

Teen Tech Challenge

Unplug.

Disconnect.

Fix your eyes on Jesus.

A Gospel Tech Resource

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul,
'therefore I will hope in him.'

Lamentations 3:22-24

A Note

This guide has been adapted from *A Graceful Disconnect: 25 Days to a Quieter Heart in a Tech-Saturated* world. The tech challenges included are part of a larger story challenging readers to rethink and refocus their hearts and minds on Christ. In hopes of making this content accessible to teens, students, and small group study, the challenges have been included in a separate guide format.

For further study or more reading, visit www.gospeltech.net or follow @lovegodusetechn on the socials.

Introduction

Teens, this guide is meant to help you—help us all—press pause. It's designed to reorient our hearts back on God and learn to guard them above all else. At the core of these challenges is the call to walk in who God has called us to be, living out our faith so we might pursue the good works He's set before us. We simply cannot do this when we spend nine hours a day (or more) plugged into various technologies.¹

The work we've been called to do is too great, and the God who calls us is too faithful and too good to let us stay in such a place. God is on the move, despite what we might see in front of us, and it's evidenced in you showing up here, wondering if this hard work of pushing back against tech is even worth it. I promise—Christ is worth it all.

Screens are ubiquitous in our culture—your generation know this best. And sometimes, we let bad habits linger in the name of maintaining the status quo. These challenges are meant first for you. Believe it or not, you can set the tone in your family, with your friend group, and in your school. Despite what it might feel like, you are not the only one wondering if this is how it has to be. And if, one by one, we start to put phones away, out of sight and out of mind, it will become easier for others to follow suit.

I want to give you a chance to step back for a minute and evaluate if the choices you make are the choices that line up with your goals. What do you want your life to look like? What do you want to shape your future? To define your friendships and relationships with your family members? And does your tech use support or hinder that?

There are five challenges included, and my hope is this: At the end of these challenges, whether you do them solo or invite a friend or your whole family along, you'll see more clearly the things God has in store for you. And you'll see how your tech fits into that—or maybe doesn't fit at all.

Focus here: Begin with the end in mind. We know we are called to be disciples of Christ. We are called to use our time well, making the most of our days for our joy and God's glory. Our life, when we entrust it to Christ, is not our own to fritter away mindlessly, but belongs to God.

I'm going to poke at some habits that might need to change, but I'm also going to remind you who God is and who you are to Him. When we know both of these things, the lies that seem like freedom are revealed for what they are, and our eyes are open to the life given to us in Christ.

Will you join me?

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¹ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. New York: Penguin Press, 2024.

Challenge #1

Here's the first challenge:

Redeem the car.

Make car time conversation time—no individual devices while in the car with friends or family members. Instead, you must listen to shared music, podcasts, audiobooks, or try straight up talking. Try it for a week.

Sherry Turkle writes in her book *Reclaiming Conversation* that, “Most conversations take at least seven minutes to really begin.”²

We are all hungry for deep, fruitful relationships. But it's hard to ever get there without engaging others in meaningful conversation. Our hearts and souls are designed to exist in relationship with other people. If we want to be faithful to God in our calling as his followers, we must fight to know and be known— to engage, to pursue, to prioritize people.

The hard thing is this: It's simply easier to default to silence and isolation, scrolling on our phones separately than it is to talk with whomever happens to be in the car that day.

If we want to intentionally pursue real, meaningful conversation—and therefore relationship—with the people we care about, we must carve out space in our day for this to happen. It will not happen by accident. We must dig a little deeper than perhaps what's comfortable in our hurried world.

The car is a space where we default to isolation. What if, instead, it became a place for conversation and connection?

Rather than instantly reaching for your phone or popping in AirPods, consider sharing music with whoever's with you. Engage those younger sibs (I promise—their annoying habits are often a plea for you to just notice them!). Enlighten your mom or dad on what music you're loving right now. Challenge them to really listen.

This will be hard and take practice. Most of us (adults included) have turned the car into entertainment time— we've lost a wonderful opportunity to sow seeds of patience and the chance for intentional conversations.

Andy Crouch says, “The great, deep conversations that are possible in the car after the seven-minute mark grow out of practicing simply staying engaged with each other and

² Turkle, S. (2015). *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin.

the world around us... **The tragedy of our omnipresent devices is the way they prevent almost any conversation from unfolding.**³

Reclaim the car. Allow for silence. And if there's to be music, podcasts, or audiobooks, make them communal. Ask your riding buddies what they want to listen to—and listen together. This is an opportunity to talk, yes, but it's also an opportunity to connect and share a bit of yourself with your parents or siblings too.

