

Training Session 19 - Practical Necessities: Technology: Improvement or Impediment?

Objective

Equip you to leverage technology to improve your ability to love God and people

Key Scriptures

Genesis 1:28; Matthew 6:22-23; Mark 12:30-31; Psalm 20:7

Technology: improvement or Impediment?

We're about to get super practical as we begin a series focusing on the "practical necessities" of following Jesus. In the modern world, technology is ubiquitous. Virtually everything we do throughout the day is influenced in some way by technology. As a result, we would be foolish *not* to spend a few weeks developing some guiding principles for this critical area of our lives

The role of technology struck me when I was eating lunch at Chick-Fil-A recently and looked over at four college students, all of whom were on their phones. They chose to eat out, with friends, but rather than enjoying being liked (and even loved) by their real friends, they scrolled with their index finger, hoping to be liked by Facebook friends. Insta-love (even finsta-love) seemed far more gratifying than real love, so they scrolled away. And it isn't just college students. All of us have seen (or have been) the family with every family member doing their own thing on their own device. Together, but alone, and this is our life. Without question, technology can function as an impediment to real relationships and real community.

On the other hand, all of us could also testify of the many ways our lives have been improved by technology. Personally, one of my favorite ways to pray is to walk and let God speak to me through His Word—on my phone! Could I do this with my hard copy Bible? Maybe, but it sure would be a whole lot more difficult and I'd probably look a little weird as I cruised through my neighborhood walking and trying to read my big-honkin' Bible. Undeniably, technology has improved all of our lives in countless ways.

Here's the point: technology improves or impedes all of our lives. It is a powerful tool designed to accelerate or decelerate the momentum of our lives, which is why this training session follows the training we did on BLESS rhythms. BLESS rhythms are designed to create habits of the heart so that our instincts are oriented around loving God and loving people. Why? Because Iris Murdoch, the moral philosopher from Oxford, is right when he states what all know to be true: "at the crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over." We're all faced with thousands of choices every day, and the goal is to develop Christ-like instincts that help us love God and love people so that when the crucial moments of choice arrive, *the* fundamental upstream choice to seek first Christ and His kingdom is already made. While we may not cite chapter and verse of the Bible when faced with the daily barrage of decisions throughout the day, our hope is for His way, His truth, and His life to be increasingly reflected in the instincts of our lives that shape the choices we make.

Because technology is integral in improving or impeding this process of forming our instincts, we're going to spend two weeks focusing on digital mentoring. In our training session today,

we'll consider the Biblical purpose and the Biblical pitfalls of technology and close by offering some practical guidelines for putting technology in its place.

Purposes (Biblically) of Technology

Improve Our Love for God & People

We covered this extensively during the BLESS rhythms training session, but the point of the Bible (and our lives) is to love God and love people (Mark 12:30-31). Loving God and loving people leads to a life lived for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). It's a big life and a beautiful life and it's the one we're after. Technology, then, helps us win if it fuels the fire of our love for God and people and it helps us lose if the opposite is true. That's the first Biblical purpose of technology: to fuel our love for God and people.

I'm watching this play out with all of my children right now. My daughter, who is in 6th grade, desperately wants a phone. Request denied. Repeatedly. I'm not even considering approving her request. Quickly, she realized continuing to ask for a phone was like asking for a plane ticket to Mars--it's just not happening! Wisely, she chose another tactic, decreasing her ask to an iPod Touch, paid for with "her" money. All the usual arguments surfaced, "I'm the only one in my class without a device. It will help me with my homework. I'll be safer. It will help us stay in touch so you can *safely* pick me up after school." On and on she went.

I tried my best to respectfully listen as my daughter, in lawyerly fashion, argued her case. Her presentation was, honestly, impressive. Cogent. Well-reasoned. She anticipated our hesitations and did her best to dismantle them. After listening, I said, "Here's the deal. The point of the iPod Touch you so desperately want is to help you love God and love people. Period. So we'll strike a deal with you. Over the next few months, we're going to evaluate your love for God and people. Practically, here is what we think loving God and people looks like for you right now. God has called you to be a child of His who loves Him passionately, a daughter of ours who serves and encourages, and a student at school who gives it all you have with attitude and effort. Loving God and people for you, right now, will be demonstrated by your attitude and effort in school, in church, and around the home. If you demonstrate to us that you have the maturity, the wisdom, and the courage to love God and people, then you may purchase an iPod Touch to improve what you are already doing. If you do not, then, right now, an iPod Touch will hurt your ability to love God and people. So the courage and wisdom of your choices in the next few months will tell us when you're ready, which could be as soon as a few months from now or much longer. It's up to the choices you make."

