

The Need for Digital Discernment

Good to see everybody. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of **Hebrews, chapter 12**. If you're here for the first time this morning, or just getting back to Knoxville for the semester, welcome. Let me briefly catch you up on where we've been the past couple weeks, just so you're not missing anything. We began the New Year by kicking off a new series called *Formation*, which is a series all about **how our habits help us, over time, to become more like Jesus**. So each year, we spend a month or two on one particular habit that can do just that. This year, we're focusing on the habit of *rest*.

And in week 1 of the series, we talked about how **true rest is a little more involved than just taking a day off every so often**. It's actually about structuring our entire *lives* the way Jesus structured his. It involves modeling our day-to-day, as much as is possible, after his day-to-day. And then **last Sunday**, we discussed at-length what it would look like to essentially "**un-hurry**" our life: to not be constantly overwhelmed and distracted by *many* things, but learn to focus on the one thing that matters, which is being *with* Jesus.

But admittedly, **a lot of us probably heard that** and said "yeah I just don't know if that's possible for me right now." Some of us might say it's not that we *want* to be hurried—it's that we feel like we *have* to be. We just have too many things to get done in our lives, and as hard as we may try, it just doesn't seem like any of them can be trimmed back. Maybe for you, it feels like all of them are job-related, or family-related, or church community-related. And so it just doesn't feel like any of it is *cuttable* from our life. And let me just say, right off the bat, I *feel* you on that. I'm there with you.

So let's **start here** this morning. **What if I told you** that right now, I could show us how to do one simple thing that would *give us* an additional *four hours* back into our day, every single day? If I could do that, do you think *then* we could find a way to rest and pause and rest and be with Jesus more regularly? That seems like it'd be doable, right? And what if, on top of that, I told you that this simple thing only takes approximately **two seconds for you to do**? If I could do that, do you think *then* you could find time to rest and be with Jesus, at least in *theory*? I would hope that most of us could—four hours is a lot of time to have added back into your day.

Well I can indeed help you accomplish that. And we're actually all going to **do it together right now**. Are you ready? **Okay, the first step is for all of us to take out our phone. If you've got your phone nearby, go ahead and take it out. Some of you already have it out for your bible or note taking or whatever. If you don't already have it out, take it out. Got**

it in your hand? Okay, second step: I want you to find the button that is either on the top or side or back—the power button—and I want you to use that button to turn your phone off. Is it off? Okay, congratulations: your day just got roughly four hours longer. But just out of curiosity, how uncomfortable are you sitting there with your phone off?

Here's why I say that: studies show that we spend on average **three to five hours a day on our phones**. Now **to be fair**, a lot of that three to five hours, for most people, are *short* sessions: thirty seconds here, a couple minutes there—but nonetheless, *three to five hours* per day. To put it a slightly different (and slightly *more depressing* way), that means **the average young adult will spend around one third of their waking life on their device**.¹ One *third*. Can you imagine if one *third* of your awake hours became suddenly available to rest, or to spend time with Jesus? Do you think you would be better off? The Huffington Post cited a study that said that you and I **use our phones, on average, about twice as much as we think we do**. So imagine how often you *think* you're on your phone, and then double that, and you're probably closer to the truth.

Now, I'll grant you that **not everything we do on our phones is harmful or wasteful**. **We get directions to places on our phones. We read articles about things going on in our world. We keep in touch with family and friends. Some of us even work largely from our devices**. And that's all great and helpful. So let's just say that we actually spend *half* of our time on our phones doing good, helpful, necessary, productive things (most of us *don't*, but let's say we *do* to make us all feel better). That's *still* anywhere from an hour and a half to two hours and a half that we spend on *unnecessary* stuff. Isn't that *still* a good bit of time that we'd like to have back?

And more importantly, it's worth asking the question, **what impact is that having** on how much time we *think* we have to spend time with Jesus? What impact is it having on how much time we *think* we have to rest? I think **as followers of Jesus, in today's modern world, we have to be willing to ask that question**.

