



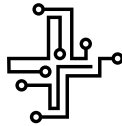
THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

DISCIPLESHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE



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INTRODUCTION

Today, we are inundated with summaries on social media and in our inboxes of things someone thinks we should know, *just in case you missed it*.

As I write this, every day, I see another thread telling me what I missed and the latest breakthroughs in the world of AI — not for that week or month, but from the past twenty-four hours! Things are moving and changing fast.

Thankfully, what isn't moving and doesn't change is the Word of God. This ancient book contains everything we need to live the Christian life faithfully, even in the age of the flip phone, the iPhone, or the metaverse.

As we will see in later chapters, there have been many negative consequences to the rapid technological advances of the twenty-first century, but there have also been many blessings. I can't imagine how difficult it would have been for my wife and me when we moved to the United States if we couldn't message or FaceTime our family and friends back in Australia. As we observe the good that has come, we must give thanks to God, for we know that ultimately, every good gift comes from him (James 1:17). We must also take seriously the need to steward what is available to us today to promote the proclamation of the gospel. You are living in a time in church history that is unlike any prior century. None of us wants to be like the wicked servant in the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30) and, out of fear, hide and hinder the multiplying potential of what has been entrusted to us.

At the same time, part of our calling as Christians is not only to steward the technology available to us for the advance of the gospel, but also to be keenly aware of the shortfalls — and the evils — that can come from technology. Suppose you are passive, adopting what the world adopts without question. In that case, there is no doubt that such an approach will negatively affect the fruitfulness of your Christian life as the world does

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not, nor can it, naturally gravitate toward that which honors God.

Our digital age can feel daunting, even overwhelming sometimes. Still, it is my prayer that as you work through this field guide, perhaps with the help of a mentor, you will not only accept the great responsibility that is upon a Christian in the twenty-first century if you decide to use the internet-connected tools of today but that God would equip you with wisdom and the practical application of his unchanging Word.

1

THE GOOD OR THE BAD OF IT

“Dad, may I have an iPhone for my birthday?” I hope all thoughtful Christian parents hear that question with a sense of dread. Sadly, from what I have observed, that’s not the reality. If you’re a younger person: When you received your first phone, was there much negotiation with Mom and Dad?

When my oldest daughter asked me that question, my heart began to race because I knew what was at stake. But why the concern? This smartphone can’t think for itself and has no fallen nature, so it can’t be bad, right?

If you had asked me when my children were much younger, I would probably have agreed. My position would have been that our smartphones and all the apps were generally neutral — not necessarily good or bad. It all just depended on how you used them. However, after further study over the past decade, reading more recent studies that have tracked the impact of social media, the internet, and smartphones on teenagers (and simply observing the fallout myself), that’s not my view today.

When I grew up, my phone wasn’t smart. It couldn’t even fit in my pocket. It was attached to a wall (I know, how inconvenient!). I remember the weekend my parents purchased a portable phone. I waited all weekend for the phone to ring to test it out, but no one called. Anyway, that piece of technology could be better described more closely as being neutral. You could use that phone to call 911 and save a life. That would be a good thing. But you could also use that phone to prank someone or dial the illicit pay-by-the-minute numbers often advertised on late-night TV. Those decisions would be immoral.

In this case, the phone is relatively neutral and depends on how you use it.

Even though the phone of the 90s was largely neutral, it wasn’t without impact. It had already begun to change me. I didn’t go out that first weekend because I didn’t want to miss a call. I had friends who were only a

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10-20-minute walk away, and I began to visit them less often because I could pick up the phone and call them. Although to a much lesser degree than today, this phone had already begun to encroach on my time outside and in face-to-face conversations.

Today, our phones are smart, and one of the last things we do with them is *call* people, let alone answer a phone call! Instead, these devices in our pockets are filled with hundreds of apps and are connected to the internet 24/7. We spend our time on social media scrolling, in our messaging apps sending memes and writing witty replies, and diverting calls to voicemail.

As an example of how fast things have changed, “the talk” today has more to do with pornography, the dangers of communicating online, and other topics we’ll get to later in the field guide than “the birds and the bees.”

For this field guide, when I address whether today’s technology is neutral, I’m referring more to the apps and online services that we all spend so much of our time on — with a particular focus on social media. Let’s consider those platforms, whether Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or others. Are they neutral? Are they “good” for humanity?

Regarding free over-the-air television (yes, there was a time before on-demand TV and cable), Richard Serra said, “If something is free, you’re the product.” It was true then, and it’s true of social media today. *You* are the product. Let that sink in. Although a company’s mission statement might speak of connecting the world, its product roadmap is driven by revenue for its founders or shareholders by selling advertising (primarily). That comes through increasing monthly active users and their time on the platform.

