

Digital Discipleship -1 – Screen Addiction

When our church began in 2003, of the 50 or so who came in the first year, not everyone had a cellphone, and those that did had Nokias and Samsungs that could take calls, send texts, and play the snake game. Most of us still connected to the Internet using a dial-up modem. No one had read a Kindle book, because they wouldn't exist for another 4 years. No one had watched a YouTube video, for it would only launch in 2005. The Internet was becoming part of our lives, but it was still just a part of our lives.

Twenty-two years later, and it is safe to say that it now occupies vast amounts of people's lives. People's work lives are integrated into the web. Most jobs requires constant research from the web, communication with colleagues through the web, shared files over the web. The last years have created jobs that function entirely on the web, providing a service or content that others pay for through the web. Few people shopped online twenty years ago, today, most people do some shopping online. A few people even do most of their shopping online. Advice and consulting, even therapy is done on the web. Even education is migrating to the web, and for many people, their classroom is through Zoom. Leisure and entertainment has gone from surfing TV and radio stations to spending much, or even more time streaming movies and TV shows, watching Youtube, scrolling Instagram or Tiktok or X, or spending hours on social media scrolling through people's posts. Watching the news and reading paper newspapers has been largely replaced by online news.

In fact, for many people, they go from being on the web for work, to watching something on the web for distraction, to doing some shopping on the web, to connecting with people through socials on the web, to answering emails and messages. In so doing, they are nearly constantly on the web for 7, 10, even 12 hours in a waking day.

Now there are certainly exceptions, and some people still go about their lives with much less interaction with the web. But in twenty years, our world has been radically re-shaped by the presence of high-speed Internet, the smartphone, cheaper data. It's no longer possible, at least in urban Johannesburg, to live your life without at least a decent portion of it being online.

That means to be a disciple of Christ, a true believer in and follower of Jesus, we need to know how to obedient to Christ online. The Bible does not have to mention the Internet for it to give us truths and principles that apply to it, just as the Bible doesn't mention cars, but there is a Christian way of driving, and the Bible doesn't mention the stock exchange, but there is a Christian way of investing. The Bible has timeless principles to be applied to ever changing technologies. We're told to be obedient to Christ in every area of life : ¹And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Colossians 3:17)

³¹ Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Now at the outset, let me say that this series is not going to be an anti-technology series. I'm not going to tell you to just unplug, detach, go totally analogue and live off the grid in the wildernesses of South Africa. Good luck with that. The technology of the internet is here, and here to stay. Our goal as Christians is to use it for all the good we can, and to avoid its evils.

But like many areas of life, when something surrounds us and becomes part of us, we become desensitised and immune to many of its dangers. So a series like this aims to alert us to the way the web is shaping us into its image, until it normalises what shouldn't be normalised. The story of the two young fish swimming past the old fish: the old fish greets them and says, "How's the water, today boys?" Once he's swum past them, the one young fish says to the other, "What's water?" The

idea is, what surrounds you, what is just part of your environment, becomes almost invisible to you.

So our goal is to pick out the problem areas of the internet, and try to address them. Some of them will be easy to spot, others might seem a bit more abstract to understand. But everything we include in this series will be vital areas of obedience.

The first of these is a phenomenon which even the world has come to call internet addiction, screen addiction, or dopamine addiction. What does this look like? A compulsive checking of one's phone for updates, messages, emails, calls, social media updates, posts. If you're on a laptop, it looks like similar compulsive checking for updates, switching from tasks to task, opening tab after tab, following link after link. The compulsive checking also shows up in the restlessness that sets in when faced with longer periods of reading or study or concentration. It shows up in the restlessness when separated from your phone or laptop or even Wi-fi for an extended period. The desire to check the phone again for a kind of mental relief is exactly, physically speaking, what we find in addiction to nicotine, or alcohol, or other nervous system drugs.

I don't think we have to look hard to find this. Go to the average restaurant and see what many of the people are doing, even though they are there to supposedly 'fellowship' with other people over a meal. They're on their phones – sometimes two people, on some kind of date, separately checking their phones. A group of friends out together, you'll see four or five of them all separately on their phones. More and more parents find themselves glued to phones and laptops when their children are there to be talked to, played with, read stories to. Parents have to be pried away from their phones to just be present at the dinner table – if that is even practised any more. Often enough, the children are just handed a screen as well. In social situations: sharing a waiting room with others, a lift, a queue, conversation is a dying art: the phones come out. Some people come to church, and seem to be reading the Bible on their phones, but simply cannot resist checking another thing or two while listening.

Sometimes parents are at fault. Some parents very early have the use-the-digital-babysitter approach, where a screen is handed to a child whenever he becomes restless. Not that it is always wrong to turn our children to a screen to keep them occupied, but when the device is used for hour upon hour of games, scrolling through social media, watching hours of videos with little serious benefit, the screen is shaping them badly, and probably setting them up to struggle with screen addiction later on.