And **Hebrews 12** is about to **tell us why** we have to ask that question. Take a look with me, beginning in v. 1:

[1] **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses—**

Now **for context**, the author of Hebrews has just spent most of the previous chapter walking from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end, highlighting the incredible faith of men and women throughout history. Theologians often call it the “hall of faith.” I'd

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/smartphone-usage-estimates_n_5637687de4b063179912dc96

recommend at some point, when you have time, to read through it and become familiar with their stories. But after doing that, he transitions and says “therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses—incredible men and women that have come before us,” continuing in v. 1:

*let us throw off **everything that hinders** and the **sin that so easily entangles**. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, [2] **fixing our eyes on Jesus**, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

Let’s pause there. So what the author is attempting to do is to help us see **how we join in** with these men and women of faith throughout biblical history. How *we too* can access the type of transformative faith that they had. And here is where it starts: **by “throwing off,” first, “everything that hinders,” and second, “the sin that so easily entangles.”** Now, that second idea—*sin*—we talk a good bit about around here. Part of what following Jesus means is becoming aware of, owning up to, and repenting of *sin* in our life. Things like *anger, self-righteousness, apathy, lust, greed & materialism*—plenty of other things. Any and all of the things that the Scriptures say are the antithesis of life in the kingdom of Jesus. We are, in the words of Hebrews, to “throw off” those things. Rid ourselves of them.

But what I want us to spend the bulk of **our time today** talking about is the *first* part of that sentence. Because it says we are to throw off not only “*sin*,” but also “*anything that hinders*.” Not just the bad things, but also at times the good and neutral things that can get in the way.

The ESV languages that as “laying aside **any weight.**” The metaphor is of a runner in a race, who wants to be as fast as they possibly can, so they remove and set aside anything that could possibly hinder them in that race. If you follow the Olympics much, you may know that runners and swimmers *still* take this approach, where they will even shave off all the hair on their legs to help trim even fractions of *seconds* off their time. I like to emphasize *often* to people that that is literally the *only* thing keeping me from running a six minute mile: the hair on my legs. Nothing else.

But here’s **my point: in the passage**, it would seem that the author is saying that there may be **things in our lives** as followers of Jesus, that aren’t explicitly *sinful*, and yet *still* need to be cast off or at least put in their place if we are going to learn to “fix our eyes on Jesus.” **Neutral things**, so to speak, but neutral things that have a tendency to pull our attention *away* from Jesus and onto lesser things. And these verses just said that we may *also* need to do something about *those* things as well. Does that all make sense so far?

Okay, with that established, I think we could **make a very strong case** that in the year 2021, our **phones** are one of those things. Whether you know it or not, this device right here is probably one of the biggest obstacles to your life with Jesus. And even more specifically to our series, may be one of the biggest obstacles to integrating *rest* into your life on a regular basis. Many of us remain *convinced* that we do not have the time or ability to rest or spend time with Jesus, while simultaneously spending anywhere from three to five hours on our devices each day. It seems like there is probably a correlation between those two problems.

Today, **all my cards on the table**, I am going to try to get each of us to think critically (or *more critically*) about the impact our phones is having on our ability to rest and set our focus on Jesus. Which maybe sounds like an oddly *specific* thing to spend an entire teaching on, and I get that. But I believe it is *well* worth our time, based on how widespread of an issue it is.

The latest study I could find said that **in the U.S.**, **84% of men and 79% of women are smartphone users.**² That is the *vast* majority of people. When you shrink the segment down to *young* adults, which tend to make up a good bit of our church, those percentages go up even more, meaning that *virtually all* of us own smartphones. And as we already mentioned, most of us spend three to five hours per day on our phones.

Now here's what is **so ironic** about that. Everyone *thought* that the invention of things like the smartphone would actually *free up* time in our schedule. We *thought* that they would save us time. Technology like the smartphone is often referred to as "time-saving" or "labor-saving" devices. So all of that said, here's the question: **how did something that was supposed to give us more time, end up single handedly consuming more of our time than most anything else?** ~~That's a valid question, right?~~

Well I would argue it's because of a little something called "digital addiction." Like some of you, I watched the documentary titled **The Social Dilemma** on Netflix when it came out not too long ago. If you haven't heard of it, it's basically a documentary about the effect that our phones and social media are having on us psychologically and sociologically. It would probably be well worth your time to watch it—it is equal parts enlightening and terrifying.

