

Sermon Title: Division, Feedback Loop, Week Three

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Sermon Questions:

1. What are ways you have noticed culture being increasingly divisive?
2. Have you noticed algorithms customizing your feed (news, social media, location, advertisements, etc) specifically for you?
3. How have you been influenced to think of us and them? How does the fact that all people are created in the image of God fight against that?
4. Our identity is supposed to be in Jesus. What other things have you put your identity in?
5. Jesus said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye". Discuss how hard it is to view things through the lens of you having the plank in your eye.
6. Words build up or words tear down. How can you grow at building others up with your words this week?

Transcript

For a couple of years we lived in my mom's old house. Just three and four years ago, right over here in a sunflower community. And while we were there, it was a small house. And so in the living room it had a huge mirror on the side wall to try and make it look bigger. And the mirror was like slightly deceptive.

It looked like a window. It looked like we had a 12 foot window in the living room, which made it feel quite a bit larger. But it wasn't a 12 foot window. It was a 12 foot mirror just shining back at you. Your own living room.

And I bring that up because we're going through this series on screens, on an algorithm, really a feedback loop that connects all our screens, all our devices. And we might think that these devices are like windows. They show us, they open up a gateway to all kinds of information. They show us a universe of information beyond ourselves. But these are not windows.

They're mirrors. In fact, they speak back to us. All of our devices, all the time, essentially speak back to us with, with the same voice. And that voice is, you are right, you are right, you are so right. And all the smart people agree with you.

In fact, the only people who disagree with you are unreasonable and dangerously foolish. And if you let them, if you let them govern things, then everything is going to fall on apart. That's the message we hear over and over and over. I thought everybody had news stories and

images and videos sent their way about how the Vikings were the greatest football team ever, how the U of A basketball team sets the standard for all basketball teams, how Sony cameras dominate things. Over and over and over.

Our screens tell us how right we are in a divisive way. So Google and Meta, two small companies out there, so that parent companies over Facebook, Instagram, you know, YouTube, all of that they will make in the year 2026. \$483 billion. 483 billion. And what they are selling is you and I.

Their product is our attention. So if we scroll and glance at something for eight seconds, they get paid more than than if we glance for four seconds. And so they know what we glance at. And they know it grabs attention and they dominate with a voice that is extremely divisive. In fact, it promotes divisiveness, it optimizes engagement.

And much like a car accident. So if you're driving down the road, there are two things that can slow down traffic in broad terms. One would be a police car that slows down traffic a little bit. But if you really want to slow down traffic Have a good accident, have one car on its roof, the other car on its side, have people standing off to the side, everyone will slow down. There's something about it that grabs human attention.

And in the same way, not exaggerating and not. Not just speculating. Former employees have shown it, court cases have proved it, and algorithm audits have shown that these platforms promote divisive engagement. Why? Because it grabs attention, they promote extreme views, they force people to take sides, and they say, you are right, you are right, you are right.

The only people who disagree with you are unreasonable and dangerously foolish. If you leave it up to them, everything's going to fall apart. And so we live in kind of echo chambers is a term to describe it, of a voice telling us we're right all the time and others are wrong. So at a recent conference, a speaker was up and the audience of this conference was right, leaning politically. And so the speaker asked them, as an audience, said, what I want you to do is tell me five positive things about Nancy Pelosi.

Crickets. Crickets. Not a single voice could answer five, is there anyone here? Five positive things. The question went out.

This is someone who's served like 40 years as a senator. I mean, in all that time, just five, five positive things. Now, I'm not speaking. You could have that same conference with a completely different audience and say, would you say five positive things about President Trump? And in that environment, you'd hear crickets.

Because the voices that we hear are not the same.

We're hearing regardless of what camps we're in with what thoughts we have, what opinions we have, we're hearing over and over, regardless. You're right, you're right, you're right. And anyone who disagrees with you is dangerously foolish and unreasonable. Leave it to them and everything will fall apart. That's the algorithm of.

Of the feedback loop that we are in. And it causes us to distrust others, it causes us to be skeptical and cynical of others, and to have a prideful arrogance of our rightness and our wisdom. That's why we're in this series, the Feedback Loop. Now, the Apostle Paul does not treat divisiveness as a small issue. Biblically speaking, much of the Apostle Paul's letters, in fact, to the churches and to those who he did ministry with, were speaking directly to the issue of divisiveness and how to overcome it as well.