Relationships that are deep and meaningful, the ones where we are known and loved, these take work. They do not happen overnight or by accident; and they require all parties to show up and engage. Keep at it and reap the harvest of deeper relationships.

Challenge:

Reclaim the car for conversation time for the next seven days. Press into that seven-minute mark, wait through the awkwardness, and see what comes out on the other side. At the end of the week, take note what differences you find in your time spent in the car.

Reflect:

1. What is your norm in the car? How did that change this week?

2. We are able to love others because of God's great love for us. How does pursuing your friends and family members in the car (through conversation, shared music or audio books) allow you to put your love into action?

³ Crouch, Andy. *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017.

Challenge #2

Initiate a screen-free night for your family or friends.

If you're anything like me, you get to the end of the day and you simply want a few minutes to mindlessly scroll.

Perhaps indulge in a show of your choice uninterrupted and guilt free.

It seems I go through seasons where I'm determined to make the most of the day, carpe the diem, use every minute well, and then the reality of life hits me, and well, I'm just *tired* by the time the day is coming to a close. Despite my best intentions to finish that project, get out my watercolors, or read that stack of books, I find myself caving to the path of least resistance and leave those good intentions for another day.

However, when this starts to happen more often than not, I find myself feeling disconnected. God has given us his people—our family and friends and siblings, too—to love and be loved. One way we work to build relationships with others, to deepen them, is by having fun together. It's a simple but often overlooked part of any healthy relationship. And like the God who so graciously pursues us, sometimes we get to be the one pursuing our friends and family.

So this challenge is for me, too. Pick one night this week and invite a few friends or circle up your siblings and parents, and instead of watching a show together, or on screens scattered throughout the house, rally the troops for game night.

Here's what this looks like for me:

I am the pickiest game player in our house, so if I initiate game night, that means we play a game I like. Some of you are geared for multi-level, super strategic games and my hat is off to you; you will find me championing Uno and Clue or maybe a game of Settlers of Catan if I'm really going for gold.

I sweeten the deal (for myself and everyone else) with snacks. Pop popcorn, pour lemonade, and dole out generous portions at your game night. Like a lot of things that are hard, like running or eating salad instead of chips, playing a game will be fun. Eventually. Sometimes even when you're doing it. Almost always when it is over.

These moments of connection that we are all longing for can certainly happen while we cozy up to watch TV together; but I've found that when that's *all* we do together, the connection diminishes a bit. Games force play; they force cooperation and looking at one another and remembering: "*We like these people!*"

One way we can diligently steward our time and energy well is to set boundaries on our entertainment tech—when, where, and how often we will watch or scroll. When we

have some routines, like game night, built into the weekly calendar, it helps recalibrate our behavior and reorient our hearts back to what really matters.

Challenge:

Designate one night this week as game night. Schedule it on the calendar and let your people know: Come play games, enjoy snacks, and have some fun. Pro tip: Find a basket and collect everyone's phones at the beginning of the game session.

Reflect:

1. What went well about your game night? What might need tweaking in the future?

2. Is tech in the evening your default setting? What other boundaries could you place around your screen time to allow you more time to pursue people and passions God has given you?

Challenge #3

Before we get to our challenge, there's an important distinction to note about the types of tech we use:

Some tech is *Drool Tech*—it's designed to take your time, attention, and money. Some tech is *Tool Tech*—it helps you design, create, and work. Things like Pinterest, SnapChat, and TikTok are Drool Tech, while Microsoft Word, Adobe PhotoShop and AutoCad are Tool Tech.⁴ I don't know about you, but I've never mindlessly scrolled in Microsoft Word for hours on end. I don't find myself checking Photoshop multiple times a day.

We rarely have problems with Tool Tech because it's designed to work when we work. Our problems with tech typically are with Drool Tech because they're designed to keep us hooked, coming back for more, in an endless feedback and dopamine loop. While we certainly are accountable for our behaviors and habits, it's worth noting that this fight against Drool Tech (especially in certain apps like TikTok and SnapChat), is simply not a fair fight.

These apps are designed by some of the best social and behavioral psychologists in the world to keep your attention. Your brain just can't compete.

So here's where our challenge comes in:

Make a screen time schedule.