But to me, one of the **biggest takeaways from it** was this. For most of us, the apps we use most regularly are **free**, right? Instagram is free. Facebook is free. Twitter is free.

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/194998/percentage-of-us-smartphone-owners-by-gender/>

Pinterest is free. And one of the people in the documentary makes the point that from a marketing perspective, when a product is *free*, that means that you (the user) aren't actually the *customer*. You are the *product*. Specifically, your *time* and *attention* are the product. *That* is what is being bought and sold. **The longer an app can hold your attention, the more ads they can sell, the more investors they can impress, and the more money they can make.**

Now, I bring that up because a lot of people, when it comes to technology like the smartphone, like to shrug off the dangers by saying "technology is **just a tool.**" In other words, a smartphone is kind of like a *hammer*. A hammer can be used for *good* (like building a house) or a hammer can be used for *bad* (like bludgeoning someone over the head with it). But the tool itself is *neutral*. We like to think that our phones are like *that*.

While **that sounds right**, there's one *major* difference between a hammer and a smartphone. Do you know what it is? Here's the difference: there aren't *thousands* of engineers spending their careers trying to get you to use a hammer every minute of your waking life. There *are* engineers trying to get you to do that when it comes to your phone. Hammers are designed to work well when you need to use them, and that's it. Our *phones* and the apps on them are designed to entice us into using them as many hours a day as we can.

For example, I still remember a few years back, when Apple came out with the **"Night Shift"** feature. Do you guys remember that? So Night Shift is when your phone automatically removes most of the "blue light" from your screen after a certain time of night, since blue light can lead to trouble sleeping, vision problems, etc. I remember hearing that they were adding that feature and thinking to myself, "wow—what a *selfless thing* for one of the most powerful companies in the world to do. They really are looking out for their users!" And while that *might* be *true*, I then realized: wait, if they take the negative consequences out of staying on your phone until late at night, what are their users more likely to do? Stay on their phone even *longer* at night. **This is the business of smartphone designers and app developers and tech companies: to capture as much of our *attention* as they possibly can.**

But **don't take my word for it**. Here's what the former president of Facebook, **Sean Parker**, said. He is now a "conscientious objector" to social media. He says:

God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains. The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, ... was all about: "How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?" And that means that we need to sort of give you a little

dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that's going to get you to contribute more content, and that's going to get you...more likes and comments. **It's a social-validation feedback loop...exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.**

Think about that. **Everytime you open up** your favorite app, there are hundreds of engineers on the other side of that app, asking "how can we capture as much of this person's time and attention as we possibly can?" And it's having a profound effect on our ability to pay attention. Studies are now showing us that the **average human attention span** is dropping with each passing year. In the year 2000, before the digital revolution truly took place, we had an average attention span of twelve seconds. Not exactly *impressive*, but it's something. Anybody want to guess what the average attention span is *now*? It's *eight* seconds. Just for comparison, a *goldfish* has an attention span of *nine* seconds. We are now losing to *goldfish*. Congratulations to us.

~~So much for "it's just a hammer," right?~~ Now, let me be very up front about what I am and am not doing here. First, **I am not suggesting** that we all need to go out and get rid of our smartphones—I *have* a smartphone. I *like* having a smartphone. I plan on *keeping* my smartphones. I think smartphones *can be* really *helpful*. I am also not saying all of us need to start a tech-free commune and live off the land (even though, I've got to admit, that does sound nice at times). I personally don't think Christians should be the ones running for the hills every time there's an advancement in modern technology.

