

Training Session 20 - Practical Necessities: Tech Commitments

Objective

Help you make practical technology commitments to improve your ability to love God and people

Key Scriptures

Galatians 6:1-6

This week, we're continuing in our series of "Practical Necessities." Last week we looked at the theology of technology; this week we're focusing on applying this theology in our lives when it comes to modern electronic technology. In particular, we'll highlight and interact with ten commitments suggested by Andy Crouch in his helpful book entitled *The Tech-Wise Family*, which is well worth your time whether you are single, married, or married with kids. Andy Crouch states, "*As our children leave high school, we realize how much of the joy that we've experienced along the way, and know today, has come from the radical choices and commitments we made to keep technology in its proper place.*"¹ The Phelan family is years away from our children leaving high school, yet what seems abundantly clear to me is that the decisions we make regarding modern technology will radically impact the degree of joy, wisdom, courage, and overall Christ-centeredness of each member of our family (yours truly included).

The Crouch family made 10 commitments regarding modern technology and we're going to interact with these 10 commitments. Why? Because a wise friend of mine once told me, "Stephen, you need to constantly surround yourself with people who have made more courageous decisions than you have. Your courage will follow their courage." Andy Crouch is a person who has made more courageous decisions than anyone else I know when it comes to modern technology, with the exception of the Amish, and I don't have any Amish friends, nor do I see many of us filling out the application for membership in the Amish community. So, let's spend some time making the theology of technology practical by learning and interacting with the Crouch and Phelan family.

1st Tech Commitment

- *We develop wisdom and courage together as a family.*

Andy's first commitment centers around our purpose as humans, which we covered last week in our training session on the role of technology in improving our ability to love God and people. A wise person is one who knows their purpose (of loving God and loving people) and a courageous person is one who lives into it on a daily basis, despite all the setbacks. The families we grow up in, both our biological and church family, are the central shaping influence that enables us to live out God's purposes for our lives by forming "us into persons who have acquired *wisdom and courage.*"²

2nd Tech Commitment

- ***We want to create more than we consume. So we fill the center of our home with things that reward skill and active engagement.***

The center of the Phelan home is a combination of the kitchen, family room, and the screened porch. Meals are created here, stories are shared, books are read, movies are watched, and board games are played, often with a fire in the background. Modern technology is most definitely present. We have a TV over our fireplace and enjoy it in limited doses on the weekends. Yet, with increasing conviction, we're trying to have crafts, games, cards, books, balls, and things that help form us as humans who love God and people. Admittedly, this is a constant battle with our kids because they would, seemingly, watch screens or play Fortnite unceasingly if we allowed them to, but we know there is something far more valuable to pursue together as a family than screens, so we try to make room for the things that fire the imagination and fuel relationship.

If you are a parent, then you have heard your kids whine, "I'm bored." Then things escalate when there are brothers and sisters and screaming babies involved. Sometimes, as a parent, you feel like you need a screen for your kids to save your sanity. The easy (and deadly) fix is to turn on the TV or shove a screen in their direction to quell the boredom. Crouch argues that what we are doing is desensitizing our children to the wonders and brilliance of the created world, like cardinals and shooting stars, because the rare bird or periodic shooting star seems boring compared to the sizzle and pop of things constantly exploding in brilliance on the screen.

Remove the wonder of the screen, and the wonder of life, sadly, vanishes for (most) kids raised in the screen-addicted generation of today. Painfully, like fingernails scraping down a chalkboard, parents hear our children whine, "I'm borrrrrrrred." The solution, so we think, is to entertain them, but "the more you entertain children, the more bored they will get."³ The design of modern technology is to make life easier, Crouch argues, but the "easy everywhere" life has created a generation of boredom that is a "perfectly modern condition."⁴ In an agricultural world where the day was spent working the land, preparing meals, working hard, and going to bed when the sun went down, boredom didn't exist because there was no time for boredom. Not so in our world of easy everywhere.

