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January 8, 2023

Addicted to Our Screens? What the Tech?! The Promise and Perils of our Digital Age

Using tech well takes God-given discernment

MONDAY 1.9.23 Proverbs 25:28, 16:21-25

The Hebrew sages who collected the sayings in the book of Proverbs might have loved Twitter—and feared its ability to absorb our time. They used short, pointed sayings to express the wise ideas in their book. In their day, the main way to defend a city was a strong, thick wall. “[Breached] gives a picture of an attacking army making a breach or opening in the wall or defenses of a city. As a result, that part of the city is left without a protective wall.” * Self-control, they said, was that wall for our inner life.

- Proverbs 16:21 said a discerning mind is important. Verse 23 similarly praised insight. Yet people design many of the technology tools we use to find ways to catch and hold our interest, long past the item that originally led us to click on them. How are discernment and insight particularly valuable in helping us use technology without becoming addicted to it, and letting it fill up time and energy we are meant to spend on more productive activities?
- In a world with much less technology than today, Proverbs 16:25 issued a sobering warning. “The picture may be that of a journey in which the traveler believes he is headed on a straight road or path toward his destination but discovers only too late that his path leads to death.” ** Have you ever found that an app you downloaded, thinking it would be useful, is having deadly effects (inwardly if not outwardly)? Can you purposely delete any such technology tools?

Prayer: Lord God, we've long since moved beyond the technology of your Old Testament people—but their wisdom still speaks to our needs. Give me the self-control to choose your life-giving ways. Amen.

* William D. Reyburn and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Proverbs*. New York: United Bible Societies, p. 555.

** William D. Reyburn and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Proverbs*. New York: United Bible Societies, p. 312.

We can use tech in sober, awake ways

TUESDAY 1.10.23 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4-11

The apostle Paul called God-given faithfulness and love spiritual “armor” to guard his converts’ lives as children of light. Scholar William Barclay wrote, “This word (*pistis*) is...the characteristic of the [person] who is reliable.” * It meant we can choose to use all our energy, time, skills, money or other assets (including technology tools Paul couldn’t have begun to imagine) to bless others and build God’s kingdom.

- Paul began this letter praising the Thessalonians for their faith, hope and love (cf. [1 Thessalonians 1:3](#); also [1 Corinthians 13:13](#)). As he neared the end of his message, he returned to those central spiritual qualities as the “armor” they could depend on to protect their life as children of light, not darkness. How do faith, hope and love function as “armor” to protect you from hurtful uses of technology? How can positive uses of tech tools amplify the impact of those good qualities?
- Paul’s guidance included a strong emphasis on being “awake.” How much of your current technology use is purposeful and intentional, and how much of it becomes a kind of mindless, unplanned scrolling? In what ways might you use technology (tools like alarms and alert messages) to bring a greater level of “awakeness” to your use of these powerful tools?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, be even more present with me than my phone or computer screen, shaping and guiding my activities (especially those that use tech) in ways that advance your kingdom. Amen.

* William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 51.

Using our God-given freedom well

WEDNESDAY 1.11.23 Galatians 4:31-5:1, 5:13-15, 22-23

The Apostle Paul planted new churches in the Roman province of Galatia (modern Turkey). After Paul left, “false teachers” began swaying people in Galatia to follow certain external rules and laws for God to accept them. Paul, in his letter, urged his readers to claim their spiritual freedom in Christ. Jesus’ words identified one of the “great commandments” (“love your neighbor as yourself”) as key to that freedom. Technology can greatly enhance or reduce our ability to live out that commandment.

- In verse 13 Paul bluntly stated a truth we often struggle to admit. We all have selfish impulses, especially if we can choose freely. He pointed his readers to the one who can give us the ability to live in love: the Holy Spirit (“Be guided by the Spirit and you won’t carry out your selfish desires”—verse 16). In what ways might you invite the Spirit to empower you to love your neighbor more fully as yourself, particularly in the realm of social media and other technology?
- Paul echoed Jesus’ teaching in [Matthew 22:35-40](#) to describe the great commandment’s meaning: “All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement.” But even many Christians struggle to live that out. We add a whole variety of doctrinal nuances to the list of things needed to “fulfill the law,” and often use technology as a megaphone to share our views. Can you trust, for yourself and other believers, that “love your neighbor as yourself” truly fulfills “all the law”?

Prayer: O God, technology gives me a level and reach of communication Paul could only have wished for. Help me to use that freedom well, in loving and positive ways. Amen.

Discerning the God-given good from the tempting

THURSDAY 1.12.23 James 1:13-18

James, like Jesus (cf. [John 9:1-5](#)), taught that God helps us resist temptation, but is not the source of it. Nor is technology the root source of temptation. Scholar N. T. Wright said, “[James] warns us not to imagine that God is responsible for the temptation itself. The testing comes from within (Jesus made that clear, too).... If you are true to ‘yourself’, you will end up a complete mess.” * Resisting the temptations of technology takes choosing to be part of the “crop” God gave “birth by his true word.”

