

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Building Faith at Home Series, Part Four

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Engaging with Media and Technology

Proverbs 4:23-27 and 2 John 12

Introduction:

A. The importance of building faith at home

This morning we conclude our Building Faith at Home series. Building faith at home is one of our church's core values. For God's Word, in places like Deuteronomy 6, Psalm 78, and Ephesians 5-6, shows that home is an important place for spiritual growth. And we want all the homes of our church, living with others or alone, married or single, kids or no kids, to engage in a loving, God-honoring way with our culture and to train the next generation to do the same.

So this morning we consider another topic we face in our culture, media and its related technologies. Parents of younger kids, we want you to know that the sermon includes a frank discussion on pornography. If you prefer to take younger children to Sunday School at this time, our volunteers would love to greet your kids in Jesus' name.

B. My history displays the presence and pace of media and technology

Now in my lifetime we have experienced incredible advances in media and technology. At age five I got a Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas. My parents enjoy telling the story that after I played Super Mario Brothers for hours, they called me in for Christmas dinner, and I protested, saying I had only been playing 10 minutes and needed one more game. In elementary school I listened to tapes on my Sony Walkman, used a Macintosh in the school computer lab to play Oregon Trail, and continued my video game career dominating Street Fighter on my Super Nintendo. In middle school I switched to CDs and my mom got a giant brick of a cell phone for her car. Early in high school I used the internet for the first time. I was at a friend's house, and he brought up an old search engine like Altavista and told me I could type in a question and that it would bring up pages that answer my question. Now I'm not proud of this, but with all this knowledge at my fingertips for the first time, the best question I could come up with was, "Is 2Pac really dead?"

In high school we got a PC with a dial up modem and Windows 95, our first DVD player, and I played video games like Madden on the Playstation and Golden Eye on Nintendo 64. In college I owned my first cell phone, downloaded music for the first time, and yes continued to

play video games on the Playstation 2 and Xbox. I did not even own a laptop, high definition TV, or smart phone until after I graduated college. And Stephanie is very happy to report that I don't really play video games anymore.

Now think about how different the world of tech and media is for my three year old son. Just a few days after Grant turned one, we ate on the Riverwalk with some friends visiting from out of town. We spent a lot of time catching up, and Grant understandably grew restless. I was trying to keep him entertained in my lap and he grabbed my iPhone. Now we had never given Grant an iPhone tutorial, but he took his tiny index finger, swiped it across the screen and unlocked it. A year later, when Grant was two, we visited my parents in Dallas. There in my parent's house Grant saw a newspaper, made a confused expression, and asked, "What's that?"

These days' media and its related technologies are prevalent and changing rapidly. And Grant's and my experience shows that the generations can view and experience technology differently. Author Douglas Adams amusingly groups technologies into three categories. First, "everything that's already in the world when you are born is just normal." Like say cars for me, or smart-phones for Grant. Then "anything that gets invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it." Finally, "anything that gets invented after you're thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilisation as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really."¹

C. How can we engage well with media and technology?

Now because media and technology are so prevalent and changing so rapidly, it is important for us to consider, how can we engage well with media and technology?

I. Think carefully about the impact of technological devices (Proverbs 4:23-27)

A. Recognize media and technology are not neutral

If you've got a Bible, I invite you to turn to the Old Testament book of Proverbs, Chapter 4; Proverbs Chapter 4. In Proverbs 4, King Solomon gives instruction to his sons about living wisely. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 23.

²³Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

²⁴Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.

²⁵Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.

¹ Quoted in John Dyer's book, *From the Garden to the City*, p. 26-27.

²⁶ Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways.

²⁷ Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

Look back at verse 23. Notice how much importance Solomon gives to guarding our hearts. Then verses 24-27 share what will help us guard our hearts, things like watching what we say, where we go, and what we do. Look now at verse 26. Notice how Solomon instructs his sons to give careful thought to their paths. In other words, we should not mindlessly wander through life. Rather, wise followers of God give careful thought to where we go and what we do. And in our culture, this includes thinking carefully about the impact of technology.