In response, we have wise and courageous friends who have developed things like a "Bored Jar." Every time a child says I am bored, they have the opportunity to choose something creative to do from the jar that could be really fun (or not so fun)--baking cookies, playing a board game, sweeping the floor, etc. More thinking like this is needed to help create entrepreneurial, innovative children who are taking the initiative to join God as what J.R.R. Tolkien called "sub-creators" with their play-dough, slime, legos, blocks, sticks, treehouses, and so much more.

3rd Tech Commitment

- ***We are designed for a rhythm of work and rest. So one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year, we turn off our devices and worship, feast, play and rest together.***

In our training on establishing BLESS rhythms for life, we spent a significant amount of time thinking through how to structure our time, particularly establishing a Sabbath rhythm to our

week that creates a healthy rhythm of work and rest. Technology, as we saw last week, is designed to improve our work, and our rest, but in order to do so, Crouch suggests resting from modern technology on a daily, weekly, and annual basis. He suggests resting from screens one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year. Here is how this is working out in our home:

One Hour a Day

For each of us, finding some period of time detached from the beckon call of emails and calls and social media and the white noise of the phone is central for flourishing as humans. Yet it is challenging, to say the least, in the world we inhabit. Currently, as a dad with four young kids at home, when I come home from work, I want to be mentally, physically, and spiritually present (and not on the phone), which requires intentionality. My mentor Dick Kaufmann recommended picking a particular place on your street or in your neighborhood where you stop your car on the way home from work and offer up all the things that you are carrying with you from the day to the Lord. Without fail, there are things left undone, and faith requires offering these unto the Lord.

When I reach this place in our neighborhood, I finish all my phone calls and put the phone away. Often times this requires me pulling over for extended periods of time to wrap up the conversation, but it is far better than squashing the excitement of a three year old and other kids running and screaming, “Dad’s home!” You can see the excitement drain from their bodies as they are slammed by the message, “Work, again, is more important than me.” Wisdom will be required in applying this principle of daily resting from technology depending on age and stage. In the current age and stage of our family, I try to make the first hour I am home completely free from the phone. I place it in a basket and don’t look at it until after dinner, ideally after the kids are in bed.

One Day a Week

One day a week means enacting the principle of the Sabbath to technology. Remember, the Sabbath is a day set apart. A day that looks different. Without question, a day away from screens and modern technology will look drastically different for most of us. Andy Crouch recommends turning the phone off altogether. Personally, my phone remains on during my Sabbath and I check the text messages usually once during the middle of the day in the event of a family emergency. I do not, however, respond to work related texts or emails, nor do I even check them until Sunday evening. My Sabbath is from sundown Saturday night until sundown Sunday night.

I must say being unplugged from my phone and all technological devices one day a week is one of the more restorative things I do during the week. We don’t turn our TV on, at all, on Sundays. I know this sounds blasphemous to NFL fans, but trust me, we get our fill of college football on Saturdays (yes, Saturday night too, so technically we don’t have 24 hours away from our devices).

One Week a Year

While I have gone a week without checking email for vacation purposes, I have not yet ventured into the realm of one week without any modern technology. My guess is that most of us, if not all of us, will immediately bristle and dismiss Andy Crouch’s practice of not ever checking (or

responding to) email during vacation. He writes, *“There are very few better gifts we could give ourselves and our families than an entire week--at the very minimum--free of devices....On the Friday before...vacation, I clean out my email inbox, set up a filter that will send every single message straight to an archive, and activate a “vacation message” with the stark subject line, “Unfortunately I will never read your email.” And it is gloriously true...Part of true rest is not having work accumulate relentlessly while you are resting! The days that follow are full--full of rest rather than work. We fill them with biking and hiking and grilling and reading and napping. Thanks to this annual Sabbath, we have memories of life together at every stage of our children’s lives, memories that we will remember longer than anything anyone might email me about during those two weeks. When I return after two weeks and deactivate the filter, my empty inbox quickly begins to fill again. But I have had two weeks of rest. Somehow the work ahead, and the years ahead, seems more like gift and less like toil than it did before my digital Sabbath.”*⁵

I can feel you dismissing Andy’s digital Sabbath as impractical or something that he can do because of his job but isn’t “life in the real world.” I hear you and I’ve said that all my life too! Maybe, just maybe, he is walking with wisdom and courage in a way that we aren’t. “Walk with the wise, and you will become wise; a companion of fools suffers harms” (Proverbs 13:20). Maybe, in the name of progress, we’re walking with fools; maybe, just maybe, we should step out in faith and grow in wisdom and courage.

