

Then you have the incredible story of Charleston Southern having to suspend 32 players for a game vs. Florida State in 2016 because they used extra money from their book allowance to buy school supplies.

Or how about the story of how [Lane Kiffen at Tennessee allegedly sent attractive hostesses to high school games in South Carolina to get recruits to come?](#) Marcus Lattimore, one of the finest young men of Christian integrity to ever play football in the state of SC said, "I haven't seen (any) other schools do that. It's crazy." And did the NCAA ever find anything of substance to pin on UT? Nope.

Welcome to the NCAA, the worst run, most corrupt and hypocritical sports organization in America.

The NCAA once made Todd Gurley do community service for selling his autograph in addition to suspending him, as though he were some kind of criminal in need of rehabilitation. The NCAA suspended Enes Kanter for life for money he made as a professional overseas that he never touched and was willing to give back. The NCAA sometimes suspends people 5 games for selling things and sometimes 0.5. There is no rhyme, reason or consistency to most of it.

There really is a simple way to stop the madness. Pay the players. Let the people give them however much money they want to.

4. Even if the NCAA were virtuous, they could never fairly monitor recruiting.

Did you hear former Texas Longhorns QB Chris Simms mention recently that [he used to get "\\$100 handshakes" from boosters](#)? Who out there doesn't think this happens all the time? Who out there doesn't think every major program is cheating in ways that will always be ahead of the NCAA?

If you pay the players there is no need for any tables to hand money under.

5. It's time to abandon the pretense of the ideal student-athlete

Some sports will never have a minor leagues and that is essentially what college becomes. That could be a good thing. Pay them to play and if they want to get an education because they cannot go to the next level, they still can. The "one and done" culture of college basketball is a travesty and an

overreach by the NBA. Many freshmen know they don't have to go to class in the spring if they are leaving. Paying them gives them purpose and could even convince some athletes to stay in school longer and make college sports even better.

I don't buy that it is a bad idea to give new adults money because they cannot handle it. We do it in so many sports anyway: Tennis, minor league baseball, one and done basketball, etc. Money could mess up some 18 and 19-year olds, but it stands to do far more good than harm.

I don't have a great plan for how to make paying athletes work as far as specifics, but some people do. I do not think it will ever happen because the NCAA is so powerful. But it should happen. Otherwise the NCAA will continue to deal with injustice and corruption on a massive scale. As long as they hold the power and wealth, I do not think they care. And that is a shame. The players and the fans deserve better.

500 Words or Less Reviews: Look What Taylor Swift Made Me Do

I am not a fan of Taylor Swift. Never have been. Her only album I have been able to tolerate is *1989*. I feel that disclaimer is necessary from the outset.

Unless you live under a rock, you probably noticed that Taylor released a new song a few days ago. It is titled, "Look What You Made Me Do." The song is awful – filled with all the poorest elements of modern pop music. However, looking beyond the melody and the beat, the song is emblematic of the very worst of our society. It is the quintessential anthem of our narcissistic and victim culture. If there was any doubt before, we can now crown Taylor Swift as the Queen Victim of our age.

The song is a list of the times Taylor feels she has been slighted, wronged, offended, judged, criticized, and blamed. It is whiny and screechy and so inwardly focused that it is difficult to take any of it seriously. There isn't a whiff of self-awareness. No trace of self-reflection. She even sees herself as a Christ figure in the music video – arms outstretched with a crucifix behind her. In Taylor's fantasy world, there are many who have lied about her and stabbed her in the back, so hers is a righteous anger. It's hard to hear all this self-pity coming from a 27-year-old woman who is worth nearly \$300 million. The end result of the song is to declare that due to all the horrible, unfair, mean stuff that has been said about or done to her, that the old Taylor Swift is dead and she has become someone else – someone angry and vengeful. The problem with that declaration is that Taylor Swift has been a "mean girl" for a long time. You only have to listen to her older albums to see the spitefulness with which

she has always operated. But in her warped view, she is the put-upon victim, the innocent, the martyr. In her mind, her enemies forced her to create and release this song and now that she has taken all she can, she is ready to get down in the mud with all those “liars and dirty, dirty cheats of the world.” So, we have that to look forward to...

We are a society of self-aggrandizers, self-promoters, and self-congratulators who in our minds can do no wrong, bear no responsibility for any of our actions, and are in a constant state of victimization. Everyone is out to get us. So if no one is on our side, then we have to do everything we can to get ours. We are “me monsters” of the highest order. And society will praise us for that. Society will champion us until it has no more use for us and then it will destroy us. That is the end that is awaiting Taylor Swift. And based on the reception to her new single, it is an end that could be here sooner than she expects.