What does that mean practically? If a platform discovers that hostile and angry posts and threads receive more engagement than positive or neutral messages (they do, by the way), they will tweak their algorithm to favor the negative and suppress the positive. That’s also why the 6 o’clock news isn’t filled with lovely things people did that day. Suppose you were active on social media during COVID-19 or any election season in the United States. In that case, you will have experienced this reality regardless of your social, medical, or political views. As a result, our news feeds provide a distorted view of reality and our society. And this will continue because the driving force behind most platforms is not truth, awareness, and human flourishing but engagement and revenue.

Since we generally prefer to see images of friends or strangers in perfect settings, framed just the right way, and wearing the most fashionable out-

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fit, the algorithm pushes those images to more people. As they engage by liking or hearting the photo, the feedback loop for the one who posted it encourages them to take more photos that are likely to receive even greater affirmation from the anonymous sea of kudos.

As a result, our Instagram feeds are filled with beautiful people living beautiful lives, all while the ones posting the photos may be failing exams, breaking up with boyfriends, arguing with parents, or being abused at home.

We long for their profile-perfect lives while growing discontent with our own — some even to the point of self-harm.

Since the release of the iPhone in 2007, we have seen a generation of teenagers experience brokenness to such a degree that no reasonable person can call this digital age neutral. We must be serious and proactive to protect ourselves, our children, and honor Christ.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What is your relationship like with your phone? Would you be able to say you master it, or does it master you?
2. How does this chapter convict you towards making changes in how you use technology?

2

THE DIGITAL AGE & IDENTITY

“Who am I?” This is one of the foundational questions philosophers and world religions have attempted to answer over millennia. But it’s not a question reserved for philosophers only. It’s a question every teenager wrestles with, and if we’re honest, it’s a question that isn’t limited to our teenage years.

John Calvin famously said that man’s heart is a perpetual idol factory. That means we’re always creating things to worship and idolize in place of the one true and living God. If you’ve read the Old Testament, you will read of people literally cutting down trees and carving for themselves figurines that they would paint and bow down to, but that’s not the world most of us live in today. Despite that, our idol factory is fully operational. It is busy creating idols, not for use in pagan worship services, but for no less idolatrous and destructive ways. And one of the most dangerous idols today is the idol of *identity*.

I don’t believe it is an overstatement to say that the idol of identity has reached pandemic proportions. This is true even apart from the issue of identity and the LGBTQ+ community and the rising generation being told they can change and adopt their preferred gender identities.

This pandemic is visible to each of us (if we’re willing to look) thanks to how social media gives us a glimpse into people’s lives due to their general willingness to post even the most personal and vulnerable of videos to a global audience of strangers (a symptom of this pandemic). However, this pandemic has also been fueled and accelerated due to the very nature of social media itself.

If you scroll through social media, you get the sense that everybody else has it all together. But is that reality?

I remember some years ago reading of an Australian Instagram influencer

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who quit posting bikini and glamor photos, describing it as “contrived perfection made to get attention...” The reality was she would take countless photos to get the right pose and would suck in her stomach to look just right. That fun evening out wasn’t fun; it was spent trying to get the right photo. Remember, Instagram does not equal reality. But the drive for likes, attention, and celebrity is powerful, and we will suffer greatly to get attention.

You and I might not be Instagram models (or whatever platform is significant when you’re reading this). Still, even as Christians, we can fall into this same trap. Here’s a quick temperature check for you: When you post on social media, do you post and run, or do you post and check, and check again, and check again, to see what the response is like? And pushing even deeper, what happens if the reaction is slow? How do you feel? Suppose you take it personally and it discourages you. In that case, you may be placing your identity in things that will eventually disappoint.

The existence of influencer models, influencer families, and influencer [fill in the blank] results in another side effect: covetousness. When we scroll through social media profiles, we may literally covet the person in the photo and sin in the form of lust (we’ll discuss that in chapter five), but more subtly, we can covet their fame, their beauty, their success, and their happiness. We ask ourselves, “Why don’t I look like that in photos?” “Why don’t I get as many likes when I post on social media?” “Why isn’t my marriage or my vacation as fun as theirs?”

We begin to place our personal value and worth in the idols of success, fame, and external beauty, revealing that we are experiencing an identity crisis. But remember, success and fame will pass. External beauty will always disappoint, because those who chase it will always find something that needs to be improved, and the aging process will always pass you before you get to the finish line.

It reminds me of hearing that rich people can be some of the most depressed people on the planet and far more depressed than poor people. Why? Poor people live day-to-day thinking they may make it big one day and that all their financial and personal problems will go away. Compare that to rich people. They *have* made it big and are still insecure, confused about who they are, and chasing acceptance from the world. Poor people have hope, but outside of Christ, rich people are hopeless. Saint Augustine was right all those years ago when he said that God has made us for himself and that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. Does your use of social media make you more or less restless?