Improve Our Work

When we say "technology" in the modern world, we tend to mean computers, the internet, and electronic devices. Yet, we need to back up. Way up. To the beginning of creation in the Garden of Eden. In the beginning of human history, we see the call to create and use technology in Genesis 1:28. God said, "Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule." Theologians call this the cultural mandate, meaning that God gave us a mandate to build and work in a way that would establish a flourishing culture. We were (and are) to subdue and rule the earth, meaning to establish order and bring form and function to God's created world. As image bearers, God

called us to work, just as he did, **before** sin ever entered the world through Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

“Yes,” you object, “but I don’t see any cell phones in Genesis. Where does technology come into play?” The word technology comes from the Greek word *tecton*, which we translate as carpenter. Originally, a carpenter was someone who was an artisan or craftsman who made useful things. Not surprisingly, Jesus was a carpenter; surprisingly, He was in the tech industry, building useful things for His friends and neighbors. We see, therefore, that a Biblical definition of technology is far broader than our modern usage of the word, encompassing everything from baking bread to building bridges. **The purpose of technology, then, consists of building useful things (physical and metaphysical) that improve our ability to fulfill God’s call to work and establish a flourishing culture.**¹

Improve The Lamp of Our Body

Modern technology involves the eyes. We stare at screens an awful lot, and what we stare at has an awfully big impact on our lives, to be sure. “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (Matthew 6:22-23). This verse makes you rethink screen time, doesn’t it?

The things we’re staring at the on computer screen have the power to fill our entire body with light or darkness, and we all know it’s true. Stare at pornography for 5 minutes and you’re flooded with guilt and shame. Try as we might to hit delete in our brains, we can’t. The images are burned into our memory, and, as we know, all sorts of deviant behavior follows. Conversely, fix your eyes on a Bible verse for 5 minutes; gaze upon a sunrise coming up through the oak trees on a crisp morning; stare at a toddler belly laughing as her mom pushes her on a swing; spend time as a family watching a movie that inspires and creates great questions about the world. Light, hope, and joy surface as you fix your eyes on all these things. Without question, the eye is the lamp of the body. If the lamp of our body is fueled with technological sources of light and hope and beauty and truth, then light and hope and beauty and truth will flow out of hearts. Or darkness will. Which will it be?

Pitfalls (Biblically) of Technology

The pitfalls of technology, especially in its modern evolution, are many. We’ll explore the following three pitfalls related to our modern focus on electronic technology:

When Technology Impedes Dependence on God

Make no mistake. Technology can improve our dependence on God. From prayer walks, to piping in worship in your car or house, to podcasts, to online commentaries, to the spread of the gospel throughout the world in unprecedented fashion, modern technology provides endless ways of establishing a flourishing culture that is deepening its dependence on God. Unfortunately, however, the opposite is also true; we can all attest to a myriad of ways our technology has destroyed our dependence on God.

For example, what is the one thing you never, ever, go without: your phone! We are, literally, attached at the hip to these devices. Even when we are doing something involving water, we put

our phones in a dry carry case of some sort because we can't dare go without our phone. We're dependent on it, at all times.

It's the first thing we see in the morning; it's the last thing we see at night. We're never more than a few feet away from our phone, even when we're in the shower. As soon as we buckle up our seat belt, we're reaching for our phone. If we stop at a stoplight, we're reaching for our phone. If we're standing in line at the grocery store, we're reaching for our phone. Why? We don't need to say it (most of us won't admit it), but our lives scream it: we're dependent on our iPhone, not God!

A professor at San Diego State and author of *IGen and Generation Me* described this well when talking about her students, "Nearly all slept with their phone, putting it under their pillow, on the mattress, or at the very least within arm's reach of the bed. They checked social media right before they went to sleep, and reached for their phone as soon as they woke up in the morning...If they woke in the middle of the night, they often ended up looking at their phone. Some used the language of addiction. 'I know I shouldn't, but I just can't help it,' one said about looking at her phone while in bed. Others saw their phone as an extension of their body—or even like a lover: "Having my phone closer to me while I'm sleeping is a comfort."² Having our phone nearby comforts us....because we're dependent on our phone, not God.

