

WEEK 11 | DIGITAL PRESCRIPTIONS

A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it.
– G.K. Chesterton

When things are going wrong, G.K. Chesterton observed, you don't need practical solutions. You need philosophical commitments—firm convictions about the way things are, or at least about the way things ought to be.¹ As we look across the digital and technological landscape, things have clearly gone wrong. In many ways, we have been unwittingly pulled into a dangerous universe without realizing it. Digital technologies have transformed our world and the way we interact with it and each other, and it is impacting us in dramatic and often harmful ways. What we need now are firm convictions about the way things ought to be.

VALUE YOUR TIME

Paul writes to the Ephesians, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16). Paul reminds us that our time is limited. In his sermon “The Preciousness of Time,” Jonathan Edwards describes time as the most valuable resource in the created universe, because it is the only resource we can never get more of. God has numbered our days. He has allotted the physical and temporal boundaries of our lives (Acts 17:26) and there is nothing we can do to move those boundaries. Every second, minute, hour, or day lost is one we will never get back.

If this is true, then, as Paul says, we must “Look carefully” at how we live. We must value the time we have been given and make good use of it. One of the pathologies we saw is common to digital technologies is their ability to grab attention and keep a hold of it, consuming vast amounts of our time before we even realize it. We must find a way to set limits on our digital media and technology use to avoid wasting time frivolously.

This will require wisdom. As mentioned previously, the answer is not necessarily to cut these technologies out of our lives completely (though, for some, that may be the case). In all likelihood, most of us simply need to intentionally sets limits for ourselves to guard against overuse.

One of the hallmarks of the modern west has been a dramatic increase in leisure time. Technological advances have made so much of our lives automated, freeing up time previous generations simply did not have. I would argue an excess in leisure time has caused us to undervalue time—something that we need to be retaught. With the Psalmist we must call on God

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World?* (London: Cassell & Co., 1910), 43.

to “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). Let us pray and ask God to help us value the time He has given us.

GIVE YOUR ATTENTION

Digital technologies have been designed to grab our attention. Problematically, researchers have shown that multi-tasking—the giving of our attention to multiple things at once—is largely a myth. At best, we are able to shift our limited attention span back and forth from one thing to another. If we are giving our attention to our smartphones or some other screen, we are not giving it to something else.

This reality has its costs, principally to those around us who no longer have our attention. Rather than give our attention to the unreality of the digital world, let us choose to be present and attentive in the world God has put us in. Rather than live our lives online, let us live embodied.

LIVE EMBODIED

We saw in Genesis 2 that God created man “from the dust” and breathed into him the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Then God placed the man in “a garden in Eden” (2:8), provided him “every tree that is pleasant to the sight for food” (2:9), gave man the task of working and keeping the garden as His vice-regent (2:15), and provided him “a helper fit for him” (2:18) to assist him in this task and to provide intimate companionship. In other words, God made man a physical being in a physical place with physical nourishment and physical companionship. From the beginning, man was made to live and thrive in this physical world.

We were created to live an embodied life in this universe. Too often, digital technologies remove us from this embodied existence, and when this happens something is lost. We would do well to remember that God created us to live in and interact with this world. It was a part of His grand purpose for us as His image-bearers, a purpose we must not lose sight of.

COMMIT TO COMMUNITY

Reading through the New Testament epistles, one is shocked by how many commands and exhortations they continue. One is even more shocked, perhaps, to realize that the vast majority of these imperatives are directed to individuals but to communities. Certainly, as individuals we must heed the commands of Scripture, but we should not forget that the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote to believers in the context of the church, the community of faith. We were made to live in community.

One the impacts digital technologies have had on society is to replace real community with a faux, online community. This online community promises the connection and social intimacy that we as personal creatures need, but time and again it has proven unable to offer a true substitute for the real thing. As Christians, we more than anyone must recognize the danger this presents to us. It plays on our natural inclinations towards selfishness, self-centeredness, and isolation. We must commit to community, “not neglecting to meet together. . . but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25).

We are both needy and needed. We need the encouragement of others, but others also need us to encourage them. The church needs each of its members present, actively exercising their spiritual gifts on behalf of the body, performing the one-anothers towards each other, and displaying Christ-like love for one another. As pilgrims on the way, God has given us each other to help us make it to the end.

LOVE THE TRUTH, LIVE NOT BY LIES

Finally, and given the present state of our culture, perhaps most importantly, we must be people who love the truth and refuse to live according to the lies of this world. We have seen that digital technologies have shown a powerful ability to influence what people believe and how they behave. Given that fact that no technology is truly neutral, this is a highly concerning reality.

In the second chapter of the book of Colossians, Paul urges believers to “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Paul reminds us that the world is full of falsehood, of false ideologies and empty philosophies that are vying for space in our minds. These ideologies are a part of this world system, which is anti-God and anti-Christ, and they are used by the Satan—the ruler of this world, according to Jesus—to draw us away from Christ.

Undoubtedly, the proliferation of digital media, social media, and the internet in general has made disseminating lies easier and more efficient. Even now, our society is being ravaged by these unbiblical worldviews that are being adopted at an alarming rate—even within the church. Christians must be people who love truth, people who allow God’s word to be the lens through which they view all of reality and guard themselves against false, worldly philosophies. Thus, we must be on guard so that we are not taken captive by lies.

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word” (Psalm 119:9). At a time when Biblical literacy in the American church is at an all-time low, we need to re-commit ourselves to studying and meditating on Scripture. We must be willing to forego the infinite number of distractions available to us and make time to widen and deepen our knowledge of the Bible, that we might be protected with the full armor of God from the enemy’s attacks.