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If you're discontent when you scroll through social media, you are placing a higher value on certain things than God does. God isn't saving only the bold and the beautiful. In fact, if you're a Christian, God might have saved you to shame the wise and to ensure no one can boast before God:

...not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:26–29).

That's a humbling portion of the Bible. God isn't looking for beautiful people with profile-perfect social media accounts to save as he redeems a people for himself. He knows that, ultimately, what many of us do on social media is more akin to the work of a mortician: spending our days putting makeup on a corpse. Externally, we might look alive, but outside of God's mercy and grace, we are dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). And it was in our state of deadness, warts and all, that God set his love on us and sent Jesus to live, die, and rise again for our salvation. Now, that's good news, and news that liberates us from trying to impress the world.

So, what is the solution to this pandemic-level identity crisis? Finding our identity in Christ. If you're not a Christian, you will remain in the state of restlessness that Saint Augustine described unless you repent, trust in Christ alone for salvation, and find your identity in him. But for the Christian, there is good news here that must be believed and preached to yourself daily.

The Apostle Paul tells us that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). You are not who you once were. You have a new identity as one who is in Christ. And Paul continues with even more good news: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). This means that you are a new creation with all of the righteousness you will ever need for acceptance with God.

When you discover that you are fully accepted by God the Father, thanks to the work of God the Son, you can be freed from the pressure of finding your identity and seeking acceptance from the world. Then, if you post on social media, you won't need to do it to win the world's praise. You can do it, in the words of Paul, "to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). After all, you

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have a new identity in Christ so that, ultimately, you can proclaim his identity to a lost and dying world and not your own.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What are some reasons it's crucial to understand our identity in Christ when it comes to how we relate to our digital age?
2. How should you respond to the loving gift of being united to Christ by faith alone?

3

THE DIGITAL AGE & TIME

I remember reading a popular Christian preacher and teacher say that one of the greatest uses of social media will be to prove on the last day that prayerlessness was not from a lack of time. As I've reflected on my own prayer life, I've said before that I don't struggle with prayer; I struggle with my priorities. The reality is that we've all been given enough time by God to accomplish all that he requires of us. The question for each of us is how we spend that time and whether we steward it well.

I just used a concept that isn't commonly spoken of today: stewardship. That's an important principle for us to understand as Christians. In earlier times, a steward was someone who was given the responsibility to manage the affairs of a household, particularly to make wise decisions about that household's wealth. A poor steward would spend more than the household had or fail to invest its resources wisely.

Stewardship, though, is much more than how we handle the finances for which we are responsible. R.C. Sproul connects stewardship with the mandate God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 when God told them "to be fruitful and multiply." Sproul defines stewardship as "exercising our God-given dominion over His creation..."¹ We will be judged on whether we exercise that dominion well or poorly. And that includes how we spend our time.

Time is perhaps our scarcest resource. If you're out of money, your mother or father could give you more. But we have 86,400 seconds every day and not a second more. No matter how much you ask your parents or plead with a bank, you cannot add to that number. You also cannot add to the number of days you will have on Earth. Tomorrow is not promised to any of us. All we have is the present.

To quote the King James Version, Paul tells us that we are to be "*redeeming the time*, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). He also says we are to be "making the best use of the time" (Col. 4:5). The psalmist prays

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that God would “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). And Solomon reminds his readers to consider the stewarding and hard-working nature of the ant so that we may be wise (Prov. 6:6).

How we use our time is just as important as how we use our finances, and the scarcity of time should elevate it in our thinking. Even though we have more usable time today than most Christians throughout church history, many of us waste it without giving it a second thought. Before the late nineteenth century, no one had artificial light. The day was over when the sun went down without the help of candlelight. Today, we doom scroll until today has become tomorrow.

I quoted Serra in chapter one, who reminded us that if something is free, you are the product. This is true when it comes to the data you give these technology companies as they study, optimize, and, in some cases, likely sell this data. Your digital fingerprint is crystal clear and a valuable commodity. But your time is even more valuable for most of these technology companies. The more time you spend using their app, the more money they can make from selling advertising. The worst thing these companies can tell their shareholders is that monthly active users are down or that daily usage is down. Less time quite literally means less money. And this is called the “attention economy.”

Those in this field have stumbled upon something significant — a concept that we as Christians need to think about deeply: time is a finite commodity. Brands know this, so they are battling to secure more of your time and attention than their competing brands. You and I need to be in a battle, too: the battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, ensuring that this precious and finite commodity (time) is used each day in ways that maximize the fruitfulness of the resources, talents, and responsibilities that God has given us to the end that it brings him glory.