Determine when you'll use entertainment tech. I'm not asking you to never respond to Snaps, never scroll Instagram or TikTok, or never spend time on Pinterest. What I'm asking is for these moments to be preplanned and intentional. The goal here is this: Make a boundary.

In doing so, your brain (and even your body) can relax. You will get to check said app, but at a preset time, not all the live long day. Try this for a week and see how you feel at the end.

In my life this week, I've felt a general sense of overwhelm. I've felt hurried, impatient, frustrated with nearly everyone and everything. Basically the *opposite* of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. And while this reveals a deep heart issue (Am I trusting God? Or am I trying to *be* God?), one very practical way I've seen to push back on this state of mind is to place a boundary around when I check messages.

⁴ Sutherland, N. (2024). *Gospel Centered Tech: Raising Faithful Followers of Christ in a Digitally Distracted World*. Lion Press.

Instead of checking texts and emails all day long as they come in, I'm checking them in the morning (and after my Bible reading time), at lunch, and before school pick up. It's not perfect, and it's not easy, but the space it creates in my calendar and the calm it breathes back into my mind is tangible.

Where could you put a boundary or limit around your most-used (or most thought consuming) apps? And how might this free up your heart, soul, mind, and spirit to love God and love others?

Challenge:

Make a screen time schedule for your Drool Tech this week. Be specific. Days of the week, time of day, and total screen time are all things you might consider as you make your schedule. Commit to it for seven days.

Reflect:

1. Matthew 6:33 instructs us to "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Does your screen time reflect a heart that seeks God first?

2. What difference did having a screen time schedule make for you? What was the best part? What was the hardest part?

Challenge #4

I walked into school the other day to pick up my kiddos, and a friend popped out of her car and quickly confessed: “All I was doing was listening to the radio. I left my phone at home. I almost went back and got it.” She was laughing, embarrassed at her blunder.

This friend loves Jesus. She is beautiful and smart and funny and a better storyteller than anyone I know. Her comments about sitting in the car listening to the radio were laced with shame—can you believe that’s all I was doing? Sitting alone in my car? Listening to music? As if the opportunity to scroll Instagram for ten minutes presented itself and *she missed it*.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t understand.

When I find myself waiting somewhere—in the parking lot, in the line at Starbucks, in any waiting room—the pressure to pick up my phone builds and builds. It seems as if everyone around me is alone, scrolling, and I’m maybe a serial killer if I just sit and gaze around me in silence? Social pressure demands I scroll.

But why?

Cal Newport, author of *Digital Minimalism*, says, “The urgency we have to always have a phone with us is exaggerated”.⁵ Because we live in a culture that’s always connected, always on, always scrolling, the absence of such is noticeable. I’d wager it’s more noticeable to ourselves than to others, but perception is reality.

So this week’s challenge? **Leave your phone at home.** On purpose.

The goal this week is to practice spending time apart from your phone. It can feel like a crisis if we cannot find our phone or God forbid, we leave it out of sight for a minute. “Nomophobia is a type of separation anxiety that you experience when you can’t use your smartphone...it’s more broadly described as the fear of feeling disconnected from the digital world.”⁶

Phones are useful for features like maps or the ability to connect with parents or friends to firm up plans. But most of the time, the information that feels so urgent to communicate immediately could wait. I don’t actually have to know what year Forrest Frank was born or show you that picture *right now*.

Here’s the challenge:

⁵ Newport, C. (2020). *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. Penguin.

⁶ *Six Ways to Reduce Phone Separation Anxiety*. (2020). Psychology Today. Retrieved August 23, 2020, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/urban-survival/202002/six-ways-to-reduce-phone-separation-anxiety>

Choose a few times this week you could leave your phone at home. This could be for a walk or a trip to the store. Maybe you lock it away for a full night. The point is to go without it and see how you feel. See what frees up in your mind when your every interaction isn't lured away by a real or perceived notification.

If you struggle with this and it feels impossible (or, mom and dad don't want you driving anywhere without a phone), try this caveat: leave it in the glove box or your bag—and turn it off. This way, if there is an emergency, you'll have access. But it also ensures you can't access your phone on a whim.

Doing this is a chance to recalibrate your mind and your heart for long enough to self-assess your dependence on this digital device. Why is it that you feel frenzied without it? Have you forgotten what it feels like to be alone with your thoughts sans interruption? Perhaps there are valid concerns about being reachable; if so, are there low-tech, low-notification alternatives to being always available?