- James was unequivocal: “No one who is tested should say, ‘God is tempting me!’” When an event or person strains your faith and tempts you to give up God’s ways, have you ever asked (or heard someone else ask), “Why is God doing this?” Wright said, “James grounds his teaching in what is true about God himself, God the generous giver.” ** What kind of God do you believe in? If there is a God at all, would he call you to a new, better life and then try to tug you away from it?
- We’d like to think all our inner wishes are pure and noble, but James didn’t flatter humans. Like Jesus (cf. [Mark 7:20-23](#)) and Paul (cf. [Galatians 5:13-21](#)), James said if our natural impulses run unchecked, the results can be ugly, even ruinous. James wanted his readers to trust “that grace of God which alone can make and keep us clean, and which is available to all.” *** How can you trust God’s grace, rather than your wishes or feelings, during your screen time as in all other times?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the good gifts you pour into my life, into our world. Help me clearly distinguish your good gifts from the hurtful things that try to draw me away from you. Amen.

* Wright, N. T., *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 8). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

** Wright, N. T., *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 9). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

*** William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters of James and Peter* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 53.

What if we only used tech to “bless people who harass you”?

FRIDAY 1.13.23 Romans 12:1-2, 9-10, 14-18

In Romans 12, “This world” [verse 2] is literally ‘this age.’ The ‘renewing of your mind,’ then, includes thinking as citizens of the coming new world.” * One key Greco-Roman idea sounded like a lot of what we hear online today. “The Greeks knew what greatness is, and for them, greatness did not involve humility. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre noted that humility was not considered a virtue.” * Paul’s ideas were clearly counter-cultural in Roman times, and still are in many parts of today’s tech world.

- Gentile and Hebrew Christians in Rome clearly found themselves polarized at times, frustrated by or angry at each other. What would it have taken for them to be able to regularly “bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them”? Is that a serious possibility for us, in our polarized, technological times? In what ways did that specific counsel reflect the spiritual reality behind “love should be shown without pretending” (verse 9)?
- Paul, transformed by following Jesus, also told Roman Christians: “Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions.” We trust God to finally end evil, so he wrote, “Don’t be defeated by evil but defeat evil with good” (Romans 12:17, 21). CAN good defeat evil, or is that just naïve, idealistic talk? When you have paid back hurt for hurt or wrong for wrong, on social media or elsewhere, how did that change you? Did it make the situation better or worse?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, even on the cross, you prayed for the very soldiers carrying out your unfair execution. Grow in me an ever-increasing amount of your spirit as I relate to not only friends, but acquaintances and even enemies. Amen.

* NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook (Kindle Locations 256236-256237). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

* Ortberg, John, *Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, chapter 6.

Being “partners in the heavenly calling” is life-giving

SATURDAY 1.14.23 Hebrews 3:1-6, 2 Peter 1:4-8

Hebrews 3 followed 2 chapters in which the letter set out Jesus' superiority to every other way God had spoken to the human family. The point in today's reading was, “If Jesus is so great—the solution to the human problem—then we must reflect in greater depth on who he is and what he has done.” * In all areas of our life (including our use of technology), our calling is to be as much like Jesus as we can be. Peter also spoke to his readers about the call to “share the divine nature.” That's not an abstract, filmy notion—it's meant to be a reality every day, as we go about all our activities. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis observed that “the Present is the point at which time touches eternity.” ** The past is gone, and we can no longer alter it; the future is unknown, and one moment can shatter our illusions of controlling it. “Today” (plain old “ordinary” today) is the day to partner our energy and effort with God's power to transform our inner being and live out the qualities God desires for us.

- Peter said we must “make every effort” to build these positive traits into our life. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Peter is urging his readers to....become more fully human, he says, by building one aspect of Christian character on top of another: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, piety, family affection, and finally love. All these take thought; all these take effort. They don't happen by accident.” ** Does the kind of life portrayed in today's readings appeal to you, or not? What choices are you making, particularly in your use of technology, to allow God's power to build a noble, fruitful character in you? Think through the reasons for your answer. Prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify one or two of the areas where you most need to grow in expressing love and generosity toward others, on social media or elsewhere.

Prayer: Lord God, guide me to the choices and activities I need to bear the kind of fruit in my life for which you have “planted” me. Amen.

* Kenneth Schenk, study note on Hebrews 3:1 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 437 NT. **

Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters: Annotated Edition* (Kindle Locations 1101-1102). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition. **

N. T. Wright, *Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John and Judah*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 104.