[Five Random \(and Mostly Mad\) Musings on the Solar Eclipse of 2017](#)

The Great Solar Eclipse of 2017 instigated many a thought, and thoughts in thoughts, and side pockets of thoughts in thoughts, and ever on and on. Not just in me, but in everyone in the galaxy, almost all earthlings, four out of five extra-terrestrials, and those two old guys sitting on the sun yelling at someone to shut the door because they’re too cold. Everyone has thoughts. I think. Anyway, I, yes even I, had thoughts of my own as the eclipse flashed before my eyes.

Here are a few random bits of those thoughts. Most of these are as mad as a Hatter, with the last being pretty serious. Enjoy.

1. I am super glad the world didn't end during the eclipse, because I haven't even seen an effective over-the-counter invisible potion yet. This is my ultimate dream. Yeah, I know a few months ago I wrote an article categorizing five stupendous reasons why becoming invisible is probably a bad idea. Yeah, well, I guess it's the danger element. You know how people are drawn to doing things that are not a good idea? Like snorkeling. Everyone wants to snorkel, but you know you can drown. For reals. I know and let me tell you you can have it. I'm done with the whole shebang. What happens is you end up all panicky and suffocating and almost drowning in two feet of water and floundering about while two kids gawk at the strange man pretending to be an epileptic walrus. Anways, about how the passing of the eclipse and the world not ending is a pretty good thing right now. Totes awes. It paves the way for a clean slate where the medical and magical community have time to combine their considerable efforts to concoct a safe and legal pharmaceutical drug. Until that day I will just have to do what I usually do and act all invisible. If my dream happens by the next eclipse, we'll be good to go.

2. I wonder what happens to werewolves during a total solar eclipse. Usually it's the case that people with the werewolfian affliction turn from their human form into their werewolf form when the full moon shines upon the earth. During a total solar eclipse it's pretty much the exact opposite. So what happens to werepeople when that happens? Do they turn into the opposite of werewolves? What is that, werekitty? Whatever the case the were-community is staying mum on the issue. There was no comment from their neck of the woods...OF HORROR!!! It does not look like an answer to this question is soon forthcoming since it gets real, real dark during solar eclipsi so that we are literally in the dark on the issue.

3. Watching the moon ease its way over the sun on Monday I thought many a profound thought, meditated on many a deep question. Chief among them: Did an eclipse inspire the creation of Pac-Man? Looked at another way, the crescent formed could very well have been Lewis Carroll's muse for the Cheshire Cat's mad grin. How about Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart"? (Obviously.) And those are just a few examples. There are songs, movies, toys, books, etc. Any way you look at it, the solar eclipses of yore have had a dramatic impact on popular culture. The solar eclipse of 2017 has transcended above a one-time natural occurrence and has given lasting inspiration to millions, maybe billions. It is truly a total eclipse of our hearts.

4. Another reason I'm relieved the eclipse didn't end the earth was I thought of an awesome joke that would otherwise have heartbreakingly never been told. I present to you my newest standup material:

Darth Vader: What have I told you, bounty hunter?

Boba Fett: No disintegrations.

Darth Vader: No. I'm Fett up with you. Boom! (Heavy breathing)

And there you have it. I thought it up by myself in my brain. You can thank me later. I'm thinking of continuing the routine by having Admiral Piett try to top Vader with a crazy Boba-themed pun of his own like "that was Bounty to happen" or "000h, shishka-Boba." That's still in development stage, though. Good thing there's not another eclipse on the horizon. Oh, yeah. See what I did there?

5. Serious time here: I was not really expecting much from the eclipse, but it ended up being many times better. In fact, it was undoubtedly one of the most amazing things I have ever seen. The ring of fire and then total darkness of the eclipse itself was an awesome act of God itself, but thankfully I took the time to take off my glasses and observe my surroundings

during totality. As we all know it became as dark as night, but there was also an apparent sunset in all the horizons that we could see from my sister's house. I have read that this is something that usually happens during a total eclipse and that this apparent sunset is a phenomenon that happens in every direction. And there was also the shifting and mysterious shadows that moved across the earth, the trees, the houses as the moon moved off of the sun and the light and the humid heat of day gradually returned. Fellow contributor, Phill Lytle, has commented that God stopped the human madness of the passed few weeks to show us the power of His handiwork. (Not his exact words.) Indeed He has.