It's nearly impossible to be still and know God when we are bombarded with constant alerts and pings and quick checks. We must learn to carve out time without our phones, and remember what it feels like to be disconnected from the digital world.

Challenge:

Choose a few times this week when you can practice leaving your phone at home—aim for at least one hour each. Schedule these into your week. Be sure to let your parents know your plan and whereabouts so no one is alarmed when you don't respond immediately.

Reflect:

1. Reflect on how your outings without your phone went. How did you feel? What was different about your mindset? Anxiety level? Thought process?

2. Consider if this is something you could adopt into a weekly practice. Perhaps there's a time of day (or even day of the week) you could go phone free. Would this be something you're willing to try for a month? Why or why not?

Challenge #5

Here's the final one! You've made it! You've done the work of thinking through why we're pushing back on our tech use. Hopefully, you've lifted up your eyes off a screen and fixed them back onto Jesus.

We're going to end on a big one:

A thirty-day tech fast.

Pick one. Take that especially sticky tech that consistently convinces you to give a little more than you intended—the one that keeps you up a little later, distracts you whenever you have a moment, and costs you the time and attention you'll never get back. Then, give it up for thirty days.

This tech fast is a chance for your brain to regroup and reconsider some of the habits you might have formed around these shiny screens. I'm going to guess that for most of us, social media and gaming is what has the strongest hold on our habits and time. But if not, feel free to insert your scrolling/website/streaming service of choice.

At the end of the day, most of us have some type of compulsory behavior associated with our tech, if not a full-on addiction. And at the heart of these behaviors is the deep-seated belief that this thing, this man-made fruit, will satisfy. Will provide. Will offer respite.

We click and scroll in hopes of finding something, when really, there's only One who offers life.

I know very few people who can log on to their app of choice and stick to their pre-set time parameters; very few who can move on without a glazed donut look on their face, precious minutes having just vanished into the murky ether of algorithms.

I need this myself. I've spent a good deal of time researching app blockers. The results were underwhelming. Almost all of them are easy to circumnavigate on the iPhone.

A thirty-day reset not only breaks the cycle of use, it also allows time for new habits to form.

Here's what I've found to be the most helpful when tackling your thirty days:

1. Delete the problematic app from your phone. If you're really going big, block these sites on your computer too.
2. Tell someone. Accountability is your friend.
3. Replace! There will be a gaping hole in your day where you've trained yourself to reach for your phone in search of that quick dopamine hit. Before you begin, make a plan of what you will reach for instead. More on this below.

This will be hard, the first few days especially. Breaking well-worn habits, especially the ones that offer high frequency rewards, is hard work. For a few days, it might feel like it's not worth it. Your body will crave that dopamine hit—but push on.

Where are the places grabbing your phone is automatic? And what will you reach for instead?

At night?

In lulls of conversation?

During that boring class?

Grab a book, craft, little project, Bible verse; make a plan to move your body; set a friend on speed dial because you can still make an actual phone call. Fill your brain with truth and see how you feel on the other side of thirty days.

This will be hard *and* it will be worth it. I want you to know that I'm joining you in this—that as you battle compulsive behavior and unbelief and bad habits, I'm praying for the grace to choose life over escape, to believe that Jesus is better than whatever temporary fix we seek through our phones.

Every single time I've stepped away from an unhealthy tech habit, I've been glad. I know this is what people who quit sugar tell you and as someone who has quit sugar at least three times in my life, I can tell you I always come back to chocolate chip cookies.

But I've never been tempted to turn on my notifications again.

I have yet to reinstall problematic, time draining apps.

I am more content, more free—happier—without my phone pinging me all day long. I'm working to daily turn and trust in Jesus, to find practical ways to fix my eyes on Him. Sometimes that means removing the thing that distracts.

Remember why we're doing this: Our hope doesn't rest in quick hits or escape, or in the approval of the online world. Our hope is in Jesus, and He, praise God, will provide all we need for life and godliness.

I'm so proud of you for taking this journey. I'm cheering for you! And I'm praying for victory and freedom and for your eyes to be lifted up and onto God, where they belong.

Challenge:

What tech will you take a break from for thirty-days? And what will your replacement plan be? Be sure to let someone know about your goal and perhaps consider inviting them to join you.

Reflect:

1. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."
How do you think this applies to how we use screens?

2. At the end of the thirty days, consider how your challenge went: Which days were the hardest? Did it ever start to feel easier? What helped?

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