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GRACE SCHOOL OF MINISTRY

**THE PREACHER AND HIS TECHNOLOGY**  
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Recommended reading: *The Next Story* by Tim Challies

Challies:

*This book began with a question. Actually, it began with an uneasy feeling that begged a whole series of heartfelt questions .... I began to feel as if maybe, just maybe, all of my devices, gizmos, and gadgets owned me as much as I owned them.*

*.... Am I becoming a tool of the very tools that are supposed to serve me?  
(The Next Story, 11)*

**Introduction:**

Technology, such as computers, cell phones, Bible programs, and the Internet offer many undeniable benefits to a preacher.

Cell phones, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs can help you stay in contact with your congregation and events in the Christian world at large.

Bible programs help you to translate and analyse a passage faster, redeeming precious study time. Electronic libraries allow you to access a vast array of theological resources previously difficult to get at. In the past, only those with superhuman memories could raid the *sixty-three* volumes of *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* for illustrations from Spurgeon's sermons. Now a key word search will turn up hundreds of illustrations in a fraction of a second.

Technology, however, is also fraught with dangers. It is a two-edged sword that can both save time *and* waste time; increase contact *and* decrease real, personal contact; keep you in touch *and* smother you under an avalanche of trivial information.

Key observation:

Technology is not merely *additive* (helping you live your current life better). Today's digital technology is *transformational*: it changes your current life into something it wasn't before.

Point:

If you don't think about the positive and negative ways that your technology is transforming your life, you might be unwittingly swept along in the current of the negative changes.

Summed up:

*Use technology. Don't let it use you.*

## Seven Unsuspected Dangers of Digital Technology

### 1) It enables idolatry.

*While technology can be an idol in and of itself, far more commonly it serves as an enabler of other idols. (Tim Challies, *The Next Story* 31)*

Idols that technology enables:

#### ❖ The idol of *sexual lust*

Unfortunately, the Internet all too easily services men's (and occasionally women's) temptation to look at pornography, offering them the opportunity to do so in anonymity and with a relatively small chance of being caught.

#### ❖ The idol of *neophilia*—the love of the new

Technology fuels some men's relentless urge to own the newest gadget, whether they really need it or not.

#### ❖ The idols of *entertainment and procrastination*

*[By 2009] the average adult was found to be spending nearly nine hours per day in front of some type of screen (or, more accurately, a near-endless succession of screens). About a quarter of his time was spent in the presence of at least two screens, and sometimes three or more. After all, why waste time watching television when you can waste time watching television, surfing the web, and sending text messages—all at once! (Challies, 53)*

#### ❖ The idol of *ungodly curiosity and gossip*.

Challies observation:

*Most of our digital technologies are created to enhance our ability to communicate. (41)*

Much of this communication, however, is little more than gossip or is motivated by an idolatrous lust for more and more information about people, however trivial that information might be.

Gossip:

Social media appears to sanitise the sin of gossip by digitalising it, but gossip is still gossip even if it is done on Facebook.

*Proverbs 18:8. The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.*

More information:

Os Guinness:

*The outcome of instant, total information is inflation—when more and more of anything is available, less and less is valuable. (Prophetic Untimeliness, 17)*

Illustration:

With a few notable exceptions, most Christian blogs are not worth the time taken to write them nor the time taken to read them. Shallow, trivial, unmeditated, unresearched, and unedited thoughts are of little help to Christians—especially when they could be reading significant books instead.

If you want to be a deep preacher, read things of significance.

#### ❖ The idol of *productivity*

Technology helps us do more things, more quickly. However, those who idolise the sense of accomplishment and productivity this brings often find that the electronic tools that are supposed to *save* time and effort actually tempt them to work longer hours. Perhaps they are bowing to the god of Productivity.

#### ❖ The idol of *significance*

*I must be somebody because I have 1,000 Facebook friends and receive 800 emails a day.*

*An event hasn't happened unless I've tweeted, posted, or uploaded the video.*

Point:

Posting the trivial might simply be feeding your vanity and sense of self-importance.

Summary:

Technology doesn't have to feed the idols of our hearts, but it often does. We like the sins it allows us to do: lust, neophilia, endless entertainment, ungodly curiosity, and the idolatrous pursuit of productivity and feelings of significance.

## 2) Skimming vs. Reading

*At best, Internet users skim text rather than read it. In fact, "skimming" is now the dominant metaphor for reading. Though words are a crucial part of the online experience, they bow before the gods of visual and audio media. (Challies, *The Next Story*, 59)*

Email:

How do you read an email? You glance quickly through it to find the main point. If it is more than a few paragraphs, you quickly scroll down, skimming to find the main points. Men who receive a lot of emails oftentimes simply ignore any email that is longer than three paragraphs.

Kindle:

In my experience, I read much faster on a screen than in a normal book. The screen lets me adjust the page width to what my eyes can capture in a glance, tempting me to speed read at a furious rate. That's good for devouring a book rapidly, bad for thoughtful digestion of its content.