These are some of his words in Romans, chapter 16, right? As he closes his book to the letter in the church of Rome. He says this in verse 17, I appeal to you brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles, contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught, avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. And by smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naive.

He says we need to be on guard, on warning, because these people, these systems, these algorithms, their sole intent is to cause division, to create obstacles. What obstacles? The kind of false obstacles that we encounter today might sound something like this. Only real Christians vote this way. Only real Christians listen to these voices.

Only real Christians care about these issues. Issues. The people who don't care about those issues, they are not real Christians. They are not true believers.

And what does Paul do? He pulls us back. He says, no, no, no, no. Do not allow those people to put false obstacles in the way of what the Gospel truly preaches. For such persons do not serve our Lord.

So he's warning against these divisive people. They may have smooth, flattering speech, but the reasons, the heart of why they're sharing it is about themselves. It's not for the benefit of the church, it's not for the benefit of the gospel. It's not actually the gospel itself. He continues this warning in Titus chapter three, we read these words, if I can find my notes.

Titus 3, verse 10. As for a person who stirs up division after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him. Knowing that such a person is warped and sinful, he is self condemned. Paul makes it clear. Have nothing to do with divisive people, have nothing to do with divisive systems, have nothing to do with the divisive algorithm.

You know, it's easy for us to put boundaries up relationally when people are divisive, when, when they're pushing through those boundaries, when they're causing strife relationally, it can be easier to put up boundaries than to say, hey, I can't allow myself, my family, the people I care about, to be around these kinds of divisive people. It may seem easier in that case, but do we have that same discernment with the content that we take in? Do we have that same discernment with the feedback loops that we interact with every single day devices. Paul makes it clear. If you have divisive people in your life after warning them once and twice, have nothing to do with them.

Avoid them, cut them off. And yet are you willing to cut off the feedback loops on our phones, on our computers, the voices that are so prevalent that speak over and over and over those devices they amplify and accelerate division. There was an FBI warning after the last election that there was a coalition of over 70 countries that led a disinformation campaign to try to sway election results. Over 70 countries that tried to influence our election here. Now, regardless of who won the election, regardless of the conversation or the arguments over, you know, was this the winner?

Was that the winner? You know who I want to say the winner is? Those countries who sought to seek division in America. Look at our country. Look at the landscape.

It's never been more divided than it is now. They are the winners. The church is called to be united.

This. This is our feedback loop. This is what we should seek after.

We need to take division seriously. And if we're going to do so, we have to discern the voices we allow to speak into our lives. The Apostle Paul says In Romans chapter 12, he says, do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. That you may be able to test and approve what God's will is. His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

This is where we find renewal. This is where we find transformation. Because the voices that we hear, the content that we take in, the feedback loops that we engage with, they seek to not just inform us, but to form us. And we must be formed by God's word. So we want to invite you to consider today four truths.

That if we're going to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, that we have to engage in these four truths. We have to allow these four truths to speak into our hearts and our lives in order to seek the unity of the church. Four truths. The first one is, all people are created in the image of God. All people are created in the image of God.

All people have the worth and. And value and dignity of the image of God sown inside of them.

All people have a debt of honor and respect being created in the image of God. All people consider these words, Genesis, the very beginning. God created man in his own image, in the image of God.

He created him. Male and female. He created them. He created all people. One of the dangers of that silent, quiet voice shaping our minds, disciplining us behind the scenes when we're not aware, spewing division is.

It enables us to dehumanize others, to dehumanize them. And so we think that them is the problem, them is an enemy, and we take human faces off of them. One of the stats that Pastor John brought up the first week of this series that grabbed my attention was that two thirds of American Regardless of what camp they're in, believe the other camp is a clear and present danger to our country.

We dehumanize others and because of that, we get cynical and anxious and view that as a danger. And we don't trust. We get afraid. We consider that camp a threat. When I say all people are created in the image of God.

This is all Americans, all Iranians, all Russians, all people are created in the image of God. Christians, non Christians, created in the image of God. All human beings created in the image of God.

It was spoken to me more than once over this season. With the war with Iran, don't you think we would be better off if we just nuked them?

A statement like that can't come from anyone who knows Iranian people, no one that has friends there. We're talking about 93 million people, Persian friends here who have family members back there. These are human beings.

One human being loses their life. We ought to grieve and mourn of the destruction of the image of God in a human being, a creation of him, a pinnacle of creation.

