

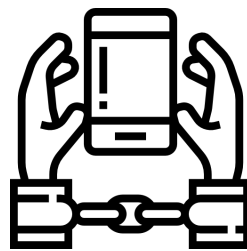


## session three addicted to distraction

### ARE WE ADDICTED?

One of the many warnings offered by popular critics of digital technology concerns the possibility of addiction.<sup>1</sup> Are we addicted to our smartphones? Are we addicted to social media? Although this may sound a little extreme, many sociologists claim that the ways we engage with our digital technology is similar to the way an addict would engage in their unhealthy habit. For example, the first thing we do when we wake up in the morning is grab for our phone. If we are tired or stressed, we resolve to rot our brains with Netflix or YouTube. If we accidentally leave our phone somewhere and suddenly feel the emptiness in our pocket, we begin to sweat and immediately drop whatever we are doing so that we can find it. We have to admit that these responses in us mark something at least similar to what could be labeled an “addiction.”

Furthermore, this level of interaction with digital technology is more complex than simply engaging in fun activity. When we post something on social media and receive a like or even anticipate receiving some sense of social approval, the neurochemical dopamine is released in our brain. In this sense it rewards our brain and begins to form a pathway that communicates that this exercise is good. In the most basic neurological sense, the more we use digital technology, the more we want to use digital technology.



While we certainly exhibit some unhealthy habits in our relationship to digital technology and social media, I believe that we need to delve deeper. We may be addicted to our smartphone or thoughtlessly browsing social media, but we have to ask *why* we might exhibit such habits. We must ask ourselves the question: what is this habit satisfying in me that causes me to return to it time and time again? Why do I feel the need to check Snapchat or Instagram? What am I seeking to do when I mindlessly check my smartphone or scroll through random YouTube videos? Although there may be many answers to those questions, I believe the strongest one is this: we desire to distract ourselves from our boredom. While we may be addicted to digital technology and social media, I believe our greater addiction is to distraction. We are addicted to distraction, and we fulfill this addiction in our digital world through digital technology and social media.

## BOREDOM

Boredom is an extremely strong motivator. When I was in middle school, my school had implemented a new form of punishment called "Saturday School." If a student were sentenced to Saturday School, the student would have to arrive in uniform to school on Saturday morning, 8am sharp. For the next two hours the only thing on the agenda was silence. As punishment, the student would have to sit there for two hours - no talking, no reading, no writing - just the student and their thoughts. It was horrible. I vividly remember the handful of times I had to go. Time moved excruciatingly slow. I attempted to develop games in my head, made up conversations with myself, and tried anything that would help me escape the prison of boredom. Much of us engage in this same exercise everyday, no matter how old we are or what stage of life we are in. We will use any means necessary to escape the feeling of boredom.

The Christian mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."<sup>2</sup> Deep down, when the busyness of life quiets down and we are left to our own thoughts with nothing to do, an intense feeling of discontentment begins to suffocate our hearts and minds. I suppose that this feeling is the product of our sinful nature, where we come face to face with our own emptiness apart from Christ - an unmediated look into the God-sized hole in our hearts. Boredom leads to introspection or soul-searching, and this introspection naturally leads to despair; and this is why we loathe boredom. The philosopher Peter Kreeft writes,

"We think we want peace and silence and freedom and leisure, but deep down we know that this would be unendurable to us. In fact, we want to complexify our lives. We don't have to, we want to. We want to be hurried and hassled and busy. Unconsciously, we want the very thing we complain about. For if we had leisure, we would look at ourselves and listen to our hearts and see the great gaping hole in our hearts and be terrified, because that hole is so big that nothing but God can fill it."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, we would rather be busy than bored; and in our preference to be busy rather than bored, we divert our attention away from thinking about the seriousness of life and our rightful place in it.



**We will use any means necessary to escape the feeling of boredom. We would rather be busy than bored.** @LNBCStudents #TechSeriesLNBC

Pascal continued, "The only good thing for men therefore is to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion."<sup>4</sup>

## **DISTRACTION**

Our greatest attack on boredom comes in the form of diversion and distraction. We hate the boredom and the state of despair that it leads us into, so we therefore seek out anything that will divert or distract us.

### ***dis-trac-tion***

anything that redirects us from what is most significant, monopolizing the heart's concerns.<sup>5</sup>

In previous generations, these diversions took on different forms. In the American colonial era children would play leapfrog and hide-and-seek, and the parents would enjoy music and dancing. In the early 1900s, American kids would play 'kick the wickey' and marbles while adults sought entertainment at the theater or the parlor. Fast forward a few decades, and families found distraction and diversion in the form of radio programs, which then later evolved into television programs. Distraction and diversion is nothing new. However, with the modern onslaught of digital technology, our access to constant distraction and diversion has multiplied dramatically.