John Dyer is a web developer who studied at Dallas Theological Seminary, where Dave and I graduated from. Dyer used his technical and theological skills to write a very helpful book on technology entitled *From the Garden to the City*. If you find anything I say helpful this morning, it probably came from Dyer's book. Now Dyer used to think technology is neutral. That all that matters is whether you use a technology, like say a computer, in a good or evil way.

However, during seminary, one of Dyer's professors said, "One of the most dangerous things you can believe in this world is that technology is neutral."² That statement put Dyer on a journey of thinking more carefully, and eventually he realized that technology is not neutral. Catholic author and philosopher Marshall McLuhan states this truth more strongly by saying, "Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot."³

B. Shovel and phone illustrations show that technology shapes us

To illustrate the point that technology is not merely neutral, Dyer invites us to imagine a shovel. Now a shovel can be used for good or evil. It could be used to break ground on an orphanage or used to dig a hole that hides stolen goods. But regardless of whether I use a shovel for a good or evil purpose, it will impact me. I will get blisters and sore muscles, and if I use the shovel a lot I will get calluses and stronger muscles. The shovel will impact my body, and similarly, media and technology will impact my mind and heart, whether used for good or evil.⁴

I'm not a tech expert, but as I considered Dyer's book and others, I thought about some possible negative impacts of owning a smart-phone. What do you think is the impact of having a device that limits our ability to be unreachable and alone? What is the impact on our work, our

² Ibid, 15, 83.

³ Ibid, 83.

⁴ Ibid, 36.

face-to-face relationships, and our relationship with God by having a device that distracts with texts, calls, and notifications, not to mention the opportunity to go online anytime you are bored with your work or companions? What is encouraged in our hearts by the marketing of new smart-phones before current ones are out of date? As we get used to the speed that a smart-phone provides, does it subtly encourage impatience in other areas of life? As we are exposed to all the information available on our phones online, is it encouraging confusion or clarity in how we live? As you think about your smart-phone, do you own it, or does it own you?

Now to be clear, there are obviously many benefits to having a smart-phone as well, and I have not gotten rid of mine this week. We are called to live faithfully in the world, not run away from all technology and media. However, if we want to give careful thought to our path, we should think carefully about how our technological devices impact us. We want to make sure that our engagement with the world's goods does not lead to worldly living.

II. Make media and technology choices in light of God's story (2 John 12)

A. Creation, fall, redemption, and restoration summarize God's story

Now one challenge to thinking about media and technology is that there is not a Bible verse with instructions on using a smart-phone well. As a result, some call us to remember God's overall story, and then consider how to use technology in a way that honors it. So our second point is that engaging well includes making media and technology choices in light of God's story.

I am going to summarize the story of the Bible using the terms creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. First is creation, God creates a perfect world and Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are invited to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and are given a garden to cultivate. As God's image-bearers, Adam and Eve were relational, enjoying perfect relationships with God, each other, and the world. As God's image bearers, Adam and Eve were also rulers under God, called to lovingly rule the creation and its creatures. And as God's image bearers, Adam and Eve were also to create, called to create new human life, create with language, like as Adam named the animals, and create as they cultivated the garden. And in all this blessing God gave only one restriction; do not eat from one tree.

Two things mark our lives here in the middle of God's story. First is the fall. Tragically, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command. Adam and Eve, along with us, have suffered profoundly. We are now stained by sin, suffering great pain and unable to live out the purposes

for which God created us. We are in conflict with God, each other, and the corrupted creation. And we all faced a horrific future of death and eternal punishment.

But thankfully, God stepped into the crisis with redemption. God graciously invited people back into relationship with Him throughout the Old Testament. And the Old Testament foreshadowed the ultimate redemption that comes through God's Son. Jesus lived the perfect life we should have lived, took the horrific punishment for our sins on the cross, and then rose from the dead. And when we come to Jesus in faith, we are forgiven of every sin and restored in relationship with God and His people. We can start living again for the purposes for which God created us, albeit imperfectly. By the work of God's Spirit, we the church are free to love and serve God, love and serve each other, and love and serve our world. As we do these things we give people a preview of God's kingdom and can invite them to follow Jesus and look forward to the perfect restoration that Jesus will bring.