Blaise Pascal, a philosopher, theologian, and mathematician who invented the calculator, saw this problem manifesting long before the modern era when he wrote, "The chief problem with man is that he is not able to sit in a room and be alone." He lived in the 1600s; how much more so in the 21st century. We're never alone and we're afraid to be alone, so we nervously finger our phones, just to make sure our toddler blankie is close for comfort. Silence, solitude, and being still (and alone) in the presence of God have always been the way for the people of God to grow in relationship with God, but these well-trodden paths are vanishing in the modern, media-saturated world. It's not that we don't have time to be alone with God to hear his voice and pray; it's that we don't make time to be alone with God to hear his voice and pray. As John Piper says, "One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time."³

We have to be honest with one another and admit our addiction (or dependency) on technology. We must heed the warning of the Psalmist (slightly altered by me), "*Some trust in iPhones, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God*" (*Psalm 20:7*).⁴ We'll discuss practical guidelines for doing so shortly, but for now let's begin with our need for repentance (or turning) from our out-of-control dependence on technology.

When Technology Impedes Real Community by Replacing it with Virtual Community

Virtual community and real community are two different things. Virtual community can enhance real, life-one-life community, but it can't replace it. When it does, we lose. True, technology can enhance God's call to love one another in physical, tangible ways.⁵ Consider, for example, an email thread from a group of friends to organize meals for a friend who has a baby. In this instance, technology enhances real community by moving us from the screen into the script of real life with the very real changes, challenges, and cherished moments of a newborn.

On the other hand, many of us as parents lament our children sitting in front of a screen all day. Instead of engaging with real people, our children choose virtual people. Snapchat replaces real chat with the false notion that Snapstreaks are somehow building enduring friendships. Enduring friends are ones who multiply your joy on the mountaintop and share your sorrow in the valley, but it is hard to share the sorrow of the valley when valleys are virtually (pun intended) non-existent in our 280 character world.

We live in a world of Fortnite friendships. Even when played with a friend physically present, Fortnite still falls far short of friendships forged in a treehouse and the epic battles that follow with dirt between your toes. With trepidation, we see the truth of a teenager quoted in the *Atlantic*, “I think we like our phones more than we like actual people.”⁶

Survey after survey confirms our fears for our children living in a generation of with so many choosing virtual community over real community. Jean M. Twenge, a psychologist who has studied trends for over 25 years, warns, “*The results could not be clearer: Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on non-screen activities are more likely to be happy. There’s not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all non-screen activities are linked to more happiness.*” Think about the sweeping boldness and clarity of this finding—there is not a single exception! Not a single one. If we want our kids to be happy, then we will seriously limit their screen time. Recent studies show teens spend 9 hours a day enjoying media for crying out loud!⁷ Begging us, pleading with us, Twenge counsels us, “*If you were going to give advice for a happy adolescence based on this survey, it would be straightforward: Put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen.*”

As parents, no doubt, we cringe when our children, surrounded by toys and possibilities, whine “I’m bored.” Boredom, as we know, leads to all sorts of problems, not least of which is pornography. “*Nearly half of teenagers who use porn, according to Barna’s research, say they do so out of boredom.*”⁸ If you have a child struggling with porn, then what they are screaming is, “Mom and Dad, my life feels empty. I’m lacking purpose. I’m bored.” Sure, sure, hormones factor in as kids go through middle school and high school, but let’s be honest, it isn’t just hormone-raging middle school kids struggling with porn. It’s adults too. Porn sites have more regular traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined *each month*. Porn is a 97 billion dollar industry. The porn industry makes more money than Major League Baseball, the NFL and the NBA combined.⁹ Middle schoolers and high schoolers aren’t forking over their lunch money to create that type of profit—adults are bored and empty and looking to porn to fill the hole.¹⁰

The problem, we know, isn’t just that our kids are hooked on phones. We are too! If we want to be happy, then we need to get off our phones! Adults spend, on average, 9 hours and 22 minutes a day in front of screens.¹¹ “Yes, but so much of that is for work,” we quickly say in defense. Yet, studies show 8 of the 9 hours were for personal use.¹² “Yes, but you don’t know my job,” we say emphatically. The study, however, included a wide range of socioeconomic fields and types of jobs. Yet, the most troubling finding is undoubtedly this: “Perhaps even more surprising is that 78 percent of parents surveyed believe they are good role models for how to use digital technology.”¹³ We’re the frog in the kettle, enchanted by the technological luxuries of the kettle,

getting cooked! Something other than Christ has taken center stage in our lives, and our first (and best) step is repentance; the second always follows: faith in Christ!