It's an addiction, not just mentally, but physically. An addiction which several people have now documented and commented on. Dr Anna Lembke wrote a book called *Dopamine Nation*. In it, she writes that dopamine is a chemical in the brain which doesn't give pleasure itself, but it motivates us to seek things that bring pleasure. Dopamine spikes when we have anticipation for something. It's a God-given part of our bodies that works by giving dopamine to build desire for something, and then sending us into a low through something called homeostasis. Dopamine makes us want that slice of cake, and then after it, we have a low so that dopamine kicks in again making us want a second slice.

On the web, what that looks like, is the bright red number, or the emboldened font telling you that you have unread messages, unread emails, unread updates. It's the desire to see what the next video will be as you keep scrolling, what the next post will be on social media. Links to follow, apps to open, likes and comments to view. It is the craving for novelty, for the new, for the update. It's like opening a wrapped present or an envelope addressed to you again and again.

Now for most of history, our dopamine hits couldn't go on forever. We run out of money to buy the hit, or space in our stomach to keep going. But that's not true of the web. You can keep going as long as you have time.

Many of the architects of certain apps and social media sites knew full well this part of human nature. Some of them had studied behavioural psychology. And so built into the the way the apps and websites are designed is a continual urge to keep clicking on something new, to keep scrolling, binge another episode, to keep getting the dopamine hit of anticipation of something new, then hit a low, then go again. The addiction to social media and to the web in general is no accident. It is a design feature that enriches some as it enslaves others. Natasha Schüll, author of *Addiction by Design*—a book researching actual slot machines, claims that “Facebook, Twitter, and other companies use methods similar to the gambling industry to keep users on their sites.”

In the meantime, not only does an addiction to continual checking of our phones or apps grow, but something is lost. That loss is the brain's ability to focus without distraction. The habit of needing the dopamine hit for checking email or WhatsApp or some other notification literally trains our brains to want that “relief” after just minutes of concentration. We think we are just “multi-tasking”, but we are actually addicted to distraction. We'll talk more about the web's destruction of our ability to meditate in a future message, but for now, we can say that addiction to distraction does not foster deep thought.

This kind of slavery is destructive. It's destructive to our time, it's destructive to our ability to focus and concentrate, and it's destructive to face-to-face relationships.

No one begins a practice and hopes to end up enslaved by it. The nature of addiction is a voluntary surrender to more and more mastery by a pleasurable habit.

So, how do we fight against digital addiction?

Let me point you to two biblical truths, and five wise practices that can help us live obedient lives under the mastery of Christ, not of our phones.

1. Christians are not meant to be mastered by our technologies.

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Corinthians 6:12)

Understand that the technology might be lawful, but ask yourself if how you are using it is helpful. Helpful to your walk with God, your prayer life, your meditation on Scripture. Helpful to your face-to-face relationships. Helpful to your productivity at work. Helpful to your service and ministry to others.

Again, it may be lawful, but is it mastering you? Does it suck you in, and what began as “I'll just check a few things” ends up scrolling for an hour or two. Has it become a need to have to check? Is it the first thing we check in the mornings?

Christians are not meant to be controlled by our tools, we are supposed to control them. Romans 6 teaches us that we died with Christ to sin, including addiction, and rose with Christ to live unto God. Because we are joined, in union to Christ, it means we have Christ's death and resurrection power available to put to death addictive habits, and raise to life new and godly habits.

¹⁴ For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:14)

Think of it this way: was Jesus ever addicted to anything? Had Jesus been incarnate in the 21st century, how would he have used technology? The biblical truth is, Jesus' righteous and wise approach to technology is imputed to you, so now you must by faith, count it to be true of you, and then become what you are. Handle your phone and laptop as Jesus would. Live in union with Him on the phone, on the laptop, in front of the TV.

2. Remember that our time is a stewardship unto God.

The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Ps. 90:10-12)

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. (Eph. 5:15-16)

How we use our time is very much a test of our priorities and beliefs. Apportioning your time to an activity is just like apportioning money to something. You think it is worth doing. You are willing to give up other things in favour of this thing. The difference is that with money, we are usually more aware that we do not have infinite amounts of it, but with time, because we don't know how much of it we have left, we tend to act like we have more of it, not less.

So Moses reminds us, we do have limited time. Our lifespans average 7, 8, 9 decades. And we should be aware that time spent on aimless, trivial stuff is time that could have been used in better ways. I am not ruling out the place for leisure and relaxation. But there are kinds of leisure that refresh you, and kinds that drain you even more.

Treating time as a stewardship brings into focus bigger matters. What am I really living for? What is the big vision of life I'm striving for? What is the grand priority of the Christian life? What is true, good, and beautiful? What is worth spending time on? By the way, that's not only spending chunks of two hours. It can also be the intermittent ten minutes here, and five here, and 15 here, which end up being a good hour, two or three out of a day. The point is, how you use your time really reveals your beliefs. If you truly believe that you will one day have to give an account for your life, for how you used your time, it makes us think about what proportion of time we're spending on this.

3. Honestly assess your screen time.

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us "The heart is above all deceitful, and desperately wicked, who can understand it?"

