

Jeff's history shows how digital devices and media are changing

In my lifetime we've experienced a lot of changes with our digital devices and media. At age five I got a Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas. My parents enjoy telling the story that after playing *Super Mario Brothers* for hours, they called me in for Christmas dinner, and I protested, "I've only been playing 10 minutes."

In elementary school I listened to tapes on my Sony Walkman, used a Macintosh in the school computer lab to play *Oregon Trail*, and played *Street Fighter* in the arcade and on my Super Nintendo. In middle school I switched from tapes to CDs and my mom got a giant brick of a cell phone for her car.

Then early in high school I use the internet for the first time. I'm at a friend's house, and he brings up a primitive search engine and tells me I can type in a question and it'll bring up pages that answer my question. And with all this knowledge at my fingertips for the very first time, I type in, "Is 2Pac really dead?"

Soon after that my family got a PC with a dial up modem and Windows 95, and also our first DVD player, and I played video games like *Madden*, *Golden Eye* and *Mario Kart*.

In college I owned my first cell phone, downloaded music for the first time, and continued to play video games on the PS 2 and Xbox. I did not own a laptop, high definition TV, or smart phone until after college.

Now think about the different experience that my six and eight year old kids have with digital devices and media. Just a few days after our son Grant turned one, we ate on the Riverwalk with some friends from out of town. As we're catching up, Grant grows restless, and as I'm trying to keep him entertained in my lap, he grabs my old iPhone. Now we never gave Grant an iPhone tutorial, but he takes his tiny twelve-month-old finger, and swipes it across the screen, unlocking my phone. I didn't have an iPhone till I was about 30, while to Grant, an iPhone is just something that's always existed, that he takes for granted as just part of the world.

Relevance: our engagement with digital devices and media makes a big impact

Now many blessings have come from the advances in digital devices and various types of media in my lifetime. I sure don't want to go back to the days of dial up modems, or of low def

TVs with rabbit ears and only 10 channels, half of which are worthless. And I enjoy my iPhone, thank you very much.

But if we're paying attention, we know that our digital age, with its rapid change and amazing devices and media options, also brings challenges. Challenges for us and for those we parent.

The book *The Tech-Wise Family*, by Christian author Andy Crouch, has recent research from Barna. In a survey of US parents, 78% said they believe that raising kids today is more complicated than when they were kids. When asked why they think parenting today is more difficult, technology and social media was the most common answer.

When then asked what makes technology so challenging as a parent, the answers were balancing physical activity with online activity, limiting children's time with technology, filtering the content kids are exposed to, what their kids' friends expose them to, family time without technology, monitoring and worrying about their children on social media, access to pornography, keeping up to date with what children are using, modeling how to use tech well for their children, online bullying, and sexting. After these survey results, the next sentence in the book says, "If there is one word that sums up how many of us feel about technology and family life, it's *Help!*"¹ And if you want help, *The Tech-Wise Family* is a great resource.

And it's not just homes with kids who are dealing with the blessings and challenges from our digital devices and media. So that's why this *Building Faith at Home* sermon series is on *Next Steps in the Digital Age*.

God's Word, in places like Deuteronomy chapter 6, Psalm 78, and Ephesians chapters 5 and 6, shows that home is an important place for spiritual growth, nurture, and mission. And we want all our homes, living with others or alone, married or unmarried, kids or no kids, to be loving, Jesus-centered homes.

And in this digital age, that requires us to pay attention to the ways we engage with our digital devices and media. They can make a big impact on us and our homes.

Orienting to God's Word

So let's ask for God's help in prayer and then look to His Word. Father...

¹ Crouch, Andy, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 22-25.

Now there's obviously no Bible verse directly about our digital devices and media, so today we're looking at wisdom from Proverbs chapter 4 about what we pay attention to.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Proverbs. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

As you're opening to Proverbs 4, I'll share some background. The majority of Proverbs was written or compiled by King Solomon of ancient Israel. Proverbs helps us to understand how life generally works and to invite us to live with wisdom. And Proverbs starts by noting that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. So biblical wisdom is not just applying principles to life, it is living skillfully in relationship with God, following His ways. In Proverbs 4, we're going to see the importance of paying attention to your attention as we seek to live wisely.

Teaching: Paying attention to your attention

Guard your heart by guarding your speech, sight, conduct (23-27) – Proverbs chapter 4, starting in verse 23. **(23-27)**

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.