Practical Guidelines for Technology and The Home

How do we then put tech in its proper place in all of our lives so that it is improving, not impeding, our love for God and people expressed in our daily lives? Here are some suggestions. These are not Biblical commandments, which means these are guilt-free. If you have a system that is rocking and rolling for you, then praise God. If not, then here are some things that might help:

When should I allow my child to have a phone? Never. OK, I'm kidding, somewhat. My children are almost 13, almost 12, and almost certainly not ready to have a phone. Yes, they moan and groan, "Dad, I'm the only one in my entire class that doesn't have a phone." I usually respond, "Great. You're unique. Dr. Seuss was right, 'Why fit in when you were born to stand out.'" It says something that Bill Gates, the man, the myth, the legend behind the entire tech industry, didn't allow his own children to have a phone until age 14.

Several friends I respect who are trying to help their children flourish in the middle school years as followers of Jesus chose to give their children flip phones. "Mom and Dad, this is social suicide," responded one child. Maybe, but social suicide is so much better than the alternative. "Research has found that an eighth-grader's risk for depression [jumps 27 percent](#) when he or she frequently uses social media. Kids who use their phones for at least three hours a day are much more likely to be suicidal. And recent research has found the teen suicide rate in the U.S. [now eclipses](#) the homicide rate, with smartphones as the driving force."¹⁴ Bullying, sexual exploitation, pornography, addiction, anxiety, loss of relational skills, abysmal communication skills--all these wonders and more are available for just 49 dollars a month with unlimited data, text, and talk plan. And we consider this a bargain?

Yes, but what age should I allow my child to have a phone? There is no magical age, but here is a guideline: ***you're child is ready for a phone when you are ready to monitor it AND when your child is wise enough and courageous enough to use the phone to love God and people.*** In other words, two people--you and your child--need to be mature enough, wise enough, and courageous enough to evaluate whether or not the phone is helping your child fulfill God's purpose for their life. So let's begin with you. First, as a parent, you must be ready and able to monitor the phone entrusted to your child to ensure that it will help them love God and people, which we will look at next week. Would you ever allow your eleven year old child to use a chainsaw without oversight? Yet, we give them something so much more powerful and so much more dangerous, often without any oversight at all. "Today we are handing our children power tools and then acting shocked when they cut off their hands," laments author Tim Challies.¹⁵ Second, understanding that each child matures differently, you must assess the level of wisdom and courage in your child to determine whether a phone will improve or impede their ability to love God and people. R.J. Palacio, in her wonderful novel *Wonder*, muses, "It's funny how there's a word like overprotective to describe some parents, but no word that means the opposite. What word do you use to describe parents who don't protect enough? Underprotective? Neglectful? Self-involved? Lame? All of the above."¹⁶

Similarly, pastor and author Andy Stanley encourages parents to begin with the end in mind. He told his children that they would have more restrictions than their friends early on (when they weren't equipped to handle the freedom) and more freedom later on (when they are equipped to handle it). We've done this with our children. We sat them down and told them our goal, which is for them to have a no restrictions whatsoever by at least their senior year in high school. They will have a phone with no restrictions, no curfew, and complete freedom. The idea is to decrease their restrictions and increase their freedoms as we see them maturing emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally. Also, we would rather work through the bumps and bruises of complete freedom while still living in our house than doing so either their first year in college or when they are living outside of our home. In Scripture God says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). That's the idea-- more training early on, then less training later on. No child's trajectory is always up and to the right, but hopefully the generally trajectory is set and surrounded by the sovereignty and grace of God.

More restrictions, more monitoring, and more guidance during the tween and teen years makes sense from a scientific and physiological perspective as well. Here's why. The prefrontal cortex of the brain is half-developed in girls at 11 and boys at 14. This is significant because the prefrontal cortex controls things such as decision making, focus, learning, judgment, goal-oriented thinking, and impulses. Ergo, the emotional response mechanisms of tweens and teens develop faster than their judgment and logic.¹⁷ Then throw raging hormones into the mix and teens don't have a prayer of making the best decisions for themselves. Their bodies, minds, and hearts are screaming, "Mom and Dad, help!" Yet, our response is often to throw a phone at them to make them happy and to make our life easier.

Now it makes a little more sense. Many an exasperated parent has thought (or screamed), "What were you thinking?" Your tween or teen acted impulsively, seemingly without thinking. In reality, they were thinking, but with a brain long on emotion and short on the things that would enable a normal adult to make solid, rational decisions. The solution, therefore, is more monitoring and guidance while the brain is developing and more freedom once it is fully developed.