We no longer have to gather our neighborhood friends to play a game. We no longer have to huddle around the one radio in the house to hear a comedy sketch. We no longer have to visit the local theater to see a new movie. We no longer have to wait for weeks to see the new episode of a television show we like. Today, we have endless avenues of diversion and distraction available at our fingertips. The easiness with which we can distract ourselves is astounding; and it is because it is so easy that we return to it over and over again, which forms the habit into something likened to a serious addiction. So while distraction is not new, its easiness and excessiveness in the digital world is new, and it is extremely dangerous.



### ***THE DANGERS OF DISTRACTION***

In the New Testament, unchecked distractions and diversions are noted as dangerous because of their ability to disrupt our relationship with God and hinder our mandate to form a culture that represents God's lordship.<sup>6</sup> The greatest danger in our digital world in regards to addiction is not necessarily that we might be addicted to our smartphone or social media; but more so, our devices and interaction on social media may be a hindrance to a deeper relationship with God and minimize our involvement in His mission.

## **DANGER ONE: UNFRUITFULNESS**

In the parable of the sower, Jesus explained that one of the ways the word of God proves unfruitful is through diverted attention to the cares of the world (Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14). The distractions of the world - money, personal comfort, security, pleasures, etc. - have the ability to make the word of God unfruitful in our life. If we allow ourselves to be constantly distracted by digital technology and social media, we may find that the word of God is not producing fruit in our daily lives.

## **DANGER TWO: LACK OF COMMUNION WITH GOD**

There is a story in Luke where Martha is so distracted with serving Jesus that she misses out enjoying Jesus' presence (Luke 10:38-42). While Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his teaching, Martha is distracted and therefore overlooks the nearness of God in her life. We often allow our attention to be diverted - even by good things, like serving Jesus - and as a result, we forsake hearing from God in our lives. Instead of sitting at the feet of Jesus, meditating over scripture, and enjoying communion with God in prayer, we tend to distract ourselves by browsing social media on our smartphones and therefore forsake what is 'better' for us (Luke 10:42). Distraction has the ability to tease us with good things, which in turn rob us from better things - i.e., communion with God.

## **DANGER THREE: SPIRITUAL DROWSINESS**

At the end of Romans 13, the apostle Paul calls the Christians in Rome to 'wake up' and realize that salvation - God's work to make all things new under the Lordship of Christ - is nearer than they think (Romans 13:11-14). The implication is that we tend to be drowsy in our spiritual life, not living with readiness and urgency as we anticipate the end of the age. Even Jesus repeatedly addressed this tendency for us to lose sight of eternity, calling us to be alert (Matthew 24:42-24; 25:13; Mark 13:34-35; Luke 21:36). In this challenge to be awake, we must realize that nothing lulls us into spiritual drowsiness like distraction. The more distracted we are, the less ready and awake we are to the urgency of God.

## **DANGER FOUR: SHALLOW LIVING**

In Tim Challies' chapter on distraction in his book *The Next Story*, he offers profound insight into one of the dangers of distraction:

**"With the ever-present distractions in our lives, we are quickly becoming a people of shallow thoughts, and shallow thoughts lead to shallow living."<sup>7</sup>**

With a heightened culture of distraction, Christians are tempted more than ever to simply catch-up with the fast pace of life. We tend to employ the unhelpful method of multitasking in hopes of becoming more productive.<sup>8</sup> In our pursuit of efficiency we forsake the critical component of being still and engaging in joyful rest, which equips us to live deep and meaningful lives (Exodus 20:8; Psalm 46:10; Zephaniah 3:17; Colossians 1:9-10).

# THE UNDISTRACTED LIFE

The battle against distraction takes place in the depths of our hearts and minds as human beings. It is not convenient or easy to rid oneself from distraction, for it requires us to come face to face with our own insufficiencies and therefore surrender and rest in the sufficiency of God. Such an endeavor will require intentionality equipped with several environmental nudges and inward disciplines.

## **NUDGES**

### ***1. Measure your use of digital technology and social media.***

How much time do you spend on your devices and on social media? The amount of time might alarm you. The simple task of measuring your time on your devices and on social media will encourage you to spend your time more wisely.

### ***2. Trace the notifications.***

Do you know how many notifications you receive per day or per hour? Which of these notifications serve as the greatest distraction for you? Knowing how many notifications you receive and deciphering which ones are truly important will assist you in limiting ones that are unnecessary.

### ***3. Identify what numbs your brain.***

There are several applications or websites that only serve to numb your brain. Locate which of the applications, websites, or games you play that limit your ability to sharpen your mind and strengthen your heart.