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

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

These verses are part of a broader section of Solomon's instruction to his sons in chapter 4. And of everything in that section, Solomon emphasizes verse 23 the most, saying, "*Above all else, guard your heart.*"

In our culture, when we speak metaphorically about our heart, we're talking about our feelings. But this word for *heart* in the Hebrew that Proverbs was originally written in, is sometimes used in broader ways. This word *heart* sometimes describes not only our feelings, but also our thinking and values and will, our whole internal world.²

² See *The Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*.

I think this is how *heart* is being used in verse 23, to describe our whole internal world: thoughts, feelings, values, and will. So when you hear *heart* this morning, think your whole internal world.

And verse 23 says it's really important for us to guard our hearts, like say a guard protects a castle, protecting the good within, and keeping the bad out.

Then the end of verse 23 explains why it's so important to guard your heart: it's because everything you do flows from your heart. Your heart is like the wellspring of your life, and if you don't guard it, allowing it instead to be polluted, that pollution will flow down through your life.

So this is important, we need to pay attention to what influences our heart and the hearts of others in our homes. Verses 24-27 share some key influences. Verse 24 says to pay attention to what we say, verse 25 says to pay attention to where we look, and verses 26-27 say to pay attention to what we do. Our speech, verse 24, our sight, verse 25, and our actions, verses 26-27, influence our hearts for good or for bad, towards God or away from God. And our heart then influences the direction of our entire lives.

Pay attention to the impact of media (liturgy) – So it's important for us to pay attention to the impact of our media on our hearts.

Some of us may need to pay attention to whether our social media usage is helping or harming our body image. Or pay attention to if we're a little too focused on how many "likes", "retweets", or "repins" our content gets. Or pay attention to the fact that on social media, you're not paying them money, so you're not the customer they're looking to serve. Their customers are the ones who buy your information and pay to show you ads.

Maybe you're doing fine with social media, but you're streaming a show where you're cheering for an antihero who's pursuing evil goals; pay attention, a shift may be happening in your heart as you cheer for evil to win. Or maybe some of us are getting sucked into the emotionally charged drama of the 24-hour news cycle; pay attention, your heart may be growing more anxious and less loving towards those who disagree with you.

Or maybe those YouTube clips are getting you wrapped up in celebrity culture; pay attention, your heart may be putting too much importance on fame and financial success. Or maybe that podcast you're listening to is subtly encouraging you to doubt your faith; pay

attention, guard your heart. Or maybe it's pornography, which we'll cover next week. Or maybe you're streaming the wrong kind of music; pay attention, I still remember rap and rock lyrics I haven't heard in 20 years that encourage violence against women and denying God.

Look back at verse 25 with me. Here Solomon admonishes us to look straight ahead, focused on the good, to fix our gaze directly there. It's because it's so easy for our eyes, and ears, mine included, to drift towards media that harms our hearts. Guard your heart.

And as we pay attention to our media, let's also pay attention to the hearts of others in our home. This week my wife Stephanie told me a story from Andrew Peterson, a Christian author and songwriter. His high school aged sons really wanted to watch a popular show that he wasn't excited about them watching. He figured they'd probably watch it eventually on their own, so he agreed to them watching it, on the condition that they would recite a liturgy together before they watched, and then talk afterwards about the show's themes, paying attention to what it was encouraging. This might be a good strategy for some of us with teens to equip them in this way, or to help ourselves be wise as we engage with media.

So as we're seeking this morning to pay attention to our media, we're going to read out loud together a portion of that liturgy Andrew Peterson recited with his sons. If you want to see the whole liturgy, it's in the book *Every Moment Holy* by Douglas McKelvey.

So let's turn the middle of this sermon participatory, please stand with me. The words to the liturgy are on the screen, please read them along with me at my pace, and may they express our hearts towards God.

Lord... guard my mind against the old enticement
to believe a lie simply because it is beautifully told.

Let me not be careless.

Give me right conviction to judge my own motives in that which I approve,
teaching me to be always mindful of that which I consume,
and thoughtful of the ways in which I consume it.

Impart to me keener knowledge of the limits
of my own heart in light of my own particular brokenness,
that I might choose what would be for my flourishing
and not for my harm.