To do this, you might need to use some apps that now come with some phones, or find one to install on your phone or laptop. Some can track, some can even control and limit. But use it to get a better picture of how much screen time you're doing. Now, I understand that information isn't the whole picture. You could be using your screen for good and lawful purposes, reading something helpful, doing your work. It's not just about how much time, but how much time is spent purely diversionary, amusing and spiritually weightless activities. How much time is unnecessary checking of messages and emails. You should probably ask those in your family if you seem to be on a screen or phone more than you need to be, where it interrupts what could be good interaction.

When it comes to overcoming addictions, everyone knows the first hurdle is honesty. Addicts who

are not yet ready to change say “I don't have an addiction. I just use it from time to time. It's just recreational, and I can stop at any time.” The person ready to change says something like, “This thing has mastered me in ways that are painful to admit. I know it occupies far more of my thoughts and time than it should, and I know I will battle at first to use less of it.”

4. Prioritise face-to-face conversation and uninterrupted fellowship with family, friends and brothers and sisters in Christ.

¹² Having many things to write to you, I did not wish *to do so* with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. (2 John 12)

Being able to be in the presence of others is a great joy and privilege. We should not allow screens to steal away time from face to face fellowship. Make a no-phone rule for dinner times and family devotions. Decide that at some times in your life you will be unreachable, uncontactable, and accept that the world will not end, and the business will not collapse, and civilisation will not crumble because you switch it off, or silence it, or put it in the draw for dinner, or devotions, or storytime with the kids, or gametime.

5. Use technology to fight the technology.

Many of the Big Tech companies are aware that people are seeing screen addiction as a problem. So rather than lose customers, they're offering apps and settings either built in or downloadable that can control your screen time. Focus apps silence notifications (I use that when I am studying). Certain apps can block social media sites or other site that you tend to binge on. It may be a crutch, but it is a good crutch when your legs have gotten weak. So use technology to help you silence the beeps, dings, notifications, that call on you to open the app, check the update, open another tab, and so on.

By the way, if you are going to read your Bible on your phone, the temptation to check other apps and interrupt your reading, or follow some notification is always going to be there. So if you're going to read your Bible on the your phone, that's the time to use some kind of focus or do not disturb app so that that all you do. A phone is designed to be a multi-tasking tool, it isn't made for you to just do one thing. For me, that means I read a paper Bible, or use an e-reader with no other apps or notifications.

6. At times, limit your access and fast from the web altogether.

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. (Matthew 5:29–30)

Jesus' words tell us there is a time to remove even the opportunity to sin altogether. A kind of radical amputation. Even secular therapists helping people overcome phone addiction will have them lock their phone away for 24 hours. Try some digital fasts, perhaps on a Sunday, or on another day when it is practical.

Fasting works in all kinds of ways upon us. When we fast from food, we learn how much food means to us, we learn how much we think about it, we learn how dependent on it we are. But when we successfully complete a fast, we learn that it doesn't have to control us, that we can prioritise God, that prayer can take precedence over food. The same thing happens during a digital fast. There

will be the cravings, the restlessness, the dopamine hunger pangs. But they will pass, and you will find a new kind of freedom, a new kind of mental clarity, a more restful spiritual focus.

Along the same lines, 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.

7. Cultivate some focused, difficult activities.

But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Paul taught that within the framework of a grace-based life of union with Christ and faith in Him, there is a place for training one's body with rigour and some severity. That means sometimes we choose to embrace some disciplines, or some practices that require concentration, difficulty, maybe even a bit of pain. Why? Because our bodies and minds only harden and strengthen when given difficulty in their training. In fact, even Dr Anna Lembke, when helping digital addicts recover advocated an approach like this . She claimed that “when we do things that are challenging – going for a run, having an ice bath, talking to a stranger, reading a book on philosophy – instead of receiving a dopamine boost beforehand we experience it afterwards.” The satisfaction from doing worthwhile things, like serving others in church, writing someone a note, learning a musical instrument, reading a Christian book or biography, studying the Word more intensely, taking 20 minutes to pray through a list, these end up giving far more enduring joys that the short hits and highs of our screens. Earned joys are much sweeter than passive ones.

We want to be like Christ in how we use the web. We can say with certainty, being addicted to our screens is not Christlike. It might be lawful, but we should not be mastered by anything. In Christ, sin should not have dominion over us, for we are in union with His sin-defeating death, and His life-giving resurrection. We have to reckon, count that to be true, and then flesh it out. We need to remember our time is a stewardship, something given to us for which we must give account.

So then we do five things. 1) We're honest about how we're using screens and track our time 2) We prioritise face-to-face time with family and loved ones. 3) We use technology to help us break out of a distracted and addicted use of the web. 4) Sometimes we fast altogether from it to show that we have mastered it. 5) We cultivate deep work, focused activities things that require us to discipline body and mind to break away from the passivity of lazy consumption.

The beginning of faithfulness to Christ regarding the web is that we exercise true Christian freedom: freedom to use these technologies, not have them use us, freedom to subdue them for Christian purposes, not have them subdue us.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Galatians 5:1)