For restoration will be indescribably wonderful, as God gives His imperfect people a perfect end to the story. We, and the creation, will no longer be stained by sin and will be free to fully live out the purposes for which we were created in God's image, to enjoy perfect relationships with God and each other, to participate in Christ's rule, and to joyfully create.

Now as we think about God's story author Tim Challies makes three points about technology. "First, technology is a good, God-given gift. Created in God's image, we have a mandate and a desire to create technology. Technology is the creative activity of using tools to shape God's creation for practical purposes. Second, like everything else in creation, technology is subject to the curse. Though intended as a means of honoring God, our technologies often become idols and compound our sinful rebellion against our Creator. Third, it is the human application of technology that helps us determine if it is being used to honor God or further human sin. Discerning the intended use of a technology, examining our own use of it, and reflecting on these purposes in light of Scripture disciplines our technological discernment."⁵

B. Avoid the obviously fallen (pornography example)

Now making media and technology choices in light of God's story certainly includes avoiding the obviously fallen. Because of the fall, we are tempted to favor ourselves at the expense of others. Because of the fall, we are tempted to seek independence from God as we

⁵ I heard this listening to the audio of Challies' book *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion*.

reject His rule and look to created things to give us life. And these temptations to evil are present in our use of media and technology.

Tragically, mankind uses media and technology in all sorts of fallen ways. We will consider just one example, internet pornography. First, listen to John Dyer's insights on how the medium of images makes pornography especially addicting. Dyer notes that, "one of the deeper and often overlooked reasons people become addicted to pornography is the power of the medium itself. Men and women become addicted not just to the physical response the images elicit, but even more dangerously, to the way the images powerfully affect the emotions and seem to offer temporary relief from the hurts, pressures, and pains of life. Getting out of pornography then is not only a matter of understanding that the content is sinful (not to mention exploitative), but also understanding how the medium of images works upon the mind, heart and soul. Of course, this doesn't mean that images are always morally corrupt. But neither does it mean that images are a neutral medium where the only thing that matters is the content itself. No, as we've been saying, images as a medium shape our thinking and communicate meaning."⁶

And not only is pornography especially addicting, but the website pornharms.com notes that according to research by psychologists and social scientists, when we use pornography, the following tragic harms can come to us and those around us.

"Children and adults are developing life-long addictions; there is a burgeoning demand for trafficked women and children in the U.S.; there is increased demand for child pornography because adult-porn users are finding that they are no longer satisfied with adult images; on average American children are seeing hardcore pornography at age 11 and four out of five 16 year-olds now regularly access pornography online; 56% of divorces cite Internet pornography as a major factor in the breakup of the marriage; porn encourages viewers to view sexual partners in dehumanized ways: porn use increases acceptance and enjoyment of sexual violence and harmful beliefs about women, sex and rape; pornography is leading to an increase of men in their 20s and 30s who are suffering from erectile dysfunction; and pornography use contributes to self-esteem issues and depression."⁷

Now the evidence that porn harms is overwhelming, so if you are using pornography, please seek help, today. There are great resources out there, websites like xxxchurch.com, books

⁶ From Dyer's book, *From the Garden to the City*, p. 129-30.

⁷ Information from <http://pornharms.com/responses-to-pro-porn-arguments/>. Accessed 2/20/15.

like *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction* by Mark Laaser, services like covenanteyes.com, where you can get internet filtering software and have a weekly report sent to a friend that shares what websites you visited. And please seek help in God, His Word, and a trusted believer or small group; for we are not meant to face sexual struggles alone.

And for those with children, we must also prepare them for living in a world filled with pornography. Kristen Jenson, author of *Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids*, makes five recommendations to help parents get started. If you want to refer to these points again later, the sermon manuscript will be on the church website later this week.