Spurgeon:

*Little learning and much pride comes of hasty reading. (Lectures to My Students, 177)*

Point:

Internet web pages and the army of emails that bivouacs in our inboxes every night have taught us to be skimmers. Although skimming is a necessary skill for preachers, the problem comes when we start to read our Bibles or important theological books the same way we scroll through emails.

My suspicion is that people who do their quiet times on their cell phones don't read their cell phone screens the same way they read a printed Bible. Reading on a screen is almost invariably done by means of skimming.

### 3) Reduced Thinking Time

For preachers, the sheer, brute speed of computers can create the unnoticed problem of reduced thinking time. I've often observed that preachers who rely heavily on computers seem to preach shallow sermons with little depth or insight.

The computer parses the passage for you in 2.75 nanoseconds. It allows you to harvest a sheaf of snazzy quotes from your online library. But an electronically parsed passage and thirteen zinger Spurgeon quotes doesn't mean that you've actually thought deeply about the text in front of you.

Point:

Use your computer to save time, but resist the temptation to cut out the *thinking time* in your sermon preparation. Unrushed, sober meditation is what adds depth and insight to sermons.

### 4) Inability to Focus

An unguarded use of technology creates an inability to focus.

Challenges:

*Our brains actually change in response to new technologies. The brain of a person raised in the age of print, a person who learned from books and who read books in time of leisure or study, has a brain that is markedly different from a person who has learned primarily from images or who has watched videos in times of leisure or study. (44)*

Two changes:

#### 1. Memory

*We can now know less than ever before. We don't have to know everything; we just need to know where and how to find it. (150)*

It is no longer necessary to remember where key passages are. Our search program will find it in a

second. But one wonders if this is sometimes a detriment to our overall Bible knowledge, not just an aid.

## 2. Focus

*The digital explosion has even changed the way the adult brain functions. It has placed many of us into what has been described as a state of continuous partial attention .... While we sit at our desks working on a report [or sermon] we are also monitoring our mobile phones and our instant messaging accounts, giving partial attention to a host of different media. As we do so, we keep our brains in a constant state of heightened stress, damaging our ability to devote ourselves to extended periods of thoughtful reflection and contemplation. After some time, our brains begin to crave this constant communication, finding peace in little else. (45, underlining added)*

Point:

Uncontrolled technology allows you to do more things, less well.

## 5) Interruption

Beeps:

*Beeps tell me that I am needed elsewhere. And far too often, I obey and answer the call .... I had to silence the torrent of beeps in my life so I could focus, at least for a time, and work undistracted from interruptions.*

*.... Immediately, I notice that the loss of my digital technologies had slowed the pace of my life. (Challies, 115)*

Cell phones:

*When we understand that cellular phones were introduced to keep businessmen in touch with the office while they were away from it ... we will not marvel that our mobile phones tend to do just that—to keep us in touch when we would rather escape. The phone is simply doing what it was created to do. (62)*

*Many of us no longer have a personal home phone and a work cell phone—we have a single device that does it all. When this is the case, we cannot be surprised when we receive work calls at home and personal calls at work .... The purpose of a multifunction device like the iPhone ... is to stop its owner whenever and wherever he*

*is in order to pull him from one thing to the next. As soon as he takes a call, it provides him with a reminder from his calendar; and when he responds to that reminder, he receives an e-mail; and when he replies to the e-mail, he receives a text message. And so it goes, from one distraction to the next. This is exactly what the iPhone is meant to do. And it does it well. (120)*

*Amidst all of the chatter we have forgotten that we do not need to communicate all the time. Is it possible that constantly communicating with others is not always good ...? Remember one of our key insights into technology: a technology wears its benefits on its sleeve—but the drawbacks are buried deep within.*

*... for a growing number of people, the need to be in constant communication is so powerful that they cannot even turn off their cell phones in order to sit through a movie [or a church service!]. (74)*

## 6) Distraction

The myth of multitasking:

*Multitasking is actually a misnomer. While we think we are multitasking, we are actually task switching, doing a little bit of one thing and then doing a little bit of another .... [One study has found that] “people who switch back and forth between two tasks, like exchanging e-mail and writing a report, may spend 50 percent more time on those tasks than if they work on them separately, completing one before starting the other.”*

*Meanwhile, if we surround ourselves by too many stimuli, we force our brains into a state of continuous partial attention, a state in which we keep tabs on everything without giving focused attention to anything .... “people may place their brains in a heightened state of stress .... they exist in a sense of constant crisis .... Once people get used to this state, they tend to thrive on the perpetual connectivity. It feeds their egos and sense of self-worth, and it becomes irresistible.” (Challies, 125)*

Point:

The task switching encouraged by digital technology often causes us to work less effectively, the exact opposite of what we expect.