But we constantly think, oh, that Rainbow crowd. Wouldn't it just be better? Oh, that Iran. Wouldn't it just be better? Oh, that.

Wouldn't it just be better? And there's a truth screaming at us from Scripture saying, human beings, all human beings, all people created in the image of God.

Harvard professor Cass Sunstein wrote a book called Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media, in which he just chronicles this goal to make money of platforms that recognize if you have a nice feel good story, you might get one or two likes on it. But get a good divisive story

going, force people to pick sides. Boy, the comments are going to go like wildfire and it's going to spread across the whole world.

And so those algorithms stir divisiveness so that we can objectively say the world is more divisive now than it's ever been.

There's a truth of scripture we have to dwell on. All people are created in the image of God. Truth number two is that our identity is in Jesus. Our identity is in Jesus. And at the same time, it's so easy to find our identity, to lump ourselves into different camps that help us to find our identity, to say, these are your people, these are my people.

To identify ourselves with different views in order to make ourselves feel safer, because we agree with them, we lump ourselves into different tribes. The tribe is a group of people that we belong to. It's the people, the story, the systems that tell us who we are, who our enemies are and how we interpret the events of this world. And yet as Christians, our identity is in Christ alone. Galatians 3, verse 28.

The apostle Paul says these words. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. All the things that divide us do not matter.

The things that unite us is stronger than that. The thing that unites us is Jesus Christ. And so we can lay down our divisions. We can lay down the things that make us different. Because the beauty of the church is that we can span all of those things.

Free people, slaves, male, female, rich, poor, Jew, Greek, it doesn't matter. We are all one in Christ. Yet how often do we opt out of that oneness and opt into a different tribe, into a different identity? What are some of those identities? Some of those include our political tribe.

We find ourselves on this side or that side. We align ourselves with these values or those values. Or maybe you're opting yourself out and saying, I have nothing to do with either of those sides. I'm on the no side side. The no side side is a side in itself by the way.

You just feel better about it and more self righteous.

Jesus says, no, we are all one in Christ. Maybe it's not a political tribe, maybe it's a social tribe. I'm on the homeschool team. I'm on the public school team. Educated, uneducated, rural, urban, white collar, blue collar, it doesn't matter.

It's so easy to find identity in these different arenas of life. And yet in Christ we are all one. Why is it so easy for us to identify in all these other areas? My question for you is, do you feel closer

to unbelievers who share your views than to Christians who don't?

Do you feel closer to unbelievers who share your views than to Christians who don't?

That should jar you.

There is no Jew or Greek. There is no slave or free. There is no male or female. We are all one in Christ. Our identity is in Jesus alone.

And if that's the case, no earthly tribe gets to define us, disciple us, or tell us who to look down on. Because in Christ we are called to seek the well being of all people. All people are created in the image of God and our identity is in Jesus. A third truth to dwell on is is. The plank is in our eye.

The plank is always in our eye. Jesus said, why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and Pay no attention to the plank that is in your own eye. How can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye, when all the time there is a plank in your own eyes eye, you hypocrite. First take the plank out of your own eye, then you'll see clearly. Just take the speck out of your brother's eye.

I'll confess on this that teaching is way beyond any earthly ability or ability I have.

I have a disease in me that thinks I'm right.

Genuinely, I come up against that truth in Scripture, and I fold because it's not humanly possible for me to think they have a speck and I have the plank.

I always think that I have the speck and they have the plank, and I try to convince myself of it oppositely, and I really don't feel it inside.

And here's the problem. If we have sin, that pushes us overwhelmingly and compellingly to think that we have the speck in our eye and they have the plank in their eye. If we have sin, how much worse is it when we have a voice constantly, you are right. You are right. And all the smart people agree with you.

The only people who disagree with you are unreasonable, dangerously foolish. If you leave it to them, everything will fall apart. If you had a human saying that to you all the time, do you think it would lead you to humility and patience, grace? Or would it lead you to pride, to divisiveness?

Devices. I'll speak balance here. Devices can be great. This morning, before church ever got

going, a friend came in who saw something of my daughter's online. Oh, have you seen this?

And I'm not on social media, so I hadn't. They're like, oh. And it was one of those things that disappears and 24 hours. And I saw it. I'm like, oh, it's my grandkids.

Oh, oh, oh, well, I need that. How can I get it? It disappears in 24 hours. That's not acceptable to me. I want that on my phone now.

So I had to run around and figure out how to outsmart the thing to get it. And then that had me talking to people who know how to use them. They can be good.

