



## Life Under Construction: What Sort of Life Are You Building?

Text: Matthew 7:15-23

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While it may not be a popular teaching today, Jesus makes it clear that there are only two groups of people in this world: those whose lives will be approved of by God and those whose lives will not be approved of by God. So we must humbly ask ourselves, “What sort of life am I building?”

1. What is the connection between what a person believes and how they behave? What is an example from your own life where what you said you believed was contradicted by how you behaved?
2. How would one know when their investment of energy and resources towards a goal or their use of something (e.g. their phone) has reached an unhealthy level, in other words, in ways that are not helping them build a life approved by God? (See Study Deeper for some ideas.) What evidence of this do you see in your own life?
3. Read Matthew 7:15-20. How do we filter out the false prophets from the true? What false prophets have you fallen prey to, and what steps have you taken or can you take to lessen the effects these false prophets are having on you?
4. Read Matthew 7:21-23. Those who live a life ultimately disapproved of by God will tragically ultimately hear these words from our Lord, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” These words should certainly have a sobering effect on us. However, it would be wrong to think that that the only way to have a life approved of by God is for us to be perfect. It is grace that allows us to know (i.e. have a relationship with) God and grace that allows us to do God’s will. How did this sermon most convict you and convince you of your need for grace?

**Challenge:** What is a concrete, actionable change you need to make in your daily and/or weekly rhythms of life to eliminate false prophets from your life, redeem your use of technologies like smartphones, and/or more regularly connect with God through His Word, like the man who starts each day with a chapter from one of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John?

**Prayer:** Close your group time by breaking up into pairs. Within each pair of group members, share specific ways you felt challenged or convicted by this message and changes you would like to see in your lives. Then finish your time together by praying for God’s grace to cover the mistakes and empower the changes desired that were shared.

## **STUDY DEEPER**

### **Denzel: Your Phone Is Changing You**

“Are you using your phone, or is your phone using you? Can you put it down? Can you turn it off?”

These were the blunt rhetorical questions asked by Denzel Washington in a recent interview with BBC television. “I’m not knocking the phone,” the actor reiterated. “We have to at least ask ourselves – around the world – what is [the smartphone] doing to us?”

Our smartphone addictions have led us to a rather odd cultural moment. As I write, Apple’s stock price has surged to a record high (\$147.90/share), partly on the news that Apple now has a cash surplus of \$256.8 billion, and partly driven by rising buzz around the ten-year anniversary iPhone (to release this fall). But as the market prepares for the most impressive iPhone yet, many signs are beginning to emerge to indicate that the smartphones are behind a growing uneasiness in our culture.

For teenagers, the endless need to gain approval and popularity, once largely isolated to the school day, has lost its boundaries. With never-ending social feeds, teens now never escape the pressures of peer approval. But the challenges persist for all demographics. Content fatigue is setting in for many, especially exhaustion from political tensions. Loneliness seems as unabated as ever, as friendships among middle-aged men have dropped to epic lows, generating a whole demographic of men who find themselves socially dislocated and isolated.

One journalist recently opened an article with this thought experiment: “Try to pinpoint the last time you took a purposeless walk through the late spring breeze, when there was no itch in your hand to reach for a mobile device, and you felt like the wind and sky around you had nothing to disclose to you other than the vast and mysterious sympathy of existence itself. Was it 2007? Or as far back as 1997? Does just asking the question make you feel ill?”

#### **What Are Smartphones Doing to Us?**

The question is not merely rhetorical. We feel the changes inside of us. We all know that the more addicted we become to our phones, the more prone we are to all sorts of psychological and physiological consequences.

Study after study has shown that too much time on our phones has profound effects on our physical health, including (but not limited to) inactivity and obesity, stress and anxiety, sleeplessness and restlessness, bad posture and sore necks, eye strain and headaches, hypertension and stress-induced shallow breathing patterns. The physical consequences of our unwise smartphone habits often go unnoticed, because in the matrix of the digital world, we simply lose a sense of our bodies, our posture, our breathing, and our heart rates. Our overwhelming focus on projected images causes negligence with regard to our bodies.

