

## Help for the Digitally Drowning Family

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As a continuation of our Family Month series, today are talking about a subject that is the quiet epidemic silently reshaping the culture of our homes, our children, and our society: the invasion of technology, screens, and social media into nearly every waking moment of our lives. It is everywhere and nearly everyone in our society is connected 24/7. This has never been true in all of human history and we are years from being able to fully see the lasting impact.

To give an example of the silent epidemic, if you have a cell phone, pull it out. Let's do a test. Will you please turn it off? How does it feel? You are off the grid. You are out of the matrix. Just think, someone might have texted you seconds ago, and you don't know what it says. Are you starting to get fidgety? I guarantee someone has posted something on Facebook that would be very interesting to you. Their family photos from Halloween. But your phone is off. You are off the grid. How many people quietly and inwardly are feeling a real anxiety right now? How many times will you accidentally check your phone forgetting that it is off?

This is called **FOMO – Fear of Missing Out**. This is a real mental condition. It drives incessant clicking and Internet surfing. It's the fear that something has been said, done, posted, or communicated, and you don't know about it. Something has happened in some faraway place in the last 10 minutes and you don't know about it already. FOMO. Do you have FOMO?



"Social Media Zombies" by Steve Cutts

This subject is massive, and one message will only touch on some things. I am going to give suggestions, but unless you are convinced that there is a better life apart from the pixels, you are unlikely to make any substantial life change. Today maybe. By Wednesday, you'll be right back to FaceCrack and Zombieland.

## The Obsessions of the Healthy Christian

There is a life of human flourishing and vibrancy that God made for us. Only two people experienced it fully and wholly—Adam and Eve prior to the Fall. While there was nothing digital or electronic, there certainly was basic technology. Adam began to adjust his environment; in a sense, naming the animals was a first step. Developing language was another. Very quickly in Genesis men began to form tools for farming and even instruments for music. Technological advancement is rooted in God's creation mandate that we subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28). We use the raw materials God made to rule and steward our planet. The Bible is far from anti-technology. The Bible itself uses technology to be the Bible. The written word. Ink and papyrus. Letters delivered via Roman roads.

But rooted in this technological advancement is a perplexing question, *who are we as human beings and how can we flourish as God intended with the technology invasion of smartphones, screens, and constant connectivity?*

Jesus received a similar question. It sounds different but it's essentially the same. A scholar of the first century asked him, which command of Scripture is the most important?

*"And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37–39 ESV)*

The best life we can live and the greatest enjoyment we can have is to have our highest goal and treasure to be God. *It's all about Him.* Loving God is a command and is also a path to joy if we pursue, by faith, Jesus as our Lord and Savior. But we must also love our neighbor. We were made for deep human relationships starting with family relationships. Father. Mother. Sibling. Son. Daughter.

We obsess about loving God and others. At the same time, anything that distracts from the flourishing of my relationship with God and others should be moderated or even eliminated. Agreed?

The reason this is a challenge with technology is that technology is not inherently bad or wrong. The spiritually immature want to argue everything as right or wrong. But technology itself is not immoral. It becomes such depending on how and why we use it. This is wisdom.

*"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." (1 Corinthians 6:12)*

There are things that are free for a Christian to do, yet which may not be helpful or may dominate our lives. Wisdom is required. This applies to the pixel obsession of our society. Not whether technology is evil, but wisdom questions like: *Is it addictive? Does it distract from loving God and others? Is it slowly dominating my life?* How are you feeling after 10 minutes off the grid?

The average smartphone owner checks their phone 81,500 times a year or every 4.3 minutes of our waking lives. Why? I already mentioned FOMO – fear of missing out. But really this obsession has a deeper root.

As the ancient theologian Blaise Pascal noted (with Reinke additions), *if you "take away their diversion, you will see them dried up with weariness," because it is to be*

*ushered into unhappiness "as soon as we are reduced to thinking of self, and have no diversion." Pascal's point is a perennial fact: the human appetite for distraction is high in every age, because distractions give us easy escape from the silence and solitude whereby we become acquainted with our finitude, our inescapable mortality, and the distance of God from all our desires, hopes, and pleasures.<sup>1</sup> (Tony Reinke)*

In a small way, mindless phone checks and distracting clicks are a human being looking for something. Something to fill an unrecognized void in their hearts. A bus filled with teenagers all engrossed in their phones reveals the human condition. A dad regularly engrossed in his phone while his kids play around him is saying something about longings and worth. In the immortal words of U2, *we still haven't found what we're looking for*. As dazzling as each shiny device or IOS update is, none provide the lasting meaning we crave.