## **DISCIPLINES**

### ***1. My devices go to sleep before I do and wake up after I do.***

Set aside a time before you go to bed to 'put your devices to sleep.' In other words, do not go to bed with your phone or tablet charging next to you; instead charge it in a central location in your home where you will not use it right before you go to sleep. This allows you to devote your last hour or half-hour before bed to things that are more important - e.g. spending time with your family, reading scripture, meditating on your day, journaling, and praying. Having your device charge somewhere other than your nightstand also allows you to begin your morning without an onslaught of notifications from your device. Take the first hour or half-hour to begin your day with the right priorities.

## ***2. Delete and unsubscribe.***

There are some applications, games, websites, and social media platforms that are simply too strong of a distraction for us to resist. The best way to remove this distraction is to make the determination to delete or unsubscribe. You will find that you are able to survive and life goes on without it quite easily; and in the long run, you will cherish the freedom it brings.

## ***3. Cultivate concentration on substance.***

In our fast-paced culture of distraction, we rarely take the time to think deeply in pursuit of living deeply. This requires practice, and as Christians, we have the greatest subject matter to serve the discipline of concentration: God, his word, and his world. The eternal, transcendent God is an endless wonder filled with infinite wisdom, which he has so graciously revealed to us through his word and creation. In your quiet hours in the morning and/or evening, dedicate them to cultivating concentration on God and scripture, thinking deeply over what he has revealed. Further, by cultivating your concentration on God and his word, you will find it easier to cultivate concentration on his creation - i.e., cultural issues, current events, academic studies, etc. Taking up the practice of journaling will greatly assist you in this discipline.

## ***4. Engage in digital fasts: one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year.***

Just as Jesus gave instruction on how to pray and how to give, he also gave instruction for how to fast (Matthew 6:1-18). When we engage in a digital fast, we are not fasting from food or water, but rather we abstain from digital technology and social media. It is considered a discipline of abstinence, where “we abstain to some degree and for some time from the satisfaction of what we generally regard as normal and legitimate desires.”<sup>9</sup> This is not a practice that condemns digital technology and social media in itself, but rather it condemns our inability to put these things in their proper place. As W. R. Inge noted, “If we feel that any habit or pursuit, harmless in itself, is keeping us from God and sinking us deeper in the things of earth...then abstinence is our only course.”<sup>10</sup> If we sense that our use of digital technology and social media is weighing us down with distraction, and if we take our spiritual walk seriously, then we will enact the necessary disciplines to remedy our situation.

## ENDNOTES

1. According to Sarah Cassidy's article, almost four in ten young people fear they are addicted to the Internet, Sarah Cassidy, "The Online Generation: Four in 10 Children Are Addicted to the Internet," *The Independent* (May 9, 2014). [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk). This was cited in Kathy Koch, *Screen and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015), 48.
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, revised ed., trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 37.
3. Kreeft quoted in Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 45-46.
4. Pascal, *Pensees*, 38.
5. This is an adapted definition from Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, 47.
6. Reinke identified three categories of distraction in the New Testament: distractions that blind souls from God, close off communion with God, and mute the urgency of God, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 48.
7. Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Faith, Friends, Family, and the Digital World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 117.
8. Challies noted, "A rash of recent studies shows that multitasking is not a solution. In fact, studies show that multitasking is actually a misnomer. While we think we are multitasking, we are actually task switching..Our brains just won't allow us to perform two complex operations at the same time with the same skill," *The Next Story*, 125.
9. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 159.
10. William Ralph Inge, *Goodness and Truth*, (London: Mowbray, 1958), 76-77.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are your thoughts on the debate concerning whether we are addicted to digital technology and social media? Do you think it possible? If so, what are some examples that you have experienced or witnessed that lead you to believe we are addicted?
2. Have you thought about how much you despise boredom? Why do you think that is? What are some of the thoughts you have when you are bored?
3. What do you believe are some of the biggest distractions that exist in our culture today? Do you agree that we use these distractions primarily to escape boredom and busy our lives?
4. Would you label our culture as a shallow culture? If so, what makes you think that? Is there anyone in your life that you would describe as someone who lives deeply? What does that mean and what does that look like?





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### **STUDENT RESPONSE**

Would you describe yourself as addicted to digital technology or social media? Why or why not?

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What is your first response to feeling bored?

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What are the primary distractions or diversions you turn to?

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How many notifications do you receive from your smartphone, tablet, or computer on a daily basis? How many of these notifications are necessary?

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What are some practical steps you can take to cultivate concentration in your life?

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### ***PRAYER***

Take a moment to write out a prayer to God, praising him for the fact that he has graciously revealed himself to you. Ask him to reveal to you those areas in your life that you are using to distract yourself, and seek wisdom for how you might reorient your life's priorities to focus on him, his word, and his world for his glory.

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