4th Tech Commitment

- ***We wake up before our devices do, and they “go to bed” before we do.***

Waking Up Before Our Devices Do

Let’s begin where we all begin: when the alarm clock goes off. Think about it. For many throughout the ages, a rooster woke them up. We live in a different world. Our phones wake us up, and the first thing we see is the text or email that is up on the screen. Here’s the thing: try as you might, you can’t get that text out of your mind. Even if you choose not respond, it’s still rattling around in there. So is all the worry associated with it. Sure, not all texts and emails send your mind spinning. Many are uplifting. Yet, that misses the point. What if we begin to live differently? Rather than being so driven by what everyone else thinks, we want to be driven by and driven to one voice, the voice of love, the voice of Abba, Father. It starts with what wakes us up and what we see and hear right out of the gates.

I, like all of you, have slept with my phone at my bedside table and used it as my alarm clock. Not anymore. The Phelans are going old school. Alarm clocks seemed to work just fine for us pre-cell phone, so back in time we go. “Yes, but what if there is an emergency during the night with a family member who needs me?” If you feel like you need to be accessible to family members during the night, crank the volume on your ringer and put it in a nearby room or somewhere you will hear it.

Imagine, for a moment, starting your day differently. The alarm clock goes off. You stretch. Then you hear God speak. Maybe you get a little call and response going like Bradford and I do. We almost always start with Psalm 118:24, “This is the day the Lord has made (which I say because she isn’t a morning person).” After a brief pause, she groggily mumbles, “let us rejoice

and be glad in it,” which she barely finishes before falling back asleep. By the way, if you’re single, you have the privilege of saying both parts!

As your feet hit the floor, you head to the kitchen and soon and very soon the fragrance of the aroma of roasted coffee beans wafts through the air (coffee is not my thing, but apparently 99.9% of the world enjoy starting their day with a cup of coffee). Birds are chirping and you hear them (because you’re not staring at your screen). The sun’s coming up (or maybe the stars are out if you’re an early riser), and you’re soaking in the warmth and light of the auburn sunrise, painted by the Master himself.

With coffee in hand, you mozy over to your “God spot,” the place where you meet with your Father. It’s a special place, even a sacred one, if you will let it be. You crack open the book that isn’t just a book. It’s so much more, and you know it. It’s alive because He’s alive and He’s breathing life and hope and meaning and purpose into you through these pages. You hear his voice. You feel His presence, and His presence is bringing joy and power to face all that is in front of you. Maybe you journal. Maybe you have music on, but one thing is certain, you’ve been with the King; you’ve been with your Father; you’ve been with the Lover of your Soul. Now, you’re ready. Lookout, because here I come, Keala Settle sings in the Greatest Showman, but how much more so for us, clothed in Christ, ready to love and serve and tear a little corner of darkness off of the world (as Bono would say). Lookout!

All this beauty, while our cell phones are still asleep. Unless, maybe, you’re using your cell phone to help you connect with God. Some of you may be like me, and your “God spot” involves a prayer walk. If so, a tremendous amount of discipline is necessary to avoid incoming texts and emails. The goal, remember, is to recalibrate our heart, daily, to the ever-fresh and always dependable mercy of God that is new every morning (Lamentations 3:23) and sets us on His course of love and mercy.

Going to Bed Before Our Devices Do

Picture a water slide. You are at the very top, flying down through all the twists and turns of the water slide, then you land in the pool at the bottom of the slide. For most of us, our devices are the slide. We’re on them all day and all night, then we “slide” into bed (or the pool, if you’re following the analogy), surprised that we can’t seem to get to sleep. Our children may need a routine at night to help them fall asleep (bath time, reading books, lights out), but not us! Wrong! What most of us don’t realize is that our brains get one dopamine hit after the next when we are liked on a post or receive another comment. Rather than gently downshifting as we read a book, pray, or meditate on a Scripture verse, our brains continue to rev up and, not surprisingly, sleep eludes us.

Not surprisingly, we’re a sleep-deprived generation. What can we do about it? The first step is removing our devices from our room and placing them in a land far, far away. The Phelans have never had a TV in our bedroom (and never will), mostly because I agree with Andy Crouch that the television is “the single least helpful thing, short of a jackhammer, you could ever put in a place where someone is trying to fall asleep.”⁶ Television programming is designed to grab your attention, not lull you to sleep. Throw on top of that the temptation and titillation of a glowing box and you have a recipe for trouble with a television in the bedroom.

This really isn't about casting judgment on you if you have a television in your bedroom, it's about growing in wisdom and courage so that you can more effectively love God and people. There is no Bible verse that reads, "*He who haveth a television screen in their bedroom is a fool.*" If you are the rare exception whose bedroom television is enabling you to more effectively sleep and love God and people, then by all means keep it. Otherwise, get it out.

While you're at it, get your cell phones out too! This is a new step for my family as well. It isn't helping our transition to bed. No more. It's a new day in our house as well.

5th Tech Commitment

- ***We aim for "no screens before double digits" at school and at home.***

The Crouch family chose not to have any screens for their children before the age of ten, including a television. Crouch writes, "*The truth is that our children, just like us, will spend far too much of their lives tethered to glowing rectangles. We owe them, at the very minimum, early years of real, embodied, difficult, rewarding learning, the kind that screens cannot provide. And that is why a family that cares about developing wisdom and courage will exert every effort to avoid the thin simplicity of screens in the first years of life.*"⁷

The Phelan family took a different approach. We've always had a television and, for the foreseeable future, will continue to have a television. Screen time, for our family, is on weekends only, mostly for sporting events or a family movie, and the kids are allowed one show on Saturday. While family screen time is and has been a source of enjoyment, the kids screen time is admittedly more of a battle. Andy Crouch states, "We most often give our children screens not to make their lives easier but to make *our* lives easier."⁸ Ouch. We're guilty, as charged, at times, just to get a break. Many conversations have been had and will continue to be had over this topic in our family. Maybe a bright line rule like the Crouch family adopted is the way to go, especially given how many of us lament the influence screens, and the cultural content flowing from them, are having on our children. In any case, what seems abundantly clear is kids won't suffer from too little screen time, but they most definitely will suffer from too much.

6th Tech Commitment

- ***We use screens for a purpose, and we use them together, rather than using them aimlessly and alone.***

Andy Crouch identifies two key words when it comes to screen time: purpose and together. First, screens are used for a purpose. As we discussed last week, screens are used to *improve* our ability to love God and love people. Far too often, we scroll through social media or frantically jump on our phone to avoid being alone or feeling bored. Comedian Louis C.K. captured this well on Conan when he went on a rant about why he won't let his kids have a cell phone. "*You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what the phones are taking away, is the ability to just sit there. That's being a person. Because underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there.*"⁹

The audience on Conan, with veiled, nervous laughter, didn't know what to do with humor that hit so close to home. They laughed, uncomfortably, because he was undressing them (and us), exposing our forever empty feeling that manifests in a sense of boredom. To fight it, we binge for an hour on junk feeds or social media, but the emptiness still remains. Rather than feeling refreshed and replenished after an hour on Facebook and Insta, we feel dulled and depleted because we lack purpose. We feel empty and we look to the screen in our pocket to fill the void. It won't. It can't. Only God will and only God can fill the God-shaped hole in all of our hearts.

Think about how a purpose-driven approach to social media works. First, when it comes to using social media, we have a purpose--we use it to improve our ability to love God and love people. We make posts and view posts with grateful love for God and for the people He has placed in our lives. Rather than resenting the good life everyone else seems to be living, we give thanks for the wonderful people God has placed in our lives. Rather than making snarky comments or demonizing those with different political or ideological beliefs, we love those on our feeds by praying for them and encouraging them (Ephesians 4:29).