Although it is not impossible to do this on social media, the more you consider the fruitless time we spend on social media, the harder it is to see a place for it in the Christian life without great discipline. A recent Gallup survey reported that, on average, the majority of U.S. teens use social media for 4.8 hours each day. Let that sink in. That’s six full twenty-four-hour days a month or almost 2.5 months a year spent on social media. As stewards, how will we give an account to God for this time?

Even if you’re not actively using social media for hours every day, the very presence of social media and other apps on a smartphone brings with it another challenge: distraction. Do you ever reach for your device

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without realizing why you grabbed it? There was no notification, and you had no purpose. Still, the feedback loop that has been created through notifications, texts, and FOMO — the fear of missing out — has trained you to reach for this device and just “check.” One author described the addictive nature of pulling down to refresh your inbox, even if there are no new emails, as being as powerful as an addicted gambler pulling the lever on a slot machine. This pull to our devices is so strong that another study showed that it only took six minutes into studying before teenagers reached for their devices and were distracted.

So whether you’re wasting time by doom scrolling or you’re not being as effective as you could be because you’re always in a state of distraction, as Christians living in the twenty-first century, we need to take time seriously and the threat that these platforms and devices are to it.

At the end of our lives, we may regret how much time we spent mindlessly scrolling, but things we will never regret will include the time we spent in God’s Word and in prayer.

I can hear some of your responses now, and yes, we are all busy. Our plates are full, and they will likely always be full. This is why I was convicted when I read Martin Luther saying, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” Saying “yes” to what honors God and is wise stewardship will require saying “no” to other things.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. What are the resources and gifts God has uniquely given you to steward?
2. How should you live differently knowing that “time is a finite commodity”?

4

THE DIGITAL AGE & COMMUNITY

Report after report and survey after survey reveal that we are facing a crisis of loneliness and an increase in anxiety. And the younger you are, the greater you are affected. Many factors have contributed to this, but the rise of the smartphone is significant. Although these devices promised to connect the world, they have broken that promise and provided the reverse. Today, the most connected generations are the most disconnected from true community and deep relationships. Why?

In the last chapter, we considered how we are almost always in a state of distraction and how that affects our time and fruitfulness. But this distractedness also influences our relationships: consider the teenagers who used to ride their bikes to each other's house to "hang out," but today they only talk to each other over a microphone, in the presence of an online squad, while distracted by multiple inputs as chats come in and battle strategy changes. Or the friends who would catch up over coffee and talk so quickly that they didn't realize two hours and two coffees had passed, but today, they sit at the cafe staring at their phones. Or, as a father, the most heartbreaking for me is seeing the family out at a restaurant, with the young children on tablets and the mom and dad on their phones. Our distractedness and dependence on communicating via text have hindered our ability to simply look a person in the eye and say "Hi."

In contrast, consider the perspective of the Apostle John in his second letter:

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete (2 John 1:12).

Over and above mediated communication (using paper and ink), he hoped to be with them "face to face, so that [their] joy may be complete." Yet, how do you feel if someone knocks on your door? Or even if your phone rings? For many young people today, such moments seem like intrusions and

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induce anxiety and dread. But we were made for relationships and community — “face to face” relationships — and not made to be afraid of them.

You and I are made in the image of God, and our God is a trinitarian God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a result, we are made for communal relationships. Consider the creation account. Before the fall, what was the one thing God said was not good? That Adam was alone. In Eden, Eve was created as a solution, but today, it seems both Adam and Eve are alone. Are you?

Not only have these devices constantly drawn our gaze down instead of into the eyes of a loved one or friend, they have also given us false confidence to speak online without restraint. Words that we would never say to someone “face to face,” we boldly leave as a comment. James tells us that “no human being can tame the tongue” (James 3:8), and social media has proven that to be true on a grand scale. Simple etiquette and the biblical command to love your neighbor have been laid aside, even by many professing Christians. Jesus said, “All people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Yet, many Christians have made it a habit to devour each other online. When we do this, we are sinning, and these are sins that require repentance.

I’ve only scratched the surface, but the negative impact of today’s digital age on families and personal relationships should grieve us. As Christians, we have been saved into another family as well: the body of Christ. So, it should concern us most when these trends from outside the church enter this eternal family, too.

To state it plainly, an increasing number of Christians neglect the weekly gathering of the saints, and this is disobedience to Scripture. Hebrews commands us not to neglect “to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). But the worship service has been dissected in our minds and habits in the same way that podcast episodes are clipped and posted online. Throughout the week, we play recordings of other people singing praise to God from a streaming service. We listen to sermons from world-class preachers with the tap of a screen. So why bother getting up early on Sunday when we can treat church like another Zoom meeting? Because we were made for embodied worship with God’s people. God blesses these gatherings, and we need them in order to grow. There should not be any lone ranger Christians, even if they have an internet connection.

