

Look up. But still use your phone.

By [David Warkentin](#)

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Much has been said about perils of social media and the excessive use of smart phones. I've chimed in [once](#) or [twice](#) in the past. The latest rant has come via the clip "[Look Up](#)":

I agree with much in the assessment of our obsessive phone culture and admit my own tendency to focus more on my phone than my surroundings from time to time. Smart phones and social media feed a lack of attentiveness in relationships and a general distraction in everyday life we'd all do well to avoid.

But I'm also uneasy with these repeated guilt-inducing tirades against the current state of society's use of technology. It's not that I disagree with (some of) the problems. I just don't think guilt is a healthy motivator. Or that the situation is as dire as suggested. To hypothesize around what ifs and suggest that unless I leave my phone at the door I will lack fulfillment and relationships just isn't true. My phone won't dramatically alter my life-course. Previous generations had their own set of problems to work through with technology. (I rarely hear anyone today decrying the automobile as too efficient or electricity as too convenient.) They wrestled through the impact of technological change in their day-to-day lives. So do we. Messages of guilt only make us feel bad, perhaps creating temporary change or a tinge of regret. But shortly we learn to live with the guilt (if it remains at all) and we move on.

When it comes to smartphones and social media, I think we can do better.

Instead of saying, "Stop using your phone so much!" we could say, "Start using your phone well." Phones are part of the problem, indeed. But we have a choice for how we use them. Smartphones aren't going away. And like I said, guilt won't help much. I want to suggest we explore a virtuous use of smartphones and social media instead.

Briefly, here's how the [cardinal virtues](#) can relate to smartphone use:

- *Wisdom (Prudence)*: Use of our phones can enhance our understanding of the world, not just through mindless facts, but with the ability to know more about our surroundings than ever. Whether it's becoming educated about important social differences or simply gathering information as we face decisions, smartphones can actually foster wisdom.
- *Justice*: Yes, we can't forget how technology contributes to much injustice in our world, from slave labor to cyber-bullying. But we can commit to using our phones as a tool for equality and wholeness, speaking words of encouragement, and supporting companies with best practices in the industry. In this sense, a phone can foster justice in our lives, not just detract from it.
- *Temperance*: This one seems like common sense to me, and is likely what's behind the video above, but the use of our phones really comes down to moderation. Yes, smartphones and social media can create a culture of impatience and self-indulgence. But this doesn't have to be. We can set aside phone-free times and commit to not checking our phones at inappropriate times (e.g. in conversation or while driving). Controlled use of our phones can actually help us become more patient and self-controlled people.
- *Courage*: One of the main problems with smart phones is mindless overuse, where we put little thought into how we use them. But what if we all committed to using our phones for good? Or to face our personal and social fears? Smartphones don't have to be only about self-indulgence, but can offer countless opportunities to make a difference in peoples lives or towards addressing important social issues as we can communicate important information in the moment.

I do think we still need warnings and reminders for the ways we can become consumed or distracted by our smartphones. But in the process let's be realistic and look for the positive instead of repeated guilt-trips that never seem to make a difference anyway. I won't stop using my phone. And you probably won't either. Let's look up and use our phones well.

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