A Few Words about Charlottesville For the Church and For the Nation

This is the antithesis of the Kingdom of God. Let this fact take root deep within us. God's kingdom is every tribe and every tongue worshiping the Jewish Messiah. It looks nothing like white men with torches chanting "blood and soil" and asserting their significance. According to Paul in Galatians the gospel unites different races and obliterates ethnic pride. This, like all assertions of ethnic superiority, is evil.

The church needs to address this and do so with more than tweets. Wisely, the Southern Baptists condemned this kind of thing this summer. Just about all the evangelical leaders to whom I listen have been vocal in their condemnation. This is good, but for the most part these are just words. I would like

to see real racial reconciliation like what Paul talked about in Galatians 3.

I would like to see the end of black churches, the end of white churches, the end of Hispanic churches. I long to see Christian worship to be so intrinsically linked to racial unity that we couldn't imagine one without the other. If this were the case, everyone who witnessed the actions of these terrorists would know: these are obviously not Christians. Sadly, too many ignorantly associate this with Christianity.

This is the antithesis of America. We are a nation of political ideals, not ethnic pride. Our nation has had plenty of white supremacy in its past, but it was not founded on ethnic or religious lines. It was founded on the inalienable rights of all men. If we take the Declaration of Independence and Constitution seriously, our nation was created to protect our liberties and to establish the equality of all people before the law. Yet, I'm seeing people forsaking our sacred ideals and doing "hail Hitlers" in the street. Seriously, I cannot believe that this kind of thing goes on in the land that sacrificed so much to defeat this tyrant.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Hitler has become the ultimate hyperbole and comparisons to him are used far too often to denounce political enemies. The conscious decision by the Charlottesville protestors to associate with the Nazi war machine, however, makes this a chilling, but fitting comparison. As a nation, we seem to be reliving 1930s Europe, where it seemed like the world would be won by one of only two options: fascists or communists. Who's it going to be 2017 America: Hitler or Stalin? Maybe we should insist on better options. Maybe we can unleash hell on the one and still tear down the walls of the other.

America may fail us. Certainly, it will not last forever. How long can a Republic last when its citizens lack virtue and know nothing about how it works? As a history teacher I will

strive to promote civic knowledge, virtue, and commitment to those American ideals that transcend race, class, and gender. I can only have so much impact.

The Church will not fail. It will march into hell and take no prisoners. It will do this because it is not maintained by its own might but by the will of God. Pastors, empower your church to be The Church. Call it to be the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-generational eternal body united in celebrating the Kingship of Jesus. You can do nothing of greater impact.

Unfiltered Thoughts of a Smartphone Addict

Every 4.3 minutes.

That is how often the average American checks their smartphone while awake[1. Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, 16]. I am positive that I am average. And when I use the word “addict,” I am not trying to devalue the word. I just know that people get physiologically attached to their phones[2. [www.psychologytoday.com Can-You-Get-Addicted-To-Your-Smartphone?](http://www.psychologytoday.com/Can-You-Get-Addicted-To-Your-Smartphone?)].

We know the stereotypes probably better from images rather than data: people walk down the street and everyone is staring down at their phone instead of noticing things around them...a couple is lying in bed and both are on their phones instead of talking to each other...people take pictures or video of “the moment” instead of actually experiencing the moment in 3D and real time.

This is me. This is too often my real life.

So in the spirit of brutal honesty but also with an attempt to wrestle with problem-solving and public accountability, I want to write about the smartphone abuse epidemic. I want to write about my personal struggle—the things I think but never say.

First, I feel shame over my smartphone habits.

I was late to the smartphone game, not owning one until 2012. I remember being mesmerized by how I could then watch videos and get on Facebook conveniently and without a big, clunky computer.

And in five short years, I have allowed this small device (with several upgrades) to become a dominant force in my life. I am the kind of person to be in a crowded room and on my phone the whole time. No matter how many times I put it in my pocket, I feel the temptation to reach for it within a few seconds or a few minutes and check it again. I feel slight panic when the battery gets low. Any time I post to Facebook I check it dozens of times the rest of the day to see who has liked or commented.

And this brings me shame. I hate the way it masters me instead of vice-versa.

The problem is not just *how much time* I spend with my phone but *what* I am looking at.

I don't even mean porn. That is something I have struggled with but due to being married and things like Covenant Eyes, I can't say this is the problem.