Before COVID-19 accelerated churches streaming their services, I had said publicly that, at best, online church is inferior, and at worst, it is an

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oxymoron. I stand by that. So, while watching a livestream can help someone who is shut in and cannot get to church, it is no recipe for sustained spiritual growth and accountability.

As a new Christian who was not yet attending church regularly, I remember asking a lifelong Christian questions about Christianity that they couldn't answer. Unsatisfied in my pursuit of truth, my response was simple: "Then I need to go to church." I was very young in the faith, but my instinct was good. Sadly, today, our instinct is often to simply Google it when what we really need is our local church.

I am grateful for the technological advances that allow the distribution of trusted teaching to those who otherwise would not have access to it and to help the hungry Christian grow through the week. However, what is found on faithful and trusted YouTube channels and in Christian apps should always be a supplement to, not a replacement for, membership and participation in a local church. I host *Renewing Your Mind*, a daily podcast and radio program that provides such trusted Bible teaching. Still, as healthy Christians engage more deeply with God's Word through the teaching they hear on the program, it should draw them closer to the local church, not further away from it.

The church did not become irrelevant because sermon libraries appeared online. As an image bearer, your need for human relationships did not change because you grew up looking at a screen instead of in people's eyes. We need healthy communities in our families, friend groups, and the local church to stand boldly and face today's challenges.

Don't Google it. Go to church.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How are your relationships affected by how you use technology?
2. What are some ways that you can beneficially use technology?

5

THE DIGITAL AGE & SEXUAL SIN

Sexual sin is not new to our day. As we'll see later, sexual immorality was addressed head-on by Jesus and the writers of both the Old and New Testaments. Have you ever considered that the very fact that the Book of Leviticus is so specific with its regulations regarding what sexual relationships are forbidden tells us a lot about human nature? We actually need such clear directives to help restrain our sinful hearts.

Sexual sin is such a broad topic, so for this chapter, I want to focus our attention on the sin of pornography. Why? Our digital age has radically changed pornography in two significant ways, and the church needs to discuss this complex topic and provide support and discipleship to prepare and protect younger Christians and help keep mature Christians from falling.

Firstly, our digital age has dramatically lowered the threshold to gain access to pornography. At the same time, it has significantly increased the explicit nature of pornography that almost anyone can access with the tap of a screen.

For most of my pre-teen and early teenage life, pornography was not even a consideration. I wasn't a Christian then, but I couldn't access it even if I wanted to. The internet was new, and I couldn't access it at home. In fact, the first time I used the internet was on a 90s Mac with a text-only browser. For the teenager growing up in the 70s, 80s, or 90s, access to pornography typically only occurred if a friend discovered his father's magazine collection or if you found a page torn out of one of those magazines in a sketchy part of town. That's not true for pre-teens and teenagers today. For them, if they use the internet, pornography is almost forced upon them whether they search for it or not. One study suggested that 34% of internet users had unintentionally been exposed to pornography due to ads, pop-ups, mis-directed links, or email. Has that ever happened to you?

Sadly, even though unintended exposure happens, it is also true that over a third of all internet downloads are related to pornography, with 68 million por-

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nography-related searches performed every day. The demand is so high today that several pornography websites feature in the top 20 most-trafficked sites online. At the time I'm writing this, one such site even appears in the top ten.

It has been said that you hunger for what you consume, and as the appetite for pornography increases, so does the vile and dark nature of that pornography. Yesterday's image no longer fulfills today's desire. But before this digital age, it was very difficult to gain access to the more explicit or even illegal kinds of pornography. It would be a shameful topic to bring up with people you knew, so finding out how to order and access it via the postal service was highly secretive and expensive. This is no longer the case, and online forums and communities have actually fostered the sinful desire of lust and a sinful curiosity in people who, outside of our digital age, would have never had the opportunity and possibly the desire to explore. Have you ever been tempted to click a link or on an image you knew was inappropriate? Would you say that your family and local church helped prepare you for the torrent of temptation that would come your way when you were given access to a smartphone or internet-connected device?

R.C. Sproul was often asked by well-meaning Christians, "What's God's will for my life?" He'd answer that he didn't know God's decreed will specifically for that individual as it was not written in the Bible, but what he did know was 1 Thessalonians 4:3, which reads: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification..."

What is God's will for your life? That you would grow in holiness and that, by the Spirit's work in your life, you would be more and more set apart from the world in your thoughts, words, and deeds. But Paul gets very specific here. This is how the passage continues:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God (1 Thess. 4:3–5).