Reinke asks questions about our smartphone use, among them are:

- *"Do my smartphone habits expose an underlying addiction to untimely amusements?*
- *Do my smartphone habits reveal a compulsive desire to be seen and affirmed?*
- *Do my smartphone habits distract me from genuine communion with God?*
- *Do my smartphone habits preoccupy me with the pursuit of worldly success?*
- *Do my smartphone habits disengage me from the needs of the neighbors God has placed right in front of me?"<sup>2</sup> (Tony Reinke)*

Convicting enough? For me too. So, what should we do? How should we approach the technological marvels? Here are some helps.

### **You MUST Pre-determine Your Family's Technology Culture**

I say pre-determine because billions of dollars of research and development are invested to allow Facebook, Apple, and others to decide your family culture. If you let Mark Zuckerberg and Tim Cook decide your home's culture, your kids will become digital zombies and you likely will too. Most of these apps are designed to be addictive, like a casino.

Much of what I'm sharing here comes from two books (see covers below): *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You* by Tony Reinke and *The Tech-Wise Family* by Andy Crouch. Both are fantastic.



<sup>1</sup> Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

Crouch speaks to the cultural issue, *“three choices...are especially fundamental. The first and deepest is to choose character—to make the mission of our family, for children and adults alike, the cultivation of wisdom and courage.”*<sup>3</sup>

Wisdom involves knowledge and learning. Courage involves risk-taking and exploring. Character is slowly shaped over time. None of these come from passive participation in a digital experience. Here’s the wonderful reality. Each of us gets to decide the culture of our homes.

Parents, your child is not mature enough on their own to have a healthy relationship with screens and media. My daughters LOVE the iPad. They were digitally capable at 18 months or so. Why? The most brilliant minds of this world are becoming billionaires because they create attention and obsessive need for their product. Thousands of design engineers and human behavior sociologists are being paid enormous amounts of money to capture you and your child’s attention. They are billionaires for a reason.

Buying a smartphone for your child is likely the most significant and potential perilous decision you will make in your entire parenting life. It’s a life-changer. A family culture changer. I’m not saying, don’t; just think very carefully before you do it. *“We only get one life to live. Wouldn’t it be better spent enjoying and serving the world God made rather than a glowing screen?”*<sup>4</sup> (Courtney Reissig)

We need to get ahead and a hold of the technology and access before it gets a hold of our family. There are many new data management helps. Here’s one:

**The Circle Device** – It monitors and controls access for every device and app. You can set time limits and when Wi-Fi is available and to whom. Get a hold of your family’s culture and don’t let societal norms do it for you.

### **You MUST Practice Digital Sabbaths to Fight the Addiction**

Andy Crouch again: *“The discipline here is committing to this simple rule: the screen stays off and blank unless we are using it together and for a specific creative purpose.”*<sup>5</sup> Further, the best way to fight the addiction to smartphones is to exercise discipline and self-control. A Sabbath is an intentional time away from our devices or TV. *“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.”*<sup>6</sup> (Andy Crouch)

The level of aversion to this thought is itself an indication of whether this is a problem in your life or not. Do digital Sabbaths.

### **You MUST Determine to LIVE Present and Interpersonally**

The vortex of media and passive engagement creates superficial minds and superficial family relationships. We easily share presence in a room but don’t share presence with one

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<sup>3</sup> Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Courtney Reissig, “Let Andy Crouch Help Your Family Become Tech-Wise,” [Thegospelcoalition.org](http://Thegospelcoalition.org), April 12, 2017.)

<sup>5</sup> Crouch, p. 149.

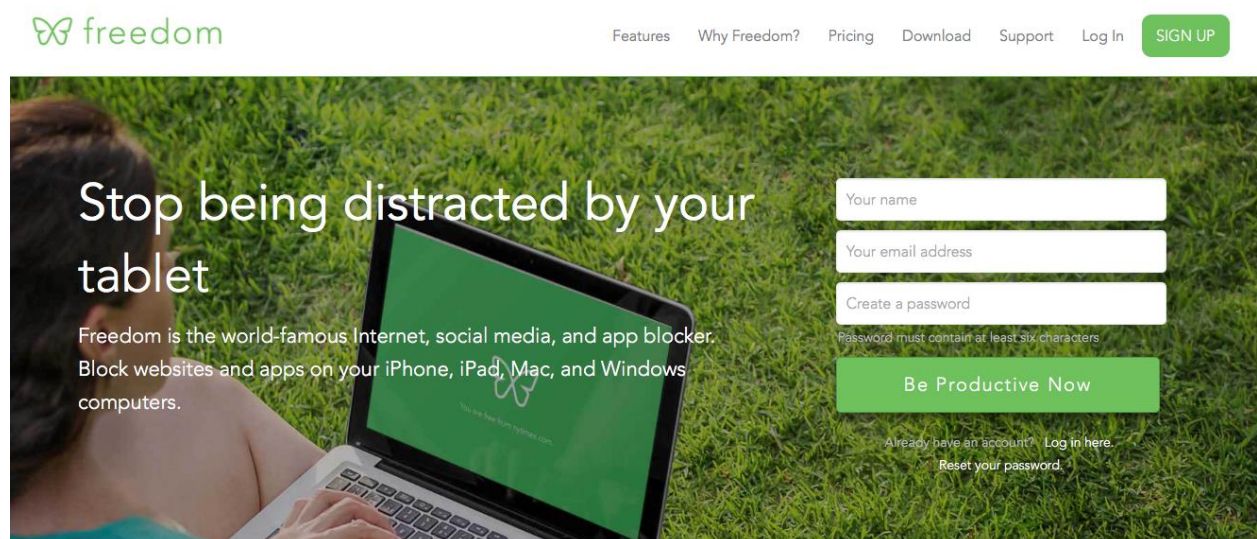
<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

another. This will happen naturally during Sabbath times but what about the rest of the time?

There is a whole movement right now away from smartphones. Many people are going back to flip phones or data-free phones just to get their lives back again. Maybe you should consider that.

There are ways to do it without throwing your \$800 phone away. Did you know you can dumb down your smartphone? I don't have time to explain how but there are settings to help. Go grayscale. Use the do not disturb. Please turn off all the notifications and beeps. Dumb the smart watch down or go buy a Mickey Mouse watch. It might transform your life.

### **The Freedom App (See screenshot below)**



## Block the Internet, Apps, and Websites

Freedom is the app and website blocker used by over 500,000 people to improve focus and productivity.  
Try Freedom for free today - no credit card required.

We must rid ourselves of digital distraction if we are ever going to be human as God intended. Be present with people. Focus your mind on others in conversation. Psalm 1 says that the righteous man meditates on God's Word day and night. That's hard to do with an iPhone nearby. These devices become unhelpful if they distract us from loving God and loving people.

Andy Crouch's suggested family commitments are fantastic.<sup>7</sup>

- 1. We develop wisdom and courage together as a family.**
- 2. We want to create more than we consume. So we fill the center of our home with things that reward skill and active engagement.**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 41-42.

Crouch suggests making the heart of your home screen and TV free. Fill the heart of the home with games, art opportunities, books, and things that promote active interaction with each other.

**3. 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.**

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

How many of us check our phones in the first five minutes of waking up? We begin our day confronted with news of natural disaster, violence, murder, and rape, and all manner of evil and problems in the world. His suggestion is to stand by the coffee pot and smell. Open the front door and breathe. Be human before you become a zombie again.

Further, put the phones to bed before you go to bed. Parents, do not let your children have any device, computer, or Internet access in their rooms or anywhere else alone. There is too much porn, too many perverts and predators to make that ever a good idea. Jennifer and I are taking this to heart and putting a Bluetooth phone in our room that allows the emergency call to get to us without having our phones in the bedroom.

**5. We aim for “no screens before double digits” at school and at home.** Crouch suggests no screens before age 10.

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

**7. Car time is conversation time** (not screen time)

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

Parents, you must know your kids’ communications. This is hard with disappearing communication apps, but do the best you can. If your child protests, it means you have a problem. No secrets. Spouses need full access all the time and should be non-defensive about it. *Nothing to hide, nothing to fear.*

That is a lot of information. I offer it hoping at least the urgency of this sticks and we all make small steps toward the life God intended, which is a life not dominated by pixels. Are we free? Sure. Is it wise? Is it helpful? Does it promote or distract from loving God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength and loving my neighbor as myself?

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