But here's **what I am trying to do**. **I am trying to get all of us to think very critically about the effect that our phones are having on our relationships with Jesus.** I am arguing for the desperate need for something we might call digital *discernment*: the ability to *critically evaluate* the impact of technology on our lives and on our discipleship with Jesus. Because I believe with everything in me that **if we are not thinking critically about the effect our phones are having on our discipleship, chances are, they are wreaking havoc on it.**

But **in order to do anything about that**, we have to get to the bottom of *why* we are so drawn to the world of our phone. What is it that makes us want to escape, every spare moment we get, into digital distraction? Well, I think it's actually a plethora of things, but here are some of the more common ones:

- Sometimes, it's simply *boredom*. We feel like our life is not exciting (in the moment or in general), and it seems like there are always more interesting and exciting things on my phone, so I go there.
- Other times, it's *approval*. We are hungry for validation from other people, so we go online and post attractive photos of ourselves or a cleverly-worded opinion, or a dance video and wait for the likes, comments and shares to roll in.
- Other times, it's *inactivity*. I'm waiting in the drive-thru line or in the lobby at the doctor's office or at a stop light and think "I could be getting stuff done right," so I check an email, or respond to a text, or comb through a Google Doc, or whatever it is.
- And then other times still, it is *discontentment*. We are unhappy with the state of our lives, so we unlock our phones in an attempt to not have to face those difficult emotions for a while.

And like I said, there are probably plenty of others where those came from. But **the point** is that **to do anything about the digital addiction in our lives, we need to be able to discern what it is that is drawing us to our phones**. We have to be aware of that, and then we have to understand that our phones don't actually solve those problems—not in any real way.

At best being consumed with our phones is just bandaid over a gaping chasm in our souls. And **at worst**, it's actually leading us deeper down the rabbit hole of emotional and spiritual bankruptcy. Here's why I say that. **This series** is all about *the art and science of how we change*. And so much of our *formation* as human beings has to do with what things we give our *time* and *attention* to. Put another way, **we become like what we behold**.³ The things that we *consistently give our attention to* end up shaping the type of people we *become*. For good or for bad, better or worse, this is how it works.

We can see this play out in so many different ways. If you constantly scroll through **Instagram profiles of lifestyle influencers** or with people who are obsessed with their appearance to an unhealthy extent, eventually you will *become* hyper-obsessed with your appearance also. If you spend hours a day combing **sub-Reddits** where people think college and professional sports are *the point of life*, you will eventually *become* one of those people. If you spend hours a day smouldering over hyper-divisive, **polarized politics** on Facebook or Twitter, you will eventually *become* one of those people posting those things. I don't know if you've thought about it this way, but what happened at the Capitol last week happened, in large part, because people *became* what they *beheld*, especially the things they beheld on their devices. **If you give large portions of your**

³ This phrase is often attributed to media theorist Marshall McLuhan, but he actually got it from a Catholic priest named Father John Culkin.

attention to your phone world, that world is going to be the primary thing *shaping your life*.

But—and this is so important for us to realize—it's also true that we *become* like the *good things* we behold. Namely, Jesus. Look with me at **2 Corinthians, chapter 3**, v. 18 on the screen:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding (doing what? Beholding) the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

You *become* what you *behold*. If we want to **become more like Jesus**, we need to figure out how to spend more time *beholding* him than we do *beholding* other things. To go back to the language of Hebrews, we need to learn to *fix our eyes* on Jesus. To *fix our eyes* on the founder and perfecter of our faith, who, to finish out our passage in **v. 2**:

...for the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The **end goal for each and every follower of Jesus** is that we would become *like* our crucified savior. The man who, for the joy set before him, endured the most gruesome death possible, by the most vile of people, and then was resurrected and seated at the right hand of God. We want to become *like him*. But the way we *get there*, Hebrews says, is by *fixing our eyes*—setting our attention—on that him. We don't get there by making a decision one time and then going about the rest of our lives unchanged. We don't get there by saying a prayer or getting baptized or trying to be a good person. **We get there by fixing our eyes, day after day, on the reality of the cross.** And as we do, we *become* what we behold. We become like our crucified, risen, reigning savior.