First, define pornography, rather than assuming kids know what it is. You can adapt the definition depending upon the child, but Jenson describes pornography to seven year olds in the following way. Pornography is people without any clothes on that may make you feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or sick to your stomach and may also make you feel excited.

Second, tell your kids that pornography should never be kept secret and that they should tell you if they see pornography. For kids often need to be coached to confide in their parents. And we want to be the kind of parents that encourage sharing by not freaking out when told something concerning. Third, get in the habit of initiating non-threatening conversations about what everyone has seen or been shown on the internet that day. No nagging, just sharing something you saw online that day and asking your kids what they have seen.

Fourth, password protect every device you own that can access the internet and install a filter on your Wi-Fi. There are instructions on how to put a filter on your Wi-Fi on sites like pornproofkids.com⁸ or encourage a tech-oriented friend to come over and help. Fifth, have your child's friends give you their mobile devices when they come over to play. This keeps them from showing inappropriate content to your child in your home.⁹ Now whether you follow these exact steps or not, we parents must do something to prepare our kids to face pornography well.

C. Make changes if media and technology subtly encourage the fallen

Next, in addition to avoiding the obviously fallen, make changes if media and technology subtly encourage the fallen. We are going to think further about two possible not so obvious negative impacts from a smart-phone. First, the overload of information we can access through our smart-phones could lead to less reflection and wisdom. If we are frequently scanning our

⁸<http://pornproofkids.com/2014/07/24/two-levels-of-internet-safety-one-moms-advice-on-filters/> Accessed 2/20/15.

⁹ Information from two articles written by Jenson - <http://pornharms.com/5-back-to-school-tips-for-porn-immune-kids/> and <http://pornproofkids.com/2012/04/30/defining-pornography-for-a-seven-year-old/>. Accessed 2/20/15.

social media feeds, clicking on various pictures and links along the way, and jumping around from website to website and app to app, and watching random clips and shows, and playing games, and sending and receiving texts, calls, and emails are we training our minds to be shallow and distracted? Even Google’s former CEO, Eric Schmidt is concerned. He says, “I worry that the level of interrupt, the sort of overwhelming rapidity of information – and especially of stressful information – is in fact affecting cognition. It is in fact affecting deeper thinking.”¹⁰

John Dyer wisely notes, “A good portion of the Christian life requires the ability to concentrate and focus on ideas over a long period of time. Spiritual depth requires the ability to pray for more than a few minutes, to read and memorize Scripture (not search for it online), and to love God with our hearts and our minds. This means that we must be careful to cultivate and retain the skill of deeply reading and deeply contemplating the things of God, something the Internet and digital technologies do not value. We cannot read deeply when we spend all of our time scanning or when we allow distraction to rule our minds.”¹¹

A second subtle negative impact is that our face-to-face relationships, and even our relationship with God, can be impacted by a smart-phone. I’d like to invite you to turn to the Bible book of 2 John, 2 John. 2 John is towards the very back of the Bible. Please follow along with me as I read verse 12. “¹²I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”

John is happy to use the advanced technology of the day, writing and sending a letter, when he couldn’t physically be with someone. However, he views the face-to-face relationship as better, where full joy can be found. This model is helpful in thinking about how we use our phones. They can be a blessing as we call, text, email or engage on social media in Godly ways to connect with people who are not with us. However, we want to make sure our phones do not interfere with our face-to-face relationships, especially with those we share a home with.

Now we’ve all seen, and maybe even been, the family or group of roommates eating together and completely ignoring one another as they look at their devices. It can be tempting to turn to social media, for unlike face-to-face relationships, it demands little of us. We share only what we want to share and explore only what we find interesting. And we can find affirmation, as others “like” or “retweet” or “repin” the thought, picture, or article we posted. Pastor Shane

¹⁰ Quoted in John Dyer’s book, *From the Garden to the City*, p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 165.