No, it's when I get on Twitter and find people I disagree with and read about 50 of their tweets because apparently I love being angry. It's when I fall down rabbit holes for a half hour reading inane things, as I did once with Jerry Seinfeld's

answers to public questions on a BuzzFeed forum. It's when I watch ten straight Youtube videos of 80s Saturday morning cartoon theme songs.

It all seems harmless, but it is a huge waste of time and my phone's potential. I could be reading edifying articles on culture or practicing Duolingo Polish. Those would be a preferable way to spend 30 minutes[3. Though a little inanity every day keeps me sane.]. Yet I find myself watching the "Bushes of Love" Star Wars video or yelling at celebrities on Twitter far more often.

When I use my smartphone unwisely, my marriage is affected.

Not only do I mean that it takes time away from my wife, but also there are times when I will be on my phone or reading while my wife is away and what I see or read will cause me to be short with her or just generally unaware of her when she comes back.

Based on the last election, I am closer to the political middle than ever. This means people from both extremes annoy me. And as I said, I regularly feed my heart and brain political garbage, like an immature child gorging on potato chips instead of a healthy diet. And when my wife walks in, she can tell immediately that I am not all there. I'm distracted not only when I am on my phone, *but even after I've put it down*. Because I cannot stop thinking about what I was reading. That is messed up.

I have tried to get better but have often failed.

I have read articles on how to stop the addiction. I have heard tons of advice. I've been told to not keep the phone by the bed, to put it away when around people, to set times to

check social media and not break those appointed times and many other things. More often than not, just reading the “how to”'s has been useless.

One reason I keep failing is because I make the arrogant mistake of trying to dig deeper or use will power. At my church we preach that this is not how God works in helping us overcome temptation, yet I somehow get confused that this is how he works in my bad habits. I have felt this before with lust and other areas.

It's foolishness.

Genuine change in my worldview only comes by the grace of God. And only when I start with this will I see results that matter. “Hungering and thirsting for righteousness” is the posture of a begging person who desperately needs help. Not a strong warrior who overcomes.

My goals must be specific, measurable and practical to bring success.

No two people are the same so this is not advice. It is just an example of how saying “I'm going to get better” is useless. I need a plan. None of this is cutting edge or even extremely sacrificial. They're just small steps that I have taken so far:

1. My wife and I consider all dates to be cell phone free.

This one we have broken, but only when we were both interested in looking something up, like the name of an actor we were talking about.

2. I turn my phone off while at church.

Sadly, I have broken this a few times this year. I do not want to be legalistic, but I personally know Sundays need to be as

distraction-free and others-focused as possible.

3. Sundays are a no social media day.

This one is rather new. Maybe I'll make an exception for Mother's Day.

4. I do not use my phone 30 minutes before sleep or within 30 minutes of waking up.

I have read the research that says smartphone usage affects sleep[4. www.sleep.org/articles/Is-Your-Smartphone-Ruining-Your-Sleep?] but I still struggle to eliminate this completely at night. In the morning I have determined that God comes before Facebook.

I want to keep evaluating and changing my smartphone habits.

I doubt I will ever totally eliminate smartphone usage, social media or screen time from my life because I think my ministry and witness are enhanced when I use them wisely. Yet there are many things I could and should do to keep the addiction at bay. I want to look into taking weeks and even whole months away from screens and/or social media. I want to not simply curb smartphone usage but find positive ways to spend that time instead, be it reading more or spending more time with people in conversation. I want to consistently seek God's wisdom in all areas of life, but especially in this area. Because without that I will continue to struggle and feel shame.

I am not and never will be a "5 steps to..." or "3 ways to..." person. I just like to talk about reality and how God collides with it. I want to be transparent, but only inasmuch as God's grace and transformative power are highlighted. I hope that is what I have done here. If so or if not, we welcome feedback

below.

Sometimes He Calms the Sea

African-American pastor and songwriter of the past century, Charles Tindley, used a common metaphor of the time to reference the trials, tribulations, dangers, and snares of the Christian life: "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me...when the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea, thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me." [1. "Stand By Me" Charles A. Tindley]

Another song writer-poet expressed similar sentiments: "Jesus Savior, pilot me, over life's tempestuous sea, unknown waves before me roll, hiding rocks and treacherous shoal, wondrous sovereign of the sea, Jesus Savior, pilot me." [2. "Jesus, Savior Pilot Me" Edward Hopper]

Songwriter Scott Krippayne, echoed these thoughts in a song he wrote in 1995:

*All who sail the sea of faith
Find out before too long
How quickly blue skies can grow dark
And gentle winds grow strong
Suddenly fear is like white water
Pounding on the soul*

*Still we sail on knowing
That our Lord is in control
Sometimes He calms the storm
With a whispered peace be still
He can settle any sea
But it doesn't mean He will
Sometimes He holds us close
And lets the wind and waves go wild
Sometimes He calms the storm
And other times He calms His child"*[3. "Sometimes He Calms the Storm" Scott Krippayne]

Traveling by boat or ship, or being out on the ocean, rivers, or lakes was a dangerous thing for many centuries, since ancient times. Storms could arise without notice, and the wind, strong waves, thunder, and lightning menaced travelers, and could capsize a ship and cause many deaths. This has been symbolic of trouble in the Christian life. Storms symbolize illness and disease, financial disasters, broken relationships, and anything else in life that threatens us, either physically or emotionally. Can God not step in and save the day? Can he not send a miracle our way?

In Mark 4, the disciples on the Sea of Galilee found themselves caught in a sudden storm, helpless and in grave danger, while Jesus was asleep in the boat. They woke him, frightened out of their wits, and He stood, extended His hand, rebuked the wind, and said "peace, be still." Immediately the storm ended. Instantly. There was a "great calm." Jesus then rebuked his followers for their lack of faith. Sure, He can calm storms. He's God.

A few years later, Paul was traveling as a prisoner to Rome, on board a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. Suddenly, a Euroclydon, a powerful, cyclone-type wind arose, and for the next two weeks the ship was tossed and battered until all hope of survival was gone. But suddenly Paul appeared and said to all on board with him: "The God whose I am, and whom I serve,

has appeared to me.” He gave Paul the peace he needed, and the assurance that all would be well (Acts 27:23). But they had to ride out the storm and suffer shipwreck. Life’s like that sometimes.

Yet another song repeats for us the same truth:

*Sometimes He calms the storm sometimes He calms me
Sometimes the storm still rages on but I feel the sweetest
peace*

*It’s such a joy to know that my Lord knows just what I need
Sometimes He calms the storm sometimes He calms me*[4. “He Calms me” sung by the McKameys]

Here are some lessons we can learn.

God is sovereign over every storm life brings our way. He is capable of doing the miraculous; healing, provision, removing obstacles, and certainly doesn’t mind His child asking for those things. He may not do what we wish He would, but He always, always, always, will be with us, and will speak peace to our heart if we call upon Him. “Therefore, we will not fear...” (Psalm 46:2) At the end of the day, He will “get us to the other side.”

Here’s the point. We all face storms. God can miraculously still them, and sometimes will, but often we will have to go through them. However, even in the storm He is with us, can speak peace to our heart. The loss of our beautiful daughter-in-law two years ago – my health challenges the past few years – standing with friends and family during severe trials. I’m so glad He is there. The song by *Casting Crowns*, “Praise You in This Storm,” states it beautifully:

*And I’ll praise you in this storm
And I will lift my hands
That you are who you are
No matter where I am
And every tear I’ve cried*

*You hold in your hand
You never left my side
And though my heart is torn
I will praise you in this storm*[5. Praise You in This Storm"
Mark Hall and Bernie Herms (Casting Crowns)]

Prayer: Father, even now be with your dear children who are caught in one of life's raging storms, whatever it might be. Please calm the storm, according to your will, or please calm them, and assure them of your love and presence. In the powerful name of Christ, Amen.

The NFL on REO: The Deep Breath Before the Plunge

In Peter Jackson's epic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a conversation that occurs early in the third film, *The Return of the King*, between the wizard Gandalf and Pippin the Hobbit. They have arrived at Minas Tirith, the last stronghold of man against the rising darkness of Mordor. After an eventful day, they stand at a balcony and look across the fields of Pelennor towards the dark mountains of Mordor. Pippin, restless and afraid, wonders why it is so unnaturally quiet. Gandalf, introspective and decidedly not full of assurances and hope, tells him that quiet is the "deep breath before the plunge." Gandalf then delivers this line, "The board is set. The pieces are moving."



The message was clear: This was the quiet of armies amassing for battle. War was coming. It was at their doorstep. Everything was set and ready to go.

That is where every NFL team and every NFL fan finds themselves today. "The board is set. The pieces are moving." These NFL teams are not fighting to save the world, but ever since the season ended on February 5, 2017, they have all been planning, strategizing, and positioning their rosters to improve and compete for a championship. (I say "every," but there are always a few teams that go into the season knowing full well they have no chance at all. Take a moment to laugh derisively at their expense, unless of course you root for one of those teams. In that case...this just got awkward.)