Recently, I said to Deborah, I need a new belt.

And lo and behold, I have belt belt ads coming my way.

So here's the thing. It's not a light thing that these algorithms are that powerful. They know us better than we know ourselves in an objective sense. They know what we will not admit. They know everything that grabs our attention and everything that doesn't, and it feeds us with a lie.

Jesus, help me see the plank in my own eye. Help me see my own sin, and help me see others with a speck in their eye.

Truth number four is that our words are never neutral. The things that we post, the conversations that we have, our comments that we make, they have a story, they tell a story. They aren't neutral. All of our words carry meaning. The apostle Paul says this.

Ephesians 4. 29. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths. Corrupting talk. It's this image of rotten or decaying words.

Let no words come out of your mouth that are rotten, that cause decay, that come from a place of decay and rottenness. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear the words we say.

Do they speak truth? Do they speak life? Do they build up or do they cause decay? And Paul gives us a framework in which to evaluate our words. Does it cause decay?

Does it cause death? Is it good for building up? Like, is it gonna build this person up or is it gonna tear them down? Is this gonna build a bridge towards somebody who's different than me? Or is it gonna build a wall so I can protect myself?

Does it fit the occasion? Is this the word I need to have right now? Okay, I'll admit real quick, there are times where somebody will come have a hard conversation with me, and I've got words to share with them, too, but I've been too much of a coward to say it, so I'll wait until they have a word to say against me, to challenge me, to share a struggle. And instead of receiving that in humility, you know what I'll do? I'll say, hey, while we're here, let me share a struggle I have with you.

Now, does that make that untrue? No, it's a true thing, but it doesn't fit the occasion. It's not the time and the place to have that conversation because I'm actually deflecting their truth in order to share my own. Are our words being used in a proper fitting occasion that it may give grace to those who hear? That it gives them grace, that it builds them up, that it gives them what they need?

Are our words being used to build up or to tear down?

We read more about this Colossians 4. 6. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer Each person. Our words are never neutral. They are meant to be gracious, to be seasoned with salt.

What good is salt? Salt is used what to preserve things, to add value and flavor to life. So just the other day I tried something for the first time. It's called dry brining. I don't know how many of you guys have tried dry brining a steak before.

So essentially you over salt the steak and then you put it in the fridge for somewhere between six to 24 hours, depending on how thick it is, and you pull it back out. At first it looks like you ruined the steak. One, because you oversalted it, two, because all the juices leave. But what it does is as the juices come out of the steak, it grabs onto that salt and then it sucks all of it back in so that every single bite and morsel is salty and good. That's what the apostle Paul is saying, is that our words should be salty and good.

They should add flavor and value and goodness to every conversation that you have. How did Lori? She thought I over salted the steak, but I was right. I want you. You.

You are right. You are right. You're right. And all the smart people agree with you. Thank you.

Yeah.

Glad you see that our words, our conversations should bring flavor and goodness. And yet how easy is it to over salt? Salt could also be used to kill. It can be used for, you know, to scorch the earth, to make it to where nothing can grow again. How easy is it for us to tear down what God invites us to build up?

The people that God invites us to encourage, to speak truth into our words are not neutral. And so we need to consider the use of our words. Now, this doesn't mean that we always say nice fluffy things to make people feel good. Truth is a part of this. In Ephesians chapter four, we read about speaking the truth in love.

And that's a very real invitation. Now, growing up, I was the youngest of four and so I was always kind of the class clown playing around. And when things got tense, when things got awkward, I would tend to try to ease the tension with a joke. And so we're in youth group one day and my youth leader walks up to me and goes, hey, Dustin. He pulls me aside.

Man, I love you. Did you know you would be twice as funny if you spoke half as much?

I was like 15. I don't even know if I got it at the time. I reflect over the last 20 plus years since he said that and I still think about it. There's still moments when I'm about to say something stupid just to crack a joke, and I think, I don't need to say this. And even though I cut at the time, it was a good cut because it was a conversation I needed to have.

It was a truth. I needed to know that I don't always have to speak. And I thank God for that leader who is willing to speak that hard truth.

Our words are not neutral. And even hard words can actually build up. But we have to check our heart as our words are meant to be a grace. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear. Do our words build a bridge?

Do they build a wall? Are they building this person up? Is it tearing them down? Does it fit the occasion? And is it a grace to those who hear?

All people are created in the image of God. Jesus is our identity. The plank is in our eye. And words are not neutral. How do we apply this?