Hipps likens social community to cotton candy, that it goes down easy and satisfies our immediate hunger, but does not provide much real nutrition.¹² Now whether or not you or I would go as far as Shane Hipps does, we want to make sure social media does not keep us from the face-to-face relationships that we need as those made in the image of a relational God.

D. Talk with God, home, and church about media and technology usage

And speaking of those relationships, our next point is to talk with God, our home, and the church about our media and technology usage. You could start by asking God if He wants you to change how you use media and technology. Perhaps you need to stop watching a show or playing a game that leads you to dwell on harmful things. Perhaps you need to rethink the selfies you post online and why you are posting them. Or perhaps a short-term technology fast could give you more space to enjoy God and people. I have even been thinking this week that I may need to make long term changes, to decrease the time I spend with media and technology so that I can spend more time with Jesus, friends and family. If you had to guess, how many minutes a day do you use media and technology? You know, doing things like using your computer, tablet, and smart-phone, watching TV and movies, playing video games. Keep that number in mind. Now it is said the average American adult can read about 250-300 words per minute.¹³ Did you know that if you read 250 words per minute, it takes less than nine minutes a day to read the entire Bible in a year?¹⁴

Not only is it good to talk with God, it is good to consider together how your home uses media and technology. Perhaps you could agree to put all of your devices away when you eat meals together, or even for the entire evening. Or maybe this is the week to have a conversation in our homes about how much of our electronic lives are hidden versus lived in front of others.

Further, we can also benefit from talking with the church family about our media and technology usage. For the church family can provide additional insights. Some of us have a better pulse on what is going on with media and technology. And some of us here, myself included, are old enough to remember life before the internet. As a result, we might be in a better position to help younger people think about how using the internet affects our lives. Further, the church family can also provide encouragement and accountability to make media

¹² From Hipps' book, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, p. 111.

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/dec/14/you-can-t-speed-read-literature>. Accessed 2/20/15.

¹⁴ <http://www.howlongdoesittaketoreadthebible.com/> Accessed 2/20/15.

and technology choices in light of God's story; for we can be tempted to escape the challenges of life by getting too absorbed in media and technology.

E. Use media and technology in redemptive ways

Finally, making media and technology choices in light of God's story includes using it in redemptive ways. The possibilities are nearly endless. We could set up an online meal calendar for a sick member of our church, or text a struggling family member what you are praying for them, or share winsomely about Jesus online. John Dyer shares a creative example. A few years ago his senior pastor, Andy McQuitty, got cancer. A church member gave Andy a beeper. The church family was instructed that whenever they prayed for their pastor, they should call the beeper so that it would vibrate and Andy would know he was being prayed for.

Andy was greatly encouraged as the beeper went off at various times every day. Now this was already a great idea, but Andy took it to another level. He asked his congregation not only to pray for him, but also pray for the people around him. Then when Andy would be in a hospital room waiting for treatment, he would get out the beeper. Inevitably it would start to buzz, and another patient would ask, "What's the deal with the beeper?" And then Andy would say, "People from my church call this beeper when they pray for me. And not only that, they pray for the people around me, meaning you were just prayed for."¹⁵ Friends, we are created in the image of a creative God, and He wants inspire us to use technology in redemptive ways that bring hope and healing.

Conclusion:

A. Engaging well includes thinking carefully about the impact of devices

This morning we've considered the question, how can we engage well with media and technology? First, engaging well includes thinking carefully about the impact of devices.

B. Engaging well includes making choices in light of God's story

Second, engaging well includes making choices in light of God's story. Choices like avoiding the fallen, making changes if media and technology subtly encourage the fallen, talking with God, home, and church about our media and technology usage, and using it in redemptive ways. May God give us the grace to engage well with media and technology, so that we can find more abundant life in Him and encourage others to do the same.

Let's pray...

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

¹⁵ Dyer tells this story in *From the Garden to the City* and on his blog - <http://donteatthefruit.com/2009/11/a-meaningful-distraction-the-beeper/#comments>. Accessed 2/20/15.