While *The Lord of the Rings* line is foreboding and ominous, this time of year is one of optimism and hope for most NFL teams and their fans. Hope does indeed spring eternal in July. Training camps are just around the corner and the fans will finally get a chance to see what all their new free agency and draft toys look like. While many teams will come crashing back to earth quickly once the season begins, right now, everyone has a chance. The odds might be worse than Lloyd Christmas had with Mary Swanson, but any little bit of hope will do for most of us.

Frankly, most fans, myself included, have that goofy grin on our faces right now, even if the facts about our teams don't back them up at all. Don't stop believing kids!

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Colin?

I hate it when I am reading a sports' article and the writer goes on a political tirade. If I wanted to read about hot-button, political issues, I would read political writers and websites. It drives me crazy and I will do my best to not get political in this column.

Now can we talk about the national anthem, Colin Kaepernick, and his never-ending crusade to destroy our country?

Joking.

I do want to talk about Kaepernick, though. I hope I can do so without bringing in all the baggage that seems to dominate every single conversation about him. As I see it, there are only three reasons why he is not on an NFL team today, starting with the least likely.

1. Every single team/owner is in collusion to keep him out of the league because they are a rich, white guy club that hates everything he stands for. Can we just take this one off the list right now? I've seen some writers argue that this is actually at play. Those writers need to get other jobs. I've heard radio commentators say the same thing. They need to do less talking and more thinking. Is it possible that some owners vehemently disagree with Kaepernick's stand and don't want to have anything to do with him? Absolutely. And that is their right as owners of a business. There are undoubtedly some owners that have no issue at all with Kaepernick's views. They probably even agree with them. So why have they not signed him then? That leads us to reason number two.

2. Colin Kaepernick, the player, is not a good fit for many/most teams. This is not to say that Kaepernick is a bad quarterback. He is not. He is talented and has had moments of brilliance in his career. The problem with Kaepernick is that his specific skill-set does not fit the role of the typical back-up quarterback in the NFL, which is exactly what he would be at this point. If he were to play in an offense that was built around his abilities, he could start and be successful, but you don't tailor an offense to a back up QB. I imagine many NFL teams feel that bringing him in to camp to compete for a back up role is not worth their time. For more on that, see reason number three.

3. With a limited skill set, a controversial background, and the fact that most NFL teams want to avoid bad press, it makes perfect sense that no team has signed him yet. It's a risk/reward scenario and right now, Kaepernick is not worth the risk. That is not to say some team is not willing to take that risk at some point before the 2017 season begins. I will not be surprised at all if he gets picked up soon. But there is no collusion. There is no scandal. Colin Kaepernick is not on an NFL team because he does not fit the role as a traditional and effective back up QB and he brings more baggage than what most NFL teams are willing to deal with. It's that simple.

Celebrate Good Times, Come On!

I'm late to the party on this but I figured since the NFL was so late to this party, it was only fitting. The league has finally adjusted and loosened their celebration rules. In typical, tone-deaf fashion, the NFL and Roger Goodell (fire him now) presented their new guidelines in a manner that suggested they had actually done something of great value – like cure cancer, figured out how to eliminate concussions, or solve the health care debate. Everyone else in the world read


the new celebration rules and said, "...okay." It was not revolutionary or groundbreaking. It was painfully obvious and average and many years too late. I guess that is an improvement though, as the NFL typically functions in the Upside Down of competence. (Completely incongruous *Stranger Things* mention because it's awesome! New season arrives exclusively to Netflix on Halloween.)


When it made this announcement, the NFL and Goodell saw themselves like this:


When the rest of the world saw them like this:

Titans Talk

I'll keep this brief with only a few predictions for the 2017 season:

 I fully expect the Titans to have a top 10 offense in 2017. If they don't, something has gone terribly wrong.

 I expect the secondary to struggle the first half of the season as they gel and learn to play together. This is a group that will have as many as three new starters from last season. That is a lot of turnover. Let's hope the rest of the team can hold on and do enough to win games during that transition.

 Marcus Mariota, if healthy, will be in the Pro Bowl and in serious consideration for MVP at the end of the season. I'll have more on him in a future column. My man-crush is stronger than ever.

That's it for today. I told you it would be brief.

Final Thoughts

Take us home Roger Goodell/David Brent:

