

“Life In the Digital Age”

Various passages

I am so glad that you all are joining me tonight for this four part series that I have given the title, “Discipleship In a Digital Age.” Over the next few weeks, I want us to take a serious look at how our faith should impact our online habits and use of technology.

With the rise of the digital age, the church has not done a great job discipling people on how their faith intersects with technology use. The gospel impacts every area of our lives. It isn't simply limited to our eternity. There is an application to tech use. Digital devices are neutral—neither good nor bad. They can be used for good and helpful purposes. They can also be used for sinful purposes.

Digital technology is not inherently evil; it can and must be used in ways that honor and glorify God. People respond to technology in three ways:

- enthusiastic embrace
- strict separation
- disciplined discernment

What does the Bible have to say about things such as lap top computers, smartphones, and tablets? Some even question how a book that was written thousands of years ago have anything relevant to say to a modern generation.

The Word of God has much to say about it, in fact! Now obviously you will not find the word ‘iPhone’ or ‘internet’ anywhere in the Scriptures, but what you will find are true and lasting principles that inform the way we respond to all of life. Technology use is a matter of discernment.

Romans 12:1-2—“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

As the followers of Jesus, we should be cautious and discerning in our use of technology. We must look carefully at the new realities of life in a digital world. We must weigh and evaluate our use of technology. We must also educate ourselves and consider all the potential consequences of using a particular technology. Even as a Christian is using a specific technology, he disciplines himself to be discerning, to embrace what can be embraced and to reject what needs to be rejected. He doesn't respond with utter rejection, but neither does he respond with complete acceptance. Instead, he relies upon the wisdom and the discretion of the Holy Spirit, who imparts wisdom through the Scriptures. This is how the believer learns to navigate in this new digital world.

1. The SCOPE of the digital age

When we refer to the history of technology, we are referring to the development over time of systematic techniques for making and doing things. The term 'technology' is a combination of two Greek words—'techne' which means art or craft, and 'logos' which means word or speech. In the ancient world, it meant a discourse on the arts, both fine and applied. When it first appeared in English in the 17th century, it was used to mean a discussion of the applied arts only, and gradually these "arts" themselves came to be the object of the designation. By the early 20th century, the term embraced a growing range of means, processes, and ideas in addition to tools and machines. By mid-century, technology was

defined by such phrases as “the means or activity by which man seeks to change or manipulate his environment.”

From a biblical perspective, technology began to emerge in the earliest days of humanity’s existence. (Genesis 3-6)

The printing press of 1440 was a major development.

Gradually different things started to be invented but the main era of technology and invention came in the 18 century when industrial revolution started and machines got invented and various types of development and production started. The Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain, and it made its way west. Eventually, the Industrial Revolution gave way to the Digital Revolution which began anywhere from the late 1960s to the 1970s with the adoption and proliferation of digital computers and digital record keeping.

In terms of digital technology, perhaps the most significant development of the last century was the arrival of the Internet. It was the collective work of dozens of scientists, programmers and engineers who each developed new features and technologies that eventually merged to become the “information superhighway” we know today.

Long before the technology existed to actually build the Internet, many scientists had already anticipated the existence of worldwide networks of information. Nikola Tesla toyed with the idea of a “world wireless system” in the early 1900s, and visionary thinkers like Paul Otlet and Vannevar Bush conceived of mechanized, searchable storage systems of books and media in the 1930s and 1940s. Still, the first practical schematics for the Internet would not arrive until the early 1960s, when an MIT professor popularized the idea of an “Intergalactic Network” of computers. Shortly thereafter, computer scientists developed a

method for effectively transmitting electronic data that would later become one of the major building blocks of the Internet.

The first workable prototype of the Internet came in the late 1960s with the creation of ARPANET, or the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network. Originally funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, ARPANET allowed multiple computers to communicate on a single network. The technology continued to develop in the 1970s after scientists Robert Kahn and Vinton Cerf developed Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol, or TCP/IP, a communications model that set standards for how data could be transmitted between multiple networks. ARPANET adopted TCP/IP on January 1, 1983, and from there researchers began to assemble the “network of networks” that in time became the modern Internet.

The online world then took on a more recognizable form in 1990, when computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web. While it’s often confused with the Internet itself, the web is actually just the most common means of accessing data online in the form of websites and hyperlinks. The web helped popularize the Internet among the public, and served as a crucial step in developing the vast trove of information that most of us now access on a daily basis.

The next major invention in the digital age was introduced to the world on January 9, 2007. Tech wiz Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone—representing the combining of both computer and phone technologies. It required no physical keyboard. He proudly announced:

Steve Jobs — *“We’re going to use the best pointing device in the world. We’re going to use a pointing device that we’re all born with—born with ten of them. We’re going to use our fingers.”*

From that moment, the magic of multitouch technology would introduce highly accurate fingertip gestures to a pocket device, bringing humans into more intimate proximity to their computing technology than ever before. It was a major milestone in the digital age.

Apple officially released the iPhone on June 29, 2007 and millions of people were instantly hooked.

When he introduced the original iPhone, Steve Jobs said that Apple's goal for the first year of the iPhone was to capture 1% of the worldwide cellphone market. The tech company achieved that goal and now stands at somewhere between 20% and 40% of the market, depending on which country you're looking at. More than 2.5 billion iPhones have been sold in the last 12 years!

So here we are. The question is, where are we going? No one knows where all of this will ultimately lead, nor does anyone know what is next on the horizon.

Tim Challies — *“The digital revolution is global, reaching to the farthest corners of the earth. It affects the way we see, what we hear, how we interact with the world around us, and how we communicate with others. Swimming in the digital sea, we are caught up in a torrent of media, striving to stay afloat and make some headway against the rush of sounds, images, and words that seem intent on drowning us out. Some, like Rip Van Winkle, are just now waking up to this new reality. They rub their eyes and wonder what has happened. How has the world changed so quickly and so thoroughly? Others have been born into it—*

they are digital natives who have never known a world apart from digital technology.”

All of us have been impacted by the rise of the digital age that now describes our world.

2. The CHALLENGE of the digital age

With the ease of access to so much modern technology, there are both advantages and disadvantages, both pros and cons. Let's look at these for just a minute where we will see that there are several.

Advantages:

- We now have instant access to literally a 'wealth' of information from anywhere in the world all from our computers or smartphones.
- Social media like Facebook and Twitter have opened up different avenues for social interaction.
- Email is often faster and more effective than snail mail.
- You can now purchase almost anything from anywhere in the world using online shopping platforms.
- Instant, worldwide communication is now available with various platforms such as FaceTime or Skype or instant messaging. (Families scattered throughout the world)
- Texting software provides instant communication and connection in almost any setting.

- iTunes now provides access to a wide variety of sermon podcasts and Christian music.
- The Bible is now accessible in every major language, anywhere in the world.
- Digital books/textbooks are readily more accessible.

As far as advantages go, the accessibility of information has been exponentially increased in the digital age. The internet has become the go-to source for research and news.

Just like anything else that man touches, technology can be used for sinful purposes. An over indulgence can lead to a host of problems in a person's life. How so?

Disadvantages:

- We become addicted to distraction
- We can ignore our own flesh and blood
- We find ourselves craving immediate approval from others
- We lose our literacy
- We feed on the produced
- We become like what we like
- We get lonely
- We get comfortable in secret vices
- We lose our sense of meaning and purpose
- We fear missing out on things going on

- We become harsh in our dealings with each other
- We lose our place in time

And so while we live in remarkable times, we need to use discretion and accept the fact that the digital world is a double-edged sword. Left unchecked, it will wreak havoc in our lives and in the lives of our children.

Dr. Archibald Hart — *“Life for our kids used to be unplugged and carefree. Now it is continuously plugged in to an assortment of digital gadgets that demand attention. Life indoors used to be boring enough that kids went outside and played ball, rode their bicycles, and explored the world around. Now, all the fun is indoors, so why not just sit and enjoy it. Sure, television did intrude somewhat, but it never really dominated our lives to the extent that the digital world does. Today’s children are all digital from head to toe, at home and on the go. While television was at home, fixed to the floor and immovable, smartphones are mobile and go wherever you go. They can even go to bed with you and receive and send text messages at three o’clock in the morning.”*

Studies have shown that the changes being brought about with technology are even outstripping the brain’s ability to adapt. One researcher at UCLA has even said:

Dr. Gary Small — *“The current explosion of digital technology not only is changing the way we live and communicate, but is rapidly and profoundly altering our brains. Daily exposure to high technology—computers, smart phones, video games, search engines like Google and Yahoo—stimulates brain cell alteration... Our brains are [changing] right now at a speed like never before.”*

The idea is that the speed with which we now process information is changing the hardwiring of our brains. Who knows what consequences this will bring down the road?

Let me give you a couple of terms. Those who have written on the subject have grouped people into two categories—digital natives, and digital immigrants.

“Digital Natives” — *describes those born after the advent of digital technology*

This category represents today’s youngest generation that has been born with ‘digital DNA’ so to speak. They have been around computers and the internet all their life. They do not know anything different.

“Digital Immigrants” — *describes those born before the advent of digital technology*

This category of people has had to learn how to navigate in a digital world. They can remember a time when you had to carry cash, had to enter a phone booth to make a call, or had to go to the library to research a particular topic.

Dr. Archibald Hart — *“There is an implied belief that digital natives are smarter than digital immigrants... The natives may be more current in digital knowledge than many immigrants, but they lack maturity and tend to ignore the hazards of the digital world.”*

Now even among those who fall into the ‘digital immigrant’ category, there are three different groups. For example:

1 — Avoiders

These are the people who prefer a lifestyle that leaves them relatively technology free. They try to get by with the least amount of technological devices as possible. They resent having to trade in their flip phone for a smartphone.

These are the people who still insist on having a landline in their home. They may even avoid cell phone use period! The only tweeting that happens at their house comes from the birds. They don't do Facebook, they don't do Twitter, and they don't see the value in much of what technology offers.

Are there any of you who would classify yourself here? If you wouldn't, perhaps your kids would!

2—Reluctant Adopters

These are the people who accept the fact that technology is very much a part of today's world and, as such, it is here to stay. Yet much of it still feels alien to them. This group is represented by a variety of ages, people from a variety of backgrounds. While they may have a cell phone, they don't text if they can help it. They may occasionally search for something on Google, but they probably don't have a social media account.

This group tends to be more cautious toward technology rather than being all too eager to use it. These are the men and women who use just enough to be able to get by with the bare minimum required in the digital age.

3—Enthusiastic Adopters

These are the people born before the digital age, but they have learned to navigate themselves. They have shown an interest in new technology and have embraced all of it enthusiastically. They've learned to text. They've opened a social media account. They've become comfortable with ordering off Amazon.

These are the people who tend to see the good in most forms of technology, perhaps even blindly.

Though you may be surprised by this fact, not even all of the digital natives can be neatly placed into one category. They, too, are a diverse group of people who come from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of technology interest.

1—Avoiders

Even though they have been around digital technology their whole life, they are not drawn to it. They do not engage with social media. They probably have a cell phone or a lap top computer, but that's about it.

This group is very small among those who are classified as digital natives, however.

2—Minimalists

They realize that the world is technologically advanced, but they limit their involvement and use technology only when they perceive it as necessary. They go to Google for information only if they have to. While they may have a social media account, they only check it once a day or every couple of days. They would rather ask someone for directions instead of looking up the address on Google maps.

3—Enthusiastic Participants

This group constitutes the majority of today's youngest generations. They thrive on technology and gadgets. They are the ones who stand in line to get the latest device. They always want the latest smartphone, even if the latest model has only a minor change. They constantly interact through social media. They would

rather text than talk. They spend a lot of time online in some capacity, whether it is Youtube, Netflix, social media, etc.

When this group wants to know something, such as how to spell a word, or the answer to a basic question, their first instinct is to turn to Google.

All of this simply helps to frame the discussion on all of the challenges that technology presents us with. Think about how things like social media have impacted politics. Or how online platforming has impacted our institutions like colleges and seminaries.

More importantly, think about the spiritual challenges that it has brought about. Perhaps an honest question to ask yourself is this—“Has technology been more of a help to me spiritually, or has it been more of a hindrance to me?”

Dr. Archibald Hart—“*Let us not forget that the digital invasion will also influence our spiritual lives. As Christian believers, we need to pay careful attention to the astonishing changes that our technologically driven world is having on our spirituality.*”

What are some of those changes? For one, research has shown that our attention spans are much shorter. The more we indulge in social media and the consumption of online information, the less we are able to concentrate.

Another concern has manifested itself among the youngest generation, who prefer an action-oriented spiritual activity as opposed to one that is reflective. (Skits vs. Sermons)

Have you noticed that people will often tell you that they are very busy, yet everywhere they go they are always on their phones scrolling through some social media feed? It has led some observers to coin the expression ‘F.O.M.O.’

or the fear of missing out. With so much information at our fingertips, we become restless wondering what other people are doing, whether we have any emails, what's going on in politics—preoccupied with anything other than what we are doing at the moment.

3. The RESPONSE to the digital age

How now shall we live? It is an important question. As the church, we should have a well reasoned and informed approach to technology, one that is influenced by the Scriptures. We shouldn't be cynical skeptics, but neither should we be blind enthusiasts.

Listen to what the apostle Paul said:

1 Corinthians 6:12—“All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.”

In other words, I'm not going to be a slave of anything!

You will have to decide for yourself whether it is helpful or not. Most of us would agree that technology is very helpful to our lives. Tony Reinke mentions several ways this is so:

- 1—Technology modifies creation
- 2—Technology pushes back the results of the fall
- 3—Technology establishes human power
- 4—Technology helps to edify souls
- 5—Technology upholds and empowers our bodies

6—Technology gives voice to human autonomy

7—Technology shapes every relationship

8—Technology shapes our theology

9—Technology is ultimately governed by God

If technology and things such as smartphones can help be a tool, then it is a gift from God. But when it becomes a Master that controls us, it is a cruel curse.

When used as a tool in right and proper place, technology is a blessing to our lives. When it becomes an unhealthy obsession, it can lead us further down the road to destruction. Is it a toy, or is it a tool? Is it a tool of useful efficiency, or a toy of meaningless habit?

John Piper — *“For all the abuses and all the devastation of distraction, wasted hours, narcissistic self-promotion, and pornographic degradation, I see the computer and the smartphone as gifts of God—like papyrus and the codex and paper and the printing press and the organs of mass distribution...if you rejoice in the hope of the glory of God because your sins are forgiven through Jesus, then your smartphone becomes a kind of friendly pack mule on the way to heaven. Mules are not kept for their good looks. They just get the job done. The job is not to impress anybody. The job is to make much of Christ and love people. That is why we were created. So don’t waste your life grooming your mule. Make him bear the weight of a thousand works of love.”*

In other words, we should put technology to the Master’s use! Like anything else, it is an issue of the heart and the motive behind one’s life.