Let me just try to show you **how this works** by just working back through the examples we gave earlier:

- Jesus is a better solution to our *boredom*, because his *mission* gives purpose and meaning to every relationship, every task, every spare moment of our lives.
- Jesus is a better place to find *approval*, because his approval is given freely and does not require us to look a certain way or be clever enough to earn it.
- Jesus is a better answer to our *inactivity*, because he teaches us that our value does not depend on our productivity (talked about that a lot last week).

- And Jesus is a better place to find *contentment*, because he gives us way to *deal* with our life disappointments and frustrations, rather than continually trying to *escape from* them.

Jesus is **a better answer**, a better solution to every single thing that we look to our phones *for*. And by beholding him, we become more like him, rather than becoming like any number of unhelpful things we find on our phones.

So the question becomes, then, **how do we practically** tear ourselves away from the world of our phones and put ourselves on a trajectory towards beholding Jesus? That's where the *practice guide* comes in for this week. If today is your first time with us, we've actually put out a **PDF practice guide** on our website to accompany this series. In that PDF, there are a number of different "practices" we are participating in during this series. And there are *two* of them that especially pertain to *today's* teaching. I'll tell you a bit about each one.

First, a practice we've called **Parenting Your Phone**. So the **way parenting works** (if you're unfamiliar), is that when you have *young* children, they go to bed before you go to bed, and they wake up after you wake up. And they sleep in a different room than you sleep in. Again, *ideally*, but that's the idea. So this practice takes that concept and applies it to our phones. **For a lot of us, right now, our phones are the last thing we interact with at night, and one of the first things we pick up in the morning.** *Parenting Your Phone* attempts to *undo* that habit.

Essentially, you **set a "bedtime" and "wake time"** for your phone each day. If you go to bed at 11:00pm, maybe your *phone* "goes to bed" in another room at 9:00pm. If you wake up at 7:00am, maybe your phone doesn't "wake up" until 8:00 or 8:30. Adjust it to whatever works and is realistic for you. But find a way to make it where looking at your phone doesn't bookend your day every day of the week. Does that make sense? There are a few more tips and tricks in the PDF.

The **second practice** is just called **Make Your Phone Just a Phone**. So I'm not sure if any of us can remember this, but there was a time, when a phone was literally just a way to call people, and take calls from people. Like that's it. The only buttons you could push or tap were numbers, to dial other people—and *you had to know their number*. How crazy is that? Okay, this practice tries to return (at least some of the way) towards that utilitarian use of the phone, by deleting a majority of the apps off of our phone so that they don't regularly steal our attention.

There are probably **a few apps that we rely on** a little too often to get rid of: our Maps app, our text message app, maybe our Calendar app. But most apps, if we're honest, end up being at least as distracting and time-wasting as they are useful. So in this practice, you delete all the unnecessary apps off of your phone, and you keep it that way for 21-days. For some of us, that's gonna feel like an *eternity*. My guess is that if you do this, you will be *shocked* at how much time it frees up in a day. Again, I'm not saying you will *like* not having anything to do during those times, but you will be shocked at how much time it frees up.

One thing I love about this one is that it has a **"bonus challenge."** For those of you that are competitive, your ears just perked up. For those of you who aren't competitive, I just lost you. Either way, here's the idea. **After the 21 days** of simplifying your phone usage, instead of just adding back all the apps you had before, you actually slowly add them back, one by one. You only add an app back to your phone if there are three legitimate, needed uses for it in a week.

But here's the point: I bet if we did one or both of these challenges, **a lot of us would discover that we actually have always had the time required for resting and being with Jesus, we've just been spending it on other things instead.** That all make sense? Because **remember: the goal** of this practice is to help us create margin in our lives for rest and fixing our eyes on Jesus, and help cut down on things that pull and captivate our attention *away* from Jesus. It's to throw off anything that hinders. And through that, that it would take away distractions and excuses to slow down and live at the pace of life that Jesus embodies. Y'all good with that?

Okay, I'd love to pray for us as we endeavor in all of that this week.