Observation:

Do you work shorter hours than you did before computers and smart phones? Not likely. Where has all the time you saved gone? In most cases, right back to your gadgets. Take control of your technology, employing its benefits, but refusing to be dominated by it.

Further point:

Good sermons come from focused, concentrated thinking. Everyone who has been around John MacArthur has heard him say this: *I'm often asked how I preach such good sermons. My answer is invariably the same: By neglect. I plan to neglect everything else until my sermon is done.*

Comment:

Most men study more effectively when they study in blocks of time rather than the fragments of time encouraged by our technology.

## 7) Reduced Relationships

Observation:

Technology tends to draw you closer to those you are far away from and *farther* away from those you are close to.

Illustration:

A married couple might spend many evenings in the same room—she checking the Facebook pages of people who live on other continents, and he in a theological chat room debating with opinionated people from around the world. That husband and wife are physically close to each other, but their technology is drawing them dangerously far apart, offering superficial electronic relationships in the place of their meaningful face-to-face marriage relationship.

Technology's threat to face-to-face relationships:

Challenges:

*A study from the University of Stanford found that for every hour we spend on our computers, traditional face-to-face interaction falls by nearly thirty minutes. (76)*

*Studies now show that many young people are actually losing their ability to relate to one another in an offline context .... It is not unusual to observe two girls sitting in the same room, mere feet from one another, texting back and forth.*

*.... In a strange way, we now find that more communication actually leads to less communication .... Many of our new media technologies are designed for speed and urgency .... They are designed, not to encourage depth in existing relationships, but to widen our network and our ability to say less that is of real substance. (77)*

*Mediated communication gives us the ability to dedicate less of ourselves to more people. (112)*

*The cell phone . . . can increase my ability to communicate with those who are far from me, often at the cost of communication with my own wife and children—those who are closest to me. (116)*

Illustration:

Not long ago I was at a restaurant with my wife, and at the next table was a young couple having a fight—sharp voices, tears, and angry glares into space. Over the course of forty-five minutes, the man took three calls (leaving the table for at least five minutes each time); she took one call lasting several minutes, and both read and answered several text messages while the other person was talking.

They couldn't even "fight properly" because of the relentless interruptions caused by their smart phones.

Point:

Beware of the way your time-saving communication devices intrude on your family time and reduce your face-to-face relationships.

### **Taking the Initiative to Manage Your Technology**

Abandoning digital technology and living in a cave in Tibet is not the solution to the problem of being owned by our gadgets. Technology is here to stay; we need to take control of it, using it, but wisely curbing its negative influences.

#### **Nine suggestions** (mostly taken from Challies, *The Next Story*)

1) Ask questions before you purchase the newest iGadget:

❖ What problem does this technology solve?

Challies:

*It may be that a great new device does not solve any problem in my life, but my purchase does solve the manufacturer's falling annual profit. (The Next Story, 63)*

❖ What problems will this new technology create?

Example: Cell phones and their constant interruptions.

❖ Why do I *really* want this device?

There are sinful reasons to invest in the newest technological widget: love of the new, the pride of being the first pastor in your circles to own it, buying it simply because it exists.

❖ What idols of my heart is my technology enabling?

Think twice before bringing into your life something that will encourage an entangling sin.

❖ How soon will this device be obsolete?

2) When studying to preach, don't let the computer think for you.

❖ Offset the speed of your computer with plenty of "feet up on the desk" time—reflection and meditation that leads to depth and insight in your preaching.

❖ Don't confuse clicking a button and having your computer produce a parsed and diagrammed version of your passage with the *necessary and time-consuming* process of actually studying the passage. The computer gives you a quick *product*, but it does not give you the benefits of the *process*—actually taking apart the passage and putting it back together yourself.

3) Use email and texting to *supplement* personal communication, not to replace it.

Challies:

*E-mail and text messaging are inevitable aspects of life, and there is no reason to forsake them altogether. But let's keep them in their proper context as supplemental and lesser forms of communication. (110)*

Point:

Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and call someone or to meet him or her face to face.

4) Eliminate the beeps.

Click the *Disable* button to cut down on the unnecessary interruptions forced upon you by your digital gadgets. A robot that is programmed to interrupt you can be reprogrammed not to interrupt you.

5) Delete and unsubscribe.

*You'll soon learn how much information you can live just fine without. (132)*

6) Focus on substance.

Use your reading time to read things of significance.

7) Cultivate concentration.

*Yes, you practiced being distracted, and you managed to get better and better at it (congratulations!). Eventually you rewired your brain in such a way that it craves distraction and fights against concentration. (133)*

8) Exercise self-control and legitimate self-denial.

*Do not be in a hurry to begin your day with the digital .... determine that you will not turn on your computer or look at your cell phone until you have read the Bible and spent time in prayer. When you have completed your work for the day, stay away from your computer. (134)*

9) Dedicate more time to fewer things.

*Technology allows you to do more things, less well. Consciously resist spreading yourself too thin, even though your technology both allows you and encourages you to do so.*