Yet, when it comes to screens, a purpose-driven approach isn't enough--purpose needs to be married with community. If you or your child struggle with pornography, then bringing others into your screen time is a commitment that can help bring new-found freedom. There should be no such thing as a screen being used by you or a child, alone, in a bedroom. In our house, screens stay on the bottom floor where there are no bedrooms, and screens are only used in the presence of others. Additionally, establishing screen-free times is critical for the overall health and flourishing of your family, especially for children and teen-agers. In the next lesson we will provide technical support on how to accomplish this at a router and account level, as well as recommend monitoring and filtering apps and devices.

7th Tech Commitment

- ***Car time is conversation time.***

The Phelans are (mostly) in sync with the Crouch family on this one. We've never had a DVD player in any of our cars and, if we did, we wouldn't use it. OK, maybe we would for special occasions on really long car trips. On three or four occasions to date, we have brought an iPad on a long car trip and enjoyed watching a movie at some point. Otherwise, we act like humans and talk and play games with one another. Priceless memories are made playing the alphabet license plate game, competitively counting cows on the left or right side of the car, seeing how many trucks you can get to toot their horn, and the like. All these create laughter and conversation and grow our relationship with one another. Individually staring at a screen does not!

But what about music? When we are in the car, the only thing we use our phones for in the car is to find directions and to play music. Otherwise, we are doing life together, sharing about our days and connecting with one another. It's funny, isn't it, how the things we often dread, like doing errands and carpooling kids, provide the *quantity* of moments that are necessary to create *quality* in moments. You never know when quality moments are coming because you never

know what life will throw at you during the day, but one thing is for sure, you will miss sharing these moments if everyone is individually glued to a phone.

The significance of car time, Crouch explains, is because it is one of the only times we have as a family with concentrated time together in close physical proximity with one another, which is the environment necessary for *real* conversation to begin. He draws on insights from psychologist Sherry Turkle, in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, who points out that most conversations take at least seven minutes to begin.¹⁰ In the first seven minutes, we all engage in what we call small talk, with the usual list of suspects (weather, sports, brief updates from our day, etc.). Yet, at the seven minute mark, someone takes a risk, either of silence or to share a feeling or something significant that happened that they want to process. In a fast food world where the dinner table is swallowed up by team practices, homework, and (cringe) TV dinners, the car might just be the only place we have left to capture *real* conversations. Let's don't tweet away this opportunity.

In reflecting on his parenting years and endless to and fro in the car, Andy Crouch writes, "*I can truly say that some of the most treasured and transforming conversations I have had with each of our children came on routine trips—which were, indeed, just as numerous and in some ways tedious as I had expected.*"¹¹ Many of us, like Andy's friend, anticipate missing our kids once they head off to college, but what about the day they get their driver's license? "*I thought I would miss them when they went off to college, but I realized that the bigger loss came sooner, when they could drive themselves wherever they wanted to go.*" Car time, though often mundane, is precious time that affords glorious opportunities for growing in our love for God and each other—treasure it up!

8th Tech Commitment

- ***Spouses have one another's passwords, and parents have total access to children's devices.***

In the Phelan house, we often repeat something our friends once told us, "We have surprises in the Phelan home, not secrets." Spiritually, Bradford and I have become one flesh, two humans joined together as one in the covenant of marriage (Genesis 2:24), and as a result, we share all passwords to promote transparency and greater oneness. Correspondingly, our children understand that we will monitor all their devices and accounts to help protect them and to provide a necessary form of accountability (Galatians 6:1-5; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Our children do not have phones yet, but when they do, there will be no place for entitled possession, "Dad, that's *my* phone. Don't look at that." I will respond, "No, it's God's phone, and we're helping you use it for His purposes by providing accountability." The same holds true for our phones as adults. Bradford (not the kids) has total access to my electronic devices and vice-versa. Finally, in next week's training session, we'll look at practical tools for how to monitor, protect, and provide accountability.