And give me the grace to understand that what causes me to stumble
might bear no ill consequence for another of your children,
so that while I am to care for my brothers and sisters,
I must also allow them in matters of conscience,
the freedom to sometimes choose
a thing your Spirit convicts me to refrain from.
Even so, let my own freedoms in Christ
never be flaunted or exercised in such a way
as to give cause for confusion, temptation, or stumbling in others.

May the stories I partake of,
and the ways in which I engage with them
make me in the end a more empathetic Christ-bearer,
more compassionate,
more aware of my own brokenness and need for grace,
better able to understand the hopes and fears
and failings of my fellow humans
so that I might more authentically live
and learn and love among them
unto the end that all of our many stories
might be more beautifully woven into your own greater story.
Amen.³

Amen, may we be that kind of church, you may be seated. Now you might be doing pretty well in what we've talked about so far, if so, great. There are good ways to use social media, there are good shows to stream, but maybe your struggle is spending too much time with media. If you stay up until two in the morning binging a show, even if it's a wholesome one, that still limits what you can bring to your relationships the next day. And if staying up late binging is a habit, then it's habitually hindering your relationships.

³ McKelvey, Douglas, *Every Moment Holy*, 83-87.

That's why I appreciate Pastor Dave starting this digital age sermon series talking about our relationships; because our relationships with God and each other are so core to the meaning of life and to God's purposes for our homes that we wouldn't want something way less significant like media to get in the way of that.

And when it comes to the home, God designed those relationships to be an important place of character formation. Sadly, it doesn't always work this way, but in the home we are to help each other grow into godly people of love, wisdom, and virtue.

So as we think about our engagement with media, we want to pay attention not only to our own hearts, but to the hearts of everyone in our home, and to our relationships in the home. Thinking about if the kinds of media and the amount of time spent with media are keeping our home from growing into better people, in better relationships with God and one another.

As verse 26 says, we are to give careful thought to our paths, steadfastly walking in God's ways. Paying attention to what we're paying attention to, because it impacts our hearts, which impacts the direction of our lives. And as we're attentive, it's also important to pay attention to our digital devices themselves.

Pay attention to the impact of digital devices (shovel illustration)

We don't have time to talk about every digital device, so I'm talking about smartphones, but you can apply these ideas to your other digital devices.

Some of you heard Christian author John Dyer speak at Northwest a couple of years ago on thinking biblically about technology.⁴ He has a helpful illustration about how technology itself impacts us, whether we use it for good or bad. To illustrate that technology, like say a smart phone, is not neutral, Dyer discusses a shovel.⁵

So I brought mine in. Now I could use this shovel for good or evil. Clearly I don't use it much, I've actually only dug one hole with it, so it hasn't really impacted me. But imagine if I used this shovel every single day. At first I'd get blisters on my hands and sore muscles, and eventually I'd get calluses and stronger muscles, who knows how buff I could get with daily shovel use ☺

⁴ <http://nwchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/FamilyGrowth3.mp3>

⁵ Dyer, John, *From the Garden to the City*, 36.

Now the shovel will impact me in these ways regardless of whether I use it to build houses with Habitat for Humanity, or to dig holes to hide stolen goods. Whether I use this shovel for good or evil purposes, it will impact me if I use it a lot. And similarly, if I use my smartphone a lot, even if it's only for good purposes, it's going to impact me, it's just less obvious because most of the impact is happening inside of me.

Pastor Dave mentioned last Sunday a study which found that iPhone users touch their phones on average 2,617 times a day. What Pastor Dave failed to mention is that he owns an iPhone ☺ I own one too ☺

You already know the many benefits of smartphones, and I'm not anti-smart phone, here's mine. But it's important to pay attention to how our smartphones are shaping our hearts over those 2,617 touches, even if every single touch is for wholesome purposes. And I'm not asking you these questions about the phone, I'm asking us these questions, me and my home have lots of room to grow.

So as you, or I, scan your social media feeds, clicking on various pictures and links along the way, and jump around from website to website and from app to app, and watch random clips and stream shows, and play online games, and send and receive texts, calls, and emails, is all that information encouraging clarity or confusion in how you live? When you're finished with your phone, do you often feel more hopeful and energized, or overwhelmed and drained?