The will of God for your life *is* sanctification, but Paul specifically calls out sexual purity. That Christians would be men and women of control, not of passion; holiness and honor, not living in the passion of lust. So, if you have been debating whether you should stop using pornography or what to do if you stumble upon it, the answer is simple. It's God's will for you to stop today and flee from it. We are very good at rationalizing sin and making excuses. Sometimes, we even promise ourselves that we'll stop tomorrow and that today will be the last time. But there is no getting around it. God's will is not for you to spend another moment in sexual sin.

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It's also God's will that you repent of this sin. Jesus warns that "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Using an extreme image to demonstrate how seriously we should battle sexual sin and turn from it, Jesus continues, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29). Paul also tells us to "flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18).

Repenting of a particular sin does not mean that you will never be tempted by it again and will never fall into that sin again. This is why the next step can be so helpful in the proper context: tell somebody. Do you have parents that you trust? A pastor or elder in whom you can confide? Or perhaps a peer who is not only trustworthy but more spiritually mature than you? If so, confessing this sin to them and asking for their help to pray for you and to encourage you toward purity could prove vital for your growth. Shining light on sin is an excellent disinfectant. When we hide our sin, failing to confess it to God and others, it festers and grows.

There are other reasons we can easily succumb to temptation and fall back into a sin for which we have previously repented. One of those reasons is guilt and shame. When we feel ashamed of a particular sin, it can make giving up and giving in easier. "This is just who I am. I don't deserve forgiveness," we might tell ourselves. Revelation 12:10 refers to Satan as "the accuser," and he does enjoy accusing Christians, calling them by their sins instead of by their title as a son or daughter of God.

Sometimes, though, when we still feel guilt and shame after repenting of a sin, it isn't the work of Satan. Sometimes, it's the work of our flesh as we fail to believe the promise of God. God cannot lie, so 1 John 1:9 must be true, and we must believe it: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

There is liberty to be found here. Sexual sin of any kind is not the unforgivable sin. All who repent — confess their sins — and trust in Christ alone for salvation are forgiven, and in the words of John, "cleanse[d] from all unrighteousness."

In our final chapter, I will offer some suggestions to help you master the tools in this digital age rather than be mastered by them, including ways to reduce the online temptation of pornography.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How is your battle against pornography going?
2. Who in your life can you ask to help you in your sexual purity?

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MASTER TODAY'S TOOLS

Tools are only a blessing when they are used *as tools*. You need to master your tools so they don't master you. Too many of us have become enslaved to the technology of our digital age with no escape plan. What I will list in this chapter are tips, tricks, and principles that may help you escape the digital tyranny.

I'd like to preface this section by saying that my suggestions are not binding on you where there is no biblical command. These tips are options that may help you long-term, for a season, or perhaps will be of no use to you in your current situation. You are free to pick and choose or tweak and adapt. The goal is to help you be proactive in this digital battle, not passive.

Look to Christ

Robert Murray McCheyne is famous for saying, "For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ." This quote is a helpful reminder in an age of selfies and vanity. If you are consumed with yourself, it will be challenging for you to grow as a Christian. Add social media into the mix, and your self-focus can quickly be amplified. The daily posture of the Christian is to look to Jesus (Heb. 12:2).

Ask Yourself Why?

"Why?" is a simple yet powerful question. Ask it multiple times, and it can dig deep to uncover the root cause of a problem. When it comes to your social media presence, ask yourself why you're posting before you post. Does this glorify God? Does this hurt my witness as a Christian? Is this loving my neighbor? Am I posting to make others jealous? Am I posting to fish for compliments?

Pray for Contentment

Contentment can be challenging as we live in a digital age of profile-perfect people and advertisements showing how happy we would be if we purchased their new product. That's a lie, but we still need to cultivate contentment. Thankfully, the Apostle Paul tells us how. He says he "learned in

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whatever situation [he is in] to be content...” (Phil. 4:11). Before we get to the secret, notice that this is something Paul *learned*. It does not come naturally, and it is something we grow in over time. What is the secret, then?

I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil. 4:12b–13).

Paul’s secret was learning that it is through Christ, faith in him, and union with him that the believer can be content with a little or a lot. Why? Because with Christ, you have all that you need. Therefore, you can’t actually be poor. If you are wealthy, the things of this age don’t distract you, as you know the riches of Christ himself.

Whenever you feel discontent, pray for contentment. Pray, as Paul does for the saints at Ephesus, that you “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18–19). To know the love of Christ is to be fully content.

Focus Yourself

It takes effort to focus, and today, with all the distractions and temptations to procrastinate around us, it takes even more effort.

One technique that I have found helpful is the Pomodoro technique. It’s a simple technique that makes it easy to put your phone away and turn off all notifications for short periods of focused time. Here’s the general structure:

1. Ensure devices are silenced and put away.
2. Select what task you want to accomplish.
3. Set your timer for 25 minutes and work continuously until the timer goes off (don’t give in to the temptation to check social media).
4. Take a 5-minute break to stretch your legs, use the restroom, or quickly check your phone.
5. Repeat steps 3 and 4 for a total of 2 hours.
6. Take a more extended break.