9th Tech Commitment

- ***We learn to sing together, rather than letting recorded and amplified music take over our lives and worship.***

When it comes to amplified music, the Crouch and the Phelan families are on divergent paths. Sadly, it seems as if God passed over Bradford and I when it comes to musical ability. I was (sadly) cut from the band in 6th grade and our band wasn't even any good! Certain that I was a late musical bloomer, I tried to lead worship when I was in law school, but I was eventually moved from the bongos, to the tambourine, to the egg shaker, and (finally) to my resting place on the overhead projector. For those unfamiliar with the overhead projector, it doesn't make any noise!

While the verdict is still out on our children, no one has yet confused our family with the Von Trapp family on the *Sound of Music*. None of us play instruments. Maybe one of the kids will surprise us, but until then we need some amplified music and we greatly appreciate amplified music! We love worshipping together as a family and we love singing together--we just need a little help!

10th Tech Commitment

- ***We show up in person for the big events of life. We learn how to be human by being fully present at our moments of greatest vulnerability. We hope to die in one another's arms.***

Virtual presence and physical presence aren't the same thing. We know this intuitively. Sure, Facetime is great. Having lived across the country from my family for 13 years, we're extraordinarily thankful for the gift of Facetime and other ways to connect virtually with our family and friends. Yet, as good as it is, it's still not the same thing as physically being present. Like the Crouch family, we show up for the big events in life.

FAMILY SCREEN TIME CONTRACT

1. I understand that as a minor, I am still on my parent/guardians' telephone service provider contract, and as such have an obligation to meet my parent/guardian's expectations of behavior regarding the use of my device and/or data plan.
2. I will be responsible for the monthly payment of my data plan for the duration of the service provider contract to the extent that my parent/guardian expects me to be.
3. I will uphold our family values and represent my family with dignity while using my device for communications and internet use.
4. I will not display any personal information on my social media profiles and/or communications, including full names, dates of birth, locations of home or school, etc.
5. I will not transmit (send or receive) any media (texts, pictures or videos) that violates our family values or any state laws.
6. If I receive any media that violates our family values or any state laws, I will report it immediately to one of the adult signers of this contract.
7. I will agree to the installation and use of any parental control software applications should my parent/guardian decide to use such and I understand that my parent/guardian can (and will) check anything and everything on my phone.
8. I will not permit younger siblings or minors to use my device without specific permission from my parent/guardian.

9. I will not meet anyone in person that I only know from internet contact without specific permission from my parent/guardian.
10. I will not use my device to engage in any harassing, threatening or otherwise illegal behavior. I understand that ignorance of the law is not an excuse.
11. I will disclose all usernames and passwords for all accounts accessible by my devices to only my parent/guardian and to no one else.
12. I understand that violation of any of the terms of this contract may result in the loss of my device and/or data plan privileges until my parent/guardians restore such privileges, but that I will continue to be responsible for payment of my data plan as determined above (see above #2).
13. I will abide by the “No Phone zones” in my home.
14. I understand that our devices Go to bed before we do and that we wake up before our devices do. I’ll abide by whatever times my parent/guardian set for our devices to go to sleep and wake up.
15. Car time is conversation time, not phone time.

Child/Youth Signature

DATE

Adult Parent/Guardian Signature

DATE

Discussion Questions

1. What tech commitments have you made for yourself and/or your house?
2. Based on the training session, what is one change you need to make to you current technological commitments to help you improve in loving God and loving people?
3. What impacted you the most from training session?
4. Read Galatians 6:1-6. Discuss the role of accountability when it comes to technology.

Endnotes

1. Andy Crouch, *Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Ada, Michigan: BakerBooks, 2017). 17.
2. Ibid., 53.
3. Ibid., 141.
4. Ibid., 140.
5. Ibid., 100-101.
6. Ibid., 118.
7. Ibid., 131.

8. Ibid., 130.
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltf1c>
10. Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 153, 322.
11. Ibid., 155.