And as your smartphone interrupts you with texts, calls, and notifications, not to mention the opportunity to go online anytime you're bored, or to engage with your work 24 hours a day, is all that making your face-to-face relationships better or worse? And is all that interruption helping or hindering your ability to stay focused on your studies or work, or as you pray?

As you, and I, have gotten used to your smart phone's speed, have you found yourself in life becoming more patient or impatient? If you leave the house and forget your smartphone, do you feel fine, or anxious? As you use your smartphone, mostly by yourself, to consume what you want and avoid what you want, do you find yourself becoming more focused on others, or on yourself?

As you pay attention to your usage of your smartphone, plus all your other digital devices, what direction are they taking you and your home? Is it more towards, or away from, character formation? More towards, or away from, healthy relationships?

Using a smartphone is easy, and it brings benefits; it has a place, but if you use it a lot, pay attention to where it's taking you and your home.

In *The Tech-Wise Family*, Andy Crouch says, "Technology, with all its gifts, poses one of the greatest threats ever conceived by human society to the formation of wise, courageous persons that real family and real community are all about."⁶

Next Step

This morning we've seen the importance of paying attention to your attention, because our attention impacts our direction. So if you're like me, your next step this morning is to pay less attention to your digital devices and media. I've got two strategies to suggest for this.

The first is to put all your devices away at mealtime, not just in your pocket, but physically in another part of the house so that they can't interrupt you while you share a meal. If you've got young kids, like we do, until it becomes a habit, they're very happy to point out if you forget and have a device at the table. Mealtime can be a great chance to grow our relationships and form our character as we connect with each other.

Now if we're keeping it real, every once in a while, we let our kids watch a show while we eat, either because we're pretty much done with things, or because Steph and I need to talk about something without interruptions. But our general pattern is no devices at the table.

And while we're keeping it real, we're not always glad about this policy, relationships and parenting can be difficult at times, it's easier to escape with a screen. But God can use the messiness of these real relationships to form us into people of greater love, wisdom, and virtue, if we don't short-circuit that process by being glued to screens.

Our second next step strategy this morning is to have your devices, and any devices your kids have, go to bed before you, in a different room than your bedrooms. Having your devices go to bed before you, in a different room, gives you more space to connect with others in your home and with God. It also keeps your digital devices away from you when you're most tired and vulnerable to making unwise choices.

I started having my phone go to bed before me about a month ago and have already seen benefits to not having screens at the end of the day. So I'm continuing this practice, and I encourage it for you too. And parents, if you've got a teen with their own device, I doubly

⁶ Crouch, Andy, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 62.

encourage you not to let them have it in their rooms with them all night, help them to guard their hearts in this way.

And if you want to get really countercultural here, you could have your devices both go to bed before you and wake up after you, as Andy Crouch suggests. This would give you space in the mornings and evenings to connect with God and your home without digital disruptions, to begin and end your day with things that are more important.

And if you're thinking, "well, my phone is my alarm, so I can't do this...", my phone was my alarm too. But for 10 bucks on Amazon you can buy an old school alarm. That purchase might be a wise use of your digital device today.

There's a time and place for digital devices and media, I engage with both, but it's hard to steward them well, so it's important to pay attention. Because we've been talking about things that can impact your mental health, your relationships, your walk with God, your productivity, your character, and your home.

And I don't want to sound overly alarmist, but we're up against multi-billion dollar companies, some of which are leveraging the latest insights in brain science to keep us playing their game, watching their content, engaging on their platform, all the while making money on our attention through purchases, ads, and data collection.

So I hope you'll take these next steps with me, to put some wise limits in place. Will you put your devices away at mealtime, and put them to bed before you?

When we're putting our kids to bed, we usually stay in there with them for a bit after we turn off the lights, as they're falling asleep. Oftentimes I'll get out my phone at this point. But recently, as I've been trying to apply these ideas, instead of paying attention to my phone, I've paid attention to my family. One recent night, our kids were in Grant's bunkbed, and I'm standing up next to Grant as he lays in the top bunk, my hand on his heart, feeling it beating, and he starts to breathe more deeply, drifting towards sleep. And I look down, and in the glow of the nightlight, I see Steph's hair shining, and I see her holding hands with our little sweetie Kate as she's falling asleep. It was a rich moment of gratitude and worship, and I would have missed it if I had been paying attention to my phone, rather than paying attention to what really matters. So let's have homes, and a church home, that pays attention to what really matters. Let's pray...

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