How do I protect my home? We've developed a practical application to help you protect, monitor, and filter your technological devices that can be found here..... While the primary application is for parents, we would encourage all of you to put these protections on your electronic devices both as a measure of accountability and as a way of safeguarding your devices for others (minors) to use.

What are some commitments I (or my family) can make to help with technology?

Andy Crouch has written an excellent book on this topic entitled *The Tech-Wise Family*.¹⁹ We'll discuss these commitments and others in an upcoming training session.

How do I (or members of my family) gain freedom over pornography?

Much can (and has) been written on this subject. The most helpful thing I've encountered is John Piper's brief article entitled "ANTHEM: Strategies for Fighting Lust"²⁰. We will not discuss this in this lesson, but we will discuss this in a future training session. The bottom line,

however, is community. You won't beat it alone. If you are walking in the darkness of pornography, you absolutely must have the courage to bring it into the light of community. Start with your mentoring group. Our groups must be safe places to share our hurts, habits, and hang-ups that are keeping us from being who God created us to be. Bring it into the light, because "*if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*" Purifies us from all sin. Including sexual sin. Bring it into the light and watch the healing begin!

Your mentor can help you determine what walking in the light will look like. It may be going through something like the Conquer Series²¹ together or joining an SAA group (Sex Addicts Anonymous). There are many paths to freedom, but all of them involve Jesus and community. Don't believe the lie that you can't share it with anyone and that you don't believe you can change. Death had no hold over Jesus and pornography certainly doesn't either. He can, and He will, set you free, but you've got to want freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom!" (2 Cor. 3:17). If you want freedom, then take the first step. Bring it into the light.

Discussion Questions

1. Based on the training session, assess your relationship with technology. What are you doing well? What do you need to change?
2. Is technology improving or impeding your love for God and for people? How?
3. Read Matthew 6:22-23. Describe how you are doing with the eyes as the lamp of your body in relationship to technology? When was the last time you looked at pornography and how regular is it?
4. Read Psalm 20:7. What are some ways in which you are overly dependent on technology (not God) and how is that manifested in your life?
5. Discuss how technology is impeding or improving your experience of community.
6. If appropriate, discuss how you are handling technology with those in your home?

Endnotes

1. Early Biblical examples of technology can be seen with harp (Gen. 4:21 and forging "tools out of bronze and iron" (Gen. 4:22); God called Noah to build an ark (Gen. 6); Abraham and Isaac dug wells (Gen. 21). To Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft" (Ex. 31:3)
2. Jean M. Twenge, Sept. 2017, The Atlantic "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

3. <https://twitter.com/johnpiper/status/5027319857?lang=en>
4. Most translations say some trust in “horses and chariots,” not technology. A chariot, however, as we’ve seen is a technological advancement, so it is certainly within the meaning of the text to add a modern technological advancement—the iphone.
5. God’s call to love one another is found all through Scripture. See, for example, John 13:34; John 15:17; Romans 12:10; Romans 12:16; Galatians 6:2.
6. Jean M. Twenge, Sept. 2017, The Atlantic “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”
7. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/silicon-valley-reconsiders-the-iphone-era-it-created-1515493801>
8. Andy Crouch, *Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Ada, Michigan: BakerBooks, 2017), 171-172.
9. https://medium.com/@Strange_bt_True/how-big-is-the-porn-industry-fbc1ac78091b
10. <https://fightthenewdrug.org/10-porn-stats-that-will-blow-your-mind/>
11. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/most-adults-spend-more-time-on-their-digital-devices-than-they-think/>
12. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/most-adults-spend-more-time-on-their-digital-devices-than-they-think/>
13. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/most-adults-spend-more-time-on-their-digital-devices-than-they-think/>
14. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/303657>
15. <https://www.challies.com/articles/parenting-well-in-a-digital-world/>
16. RJ Palacio, *Wonder* (Lincoln, NE: Wonder Club Press), 192.
17. See <http://time.com/4929170/inside-teen-teenage-brain/>. See also <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124119468>
18. Brian Salter is pastor of Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church. This contract, and some of the thoughts in this training session, are from Brian. Thank you!
19. Andy Crouch, *Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Ada, Michigan: BakerBooks, 2017).
20. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/anthem-strategies-for-fighting-lust>
21. <https://conquerseries.com/>