

Social Death¹

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." - John 8:7b

A woman was filmed yelling obscenities and screaming racial slurs in a parking lot. She was upset. There was no context: no reason given for her upset and no follow-up. Just a 20-second clip of her yelling and swearing at the camera, posted on Twitter.

There are a lot of cameras out there - you probably have one in your pocket right now. There are a lot of movies being made, mostly of people behaving badly. They are quite easy to publish on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Reddit. There are more social media platforms every day.

Wrongdoers should be punished. We need justice. The woman's behaviour on the video was bad. So many people seem to be getting away with bad things. Courts are slow. Social media is proliferating. We should take advantage of this new resource.

Instead of fines or jail, social media uses shaming. It's surprisingly effective. A woman misbehaves, caught on video, posted to social media: people view it and share it. Thousands see it. Eventually the woman's husband sees the video. Or her mother. Or her employer. Punishment ensues. How wonderfully efficient.

The anthropologist Bruce Malina² says that there are only four ways to influence people. He called them GSM, or generalized symbolic media. The name doesn't much matter but it is good to know that if you want to influence someone, you only have four options. Two work by punishment, two by reward.

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² Bruce J. Malina 1986. *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.

Shame is a punishment. "Do the right thing or you can't hang around here anymore." Shame cuts you off from the herd.

Force is a punishment. "Do what I say or I'll hurt you." The Roman army did this. Police forces do this. Burglars do this. Trump supporters seem to like this approach.

Knowledge is a reward. It invites. It calls out. "Come here! Let me tell you something!" It was around in the ancient world, just not very popular, although it did call to people in the streets (Proverbs 1:20). Knowledge is power.

Money is also a reward. While the love of money might be problematic, money itself helps people survive. It is a reward for labour. Money empowers.

Power and shame were dominant in the ancient world. Knowledge and wealth were scarce. In the ancient world, punishment was the way to go.

We got tired of shaming people and beating them up. We had accumulated knowledge and money, and we were learning to share them. The modern world preferred rewards over punishment, and had the means to reward people.

We seem to be falling back into power and shame. Like the Romans. I can't imagine that it will prove to be a good thing.

There is no question that social media works. I recognized the woman in the video. I know her name, her address, and where she works - or where she worked. I can't imagine that she was able to keep her job....

She's a single Mom with a very difficult adult son. The son keeps getting himself into jail. She used to come and talk to me. She wanted to help her son, and didn't know how. We talked for hours. I know the sacrifices she made.

Caught on film having a bad day. Most people won't care about the context, just the bad behaviour. They will judge her on 20 seconds of her life.

You know what happened to the Romans.