How do we take this home? So first I want to just go back. At the very beginning, we talked about a digital fast. We put a QR code up. You could go get some ideas on how to apply that.

We're not saying, hey, throw away your phones. We're not saying they're satanic, never touch a screen again. Like I said, does anyone want to see that video? Like, they're good things, they're useful, they're tools, but they're addictive and they're toxic. So we have to be wise.

And so there's just practical ways to set it aside to have phone free zone phone free time, screen free zones, screen free times to disconnect from the algorithm and push it aside.

I'd also say we could apply this just in the four truths. That first, truth that all people are created in the image of God. We ought to meditate on the truth that all people are created in the image of God. Imagine an enemy, a person or a a tribe that you don't have a lot of respect for, whether that's a nation or a party or some other group. Meditate on the fact that everyone created in the image of God.

Then dwell on the idea that your identity is in Christ. It's so easy to put our identity in. We put our identity in the clothes we wear and the cars we drive. We put our identity in the silliest of things. Our identity is in Jesus.

It's not in politics. It's not in our views. It's not in our opinions. Our identity is in Jesus. Dwell on that.

Consider that the third truth, that the plank is always in our eye.

If you can feel that in your heart and believe it in your mind, please share the way to that path with me.

Sin will fight against this on every course. But we have to push into Jesus. We have to be humbled in God, where we receive his righteousness and we acknowledge the plank is in our eye. And words, let's use words that build up the old motherly saying, if you don't have anything good to say, don't say it. All of our moms went to the same school.

There's truth there. Our words ought to be seasoned with grace, kindness, love. So we have the privilege this morning on both campuses to turn towards communion. As we close our service, to turn towards the Lord's table. There are communion elements up front, on both sides, in the back of both sides, under the window over here, there's gluten free.

I'd invite you come and get communion elements if you didn't as you came in. If you're watching online, I would ask that you go and find the closest communion elements you have. Any kind of bread, really, any kind of cup.

I'll share. As we're getting elements in the book of James, James talks about the danger of looking into a mirror and not changing who you are. Looking into a mirror and then going away and remaining the same. And anytime we look into the algorithm, we will stay the same. We don't have the ability to change ourselves.

So even. Even if we see our sin in it, we can't change ourself. James says, instead, look into the perfect. The perfect mirror of sorts says, gaze into the perfect law, the law of liberty. Gaze into Jesus.

Gaze into Jesus. We all are being disciplined, and we can either be disciplined by that algorithm or we can be disciplined by Jesus. So let's gaze into him as we close. On that night that Jesus was betrayed, he took bread.

He broke it.

So this is my body broken for you.

We are to take and eat this in memory of him. And I would suggest that it's not just a memorial, but that spiritually, Jesus is spiritually present in this. We take it so that we take and eat the body of Jesus Christ broken for us. That sounds. Sounds strange.

It did. The very first time Jesus spoke it in the Bible to receive his body broken, he died on the cross to wash us, to cleanse us, to renew us, to take away our sin. So, Jesus, I pray that you would anoint this bread to spiritually be your body broken for us. We receive it confessing our sins. We receive it wanting you to wash us, wanting you to cleanse us.

Renew our minds, renew our hearts. We want to be formed by you, the bread, the body of Jesus Christ, broken for you and for me. Take and eat.

Likewise. That evening he grabbed the cup, and as he looked at it, he looked upon his disciples. He said, this cup is the cup of the new Covenant. My blood poured out for you just as he poured out his own life on the cross. As his blood shed for us.

He said, whenever you gather, drink of this cup. So as we examine the cup, we ought to remember the blood of Christ shed for us as he poured himself out on our behalf. Now he invites us to consider that and likewise to pour ourselves out as a sweet supper sacrifice to him.

So as we drink this cup, I want you to consider what it is that Christ is inviting you to pour of yourselves out. What is it that he wants you to purge yourself of? What is it that he wants you to come to the end of yourself so that you can take his cup. So you can freely receive the gift that he so graciously gave. So, Father God, we thank you for the love of your Son, who freely gave himself.

God, that we would not have to stand in that place. God, not just that we wouldn't receive the consequences of our own sin, but God, that we would receive the righteousness of Christ imparted to us. So as we drink this cup, God, I pray that we would find our identity truly in you, God, that we would shed off all that seeks to hinder us. God, the sin that so easily entangles. God, that we would run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Let's go ahead and stand as we close.