We get that, and there is no lack of books, even by Christians, which address the long-term harm of these physiological concerns.

But behind all of these consequences of our smartphone abuses are the underlying causes: the cravings, the hopes, the anxieties, and the hidden desires inside of us that feed our habitual impulses toward our phones. These are the spiritual concerns that I put in my sights as I began aiming my project.

For three years I asked questions – reading, researching, interviewing thoughtful leaders, counselors, ethicists, pastors, theologians, and philosophers, anyone I could find to help in investigating the emerging effects of the smartphone on the Christian life. The end product was my new book.

## **12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You**

Never offline, always within reach, we now wield in our hands a magic wand of technological power we have only begun to grasp. But it raises new enigmas, too. Never more connected, we seem to be growing more distant. Never more efficient, we have never been more distracted.

### **Smartphone Habits, Gospel Opportunities**

But it was not until a missionary friend in the Middle East explained to me how my book was being used in her neighborhood, as a bridge into the gospel with Muslim friends, that it first dawned on me just how extensively the anxieties of the digital age reach around the globe, and how they force all of us to reckon with deeper questions of life, beyond the physical consequences.

If research tells us that a tsunami of digital distractions are crashing into our lives, we need situational wisdom to answer three spiritual questions: Why are we lured to these distractions? What is a distraction in the first place? And perhaps the most foundational question of them all: What is the undistracted life?

Simply by asking the deeper questions, Christians can move the conversation this deep, this fast.

I see twelve ways that our phones are changing us, and – more importantly – twelve ways that Scripture presses us deeper, moving us from cultural concerns to the eternal issues that hang in the balance. So, here are twelve cues you can use to move your conversations about phone abuse toward the gospel.

#### **1. We Get Addicted to Distraction.**

Our phones are a candy bowl of sugar-hits whenever we want them, and it's impossible to be offline for any amount of time without feeling the anxiety of withdrawal. But hidden under these hyperpalatable distractions is the billion-dollar question that people across the world would love to get answered: What is the undistracted life? The answer is carefully explained by Paul in one chapter of Scripture (1 Corinthians 7).

#### **2. We Ignore Our Flesh and Blood.**

We ignore our neighbors, and we ignore people around us. We text and drive and endanger others on the road. We attend parties and spend our time gazing at a 4-inch screen. Our phones push us to evade the limits of embodiment, to live in the cognitive and ethereal realm of a virtual world. But Scripture exhorts us to celebrate the countercultural beauty of the flesh-and-blood church. And Jesus labors to show us that our neighbor is anyone who shares the same place as us (Luke 10:25–37).

### **3. We Crave Immediate Approval.**

Smartphones put us in instant contact with friends, family, and strangers. We can see and be seen right now. We publish a picture and refresh our feeds to see who is watching and approving. But this craving for human approval kills faith (John 12:42–43). Yet we find it so hard to put our phones away. We fear one another, and we want admiration from one another, so we cultivate an inordinate desire for human approval through our social media platforms. For those of us who struggle here, Jesus’s warning is very clear: “Whoever loves [his social network] more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). Scripture reminds us over and over again of the supreme value of our approval before God and what’s at stake when we forget this.

### **4. We Lose Our Literacy.**

Smartphone abuse doesn’t make us il-literate, it makes us a-literate. We grow lazy with our literacy and powers of concentration. Christians are a “people of the book,” but Scripture is now for most of us, the oldest, and longest, and most complex book we will ever seriously encounter in our lives. The daunting nature of Scripture puts a premium on serious literacy. Jesus’s most common rebuke is a stinging question: “Have you not read?” To not have read means to not have comprehend Scripture, and this is to be in a dire place of spiritual hardening. We see that true, eternal literacy is a supernatural gift of seeing invisible glory.

### **5. We Feed on the Produced.**

Our phones condition us to