This technique is named after the tomato-shaped analog timer the inventor used when he followed it in college (“pomodoro” means tomato in Italian). A bonus tip is to consider getting a similar analog timer so you don’t need to use one of the many apps to track your time. Not using your smartphone to track your time will reduce the temptation to procrastinate.

DISCIPLESHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE

Device-Free Zones

Leave it behind if you don't want to be distracted by your device. Consider a family rule: leave your devices in the kitchen when you sit at the dinner table, leave them in someone's bag at a restaurant, and don't use or charge them in your bedroom. Device-free zones can help whether you want to have more in-depth conversations at the dinner table or go to sleep earlier.

Count the Cost

Undertake the exercise of calculating how much time you spend on your phone, watching Netflix, and other forms of entertainment and distraction. This exercise will reveal a lot and give you a baseline for reducing that time.

Add a Good Habit

After counting the cost and perhaps realizing that you spend 90 minutes each evening scrolling on your phone fruitlessly, instead of trying to eliminate all 90 minutes cold turkey, add a good habit into that time slot as well. For example, commit to reading a book, writing a book, or exercising for 30 minutes, knowing that your reward is the remaining 60 minutes of that slot. As you progress, increase that to 45 minutes as you slowly see the power of your bad habit fall away.

Scripture Before Smartphone

If you start your day reaching for your device and doom scrolling, you may find that you doom scroll the entire day. As your phone is now with you, a notification might draw you back to the screen before you reach for your Bible at breakfast. Or, if your Bible is on your device, you're so drawn in by the latest viral video that you don't even open your Bible app. A solution? Consider a rule that one author coined, "Scripture before Smartphone." Until you've read your Bible for the day, you simply don't touch your phone. Said differently, another author stated: "No Bible, No Breakfast." The reality is, if you want to read your Bible every day, you'll need to prioritize it over other things.

Think Twice, Post Once

In the building industry, there is an expression, "Measure twice, cut once." If you cut a piece of lumber in the wrong spot, it can be a costly mistake. How much more costly is it to post something online to a global audience that could have ramifications instantly or even months and years into the future? James tells us to "be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger..." (James 1:19). Avoid responding online with a hot take or out of frustration. Most social media snafus could have been avoided if those who caused them had simply slept on it and reevaluated the post the following day before hitting send.

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Make Face-to-Face a Priority

How many friends do you have online? You might have hundreds, if not thousands. But how many close friends do you really have? You are blessed if you have close and trusted friends in the low single digits. You should prioritize face-to-face communication with these people over texting. Make an effort to have monthly (or more often) coffee meetups or other activities. Water these relationships and see them bear fruit for years to come.

Suppose you can't meet in person because they live out of state. In that case, a video call still allows you to see facial expressions and body language, fostering a deeper relationship to grow.

Face Plant That Device

You can't always make it a device-free zone. Consider placing your device face down on the table when you're meant to be listening and engaging with someone so you don't see notifications on the screen. Even if your device is on silent, you will still hear it vibrate if you get an important call.

Upgrade Your Communications

Communications have been downgraded today. Texting is preferred over phone calls, and the thought of a face-to-face conversation can be terrifying. Why not challenge yourself to upgrade your communications within your friend group and family when possible? Those you would think of but never text, send them a message saying you were thinking of them. Those you text often, why not give them a call? And invite those you are comfortable speaking with on the phone for coffee.

If you really want to challenge culture and make an impression on someone, write and mail them a neat, handwritten letter.

Limit Screen Time

We all need screen-time limits, whether stated or not, as none of us can mindlessly scroll on our devices or play video games 24 hours a day.

The older we are, the more responsibilities we have, and the more of our day is already spoken for. However, this is not true for children who would happily watch a streaming service all day. If you're struggling with device usage, consider what limits you should place on yourself. For parents, ensure you have discussed and agreed to the limits for your children. When my four children were younger, we only permitted 15 minutes a day of screen time for each of them unless it was the weekend and we were watching a movie. They would use that time to play some basic video game, but they would take it in turns, and between all four of them, they would share an hour.

DISCIPLESHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE

Today's families are separated as children go to their rooms and use their devices, while yesterday's families gathered at the dinner table and played board games together. It's easier to foster those moments when there are screen time limits.

No Devices in the Bedroom

Where are you most tempted to look at things online that you shouldn't? Or to fall into late nights of doom scrolling? For many, it's their bedroom. I suggest to parents that children and most teenagers should not have computers or devices in their bedrooms. Private use of a device should be considered a privilege that must be earned by demonstrating maturity.

If your home can accommodate it, utilize a more public area for the family computer and ensure smartphones go to sleep at night by charging them on the kitchen counter *before* children go to bed.

Perhaps your location of temptation isn't your bedroom. Consider where it is and find a way not to take your device there.

Delete That App

Unless you never have your device with you, there will be times that you are tempted to browse content that you shouldn't or simply waste time doom scrolling. Consider what apps you use to do that. Have you considered that you can simply delete those apps? If your temptation is a website, you can add it to your blocked list.

It is becoming increasingly common for people to delete their smartphone apps and only use social media on a laptop or desktop. This removes the desire to check their apps every two minutes. You should try to place as much friction between you and the temptation as possible.

Filter Your Internet

Most of us don't drink our water unfiltered, so why do we browse the internet without a filter? An internet filter makes it harder to find content that you shouldn't and harder for you to be exposed to pornography accidentally.

There are many options out there, like Covenant Eyes and Canopy. There will almost always be a way around a filter, and a filter doesn't clean the human heart from sin. Yet, one element of killing sin is not feeding it, and an internet filter can help and might be a good tool for you and your family.

Pray for Purity

Remember that God's will for your life is your sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3)?

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Then, you should pray for God's help. Here are some verses to consider working into your prayer life often:

- Lord, help me to think about “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise...” (Phil. 4:8).
- “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14).
- Lord, help me to “Keep [my] heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).
- “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).
- Lord, I believe your Word that declares that “if we confess our sins, [you are] faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Find a Mentor

Having a mentor in your life can be a helpful way to grow. Whether you're seeking help to overcome pornography, trying to establish a more regular habit of Bible reading and prayer, or simply want some encouragement along the way, a mentor might be the answer.

This mentor could be one of your parents, an older sibling, a member of your local church, or a peer who is a little further along the road than you. Hopefully, you're already reading this field guide with a mentor!

A mentor you trust is someone to help you talk freely about the challenges you are having as you seek to be faithful to Christ in this digital age. Even if they don't know the technology well, they likely know God's Word well, and together, you can apply God's wisdom to any circumstance.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Which of these suggestions would be beneficial for you to incorporate into your daily life?
2. Who might you be able to ask to join you in your effort to steward technology well?



CONCLUSION

The digital age is not the “golden age.” In addition to the challenges already discussed, the rates of cyberbullying, teenage suicides, and sexual exploitation of young people are on the rise. Many experience burnout in the workforce as they cannot turn their work off (thanks to the smartphone, neither email nor the boss can be avoided). In light of this, can we be thankful for this digital age?

Yes we can. Today’s technological advances have improved medicine, disrupted and improved many industries, provided almost global access to knowledge that was once restricted to libraries or the academic elite, saved lives due to fall, heart attack, and crash detection in smartwatches and smartphones, and most importantly, accelerated and increased the proclamation and distribution of God’s Word. The list could go on, especially as you consider how today’s digital age has helped you.

My life was profoundly impacted by sermons and messages I listened to only because someone or a ministry decided to post them online. Is that true for you, too? The internet provided opportunities for me, without which I would not be serving in my current role at Ligonier Ministries or have received an invitation to write a field guide like this. I’m aware that every day, countless Christians worldwide receive trusted Bible teaching that they otherwise couldn’t access. And where theological training is minimal, pastors in under-resourced parts of the world are helped thanks to the internet, and that is, in turn, helping their congregations.

We must be a thankful people, even though spending time in a field guide like this can be overwhelming. The temptation might be there to reject all of today’s technology out of fear. But God is the ultimate author of history and sovereign over this chapter of history, too. As I’ve already stated, you and I are stewards, and stewardship is over more than just our time and talents; it also includes our resources and tools. Our calling, then, is not

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to neglect and reject today's technology but to ensure we are using what has been given to us to further the Great Commission and glorify God in all of life.

Another potential outcome of a field guide on this topic is feeling guilty and burdened by your sin. Honestly, no one can read these chapters and not find areas where they fall short. But beyond falling short, you may actually find yourself deep in gross sin. If that's you, know there is forgiveness and freedom in Christ. Don't run from him because of your sin; run to him precisely because you are a sinner and need his grace. The Christian life is not a sprint; it is a marathon. This race of faith often has many bumps along the way, but when we fall, by God's grace, we get up again and keep running.

Finally, my prayer is that your reflections, conversations, and changes as a result of reading this field guide will help you find your identity in Christ, steward your time well, deepen your friendships and involvement in your local church, and pursue holiness and purity, all to the glory of God alone.

Yes, this is a digital age, but it is also the age in which the Lord decreed you would live; serve him with gladness (Ps. 100:2).



ENDNOTES

1. R.C. Sproul, "What Is Biblical Stewardship?" Ligonier Ministries. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-biblical-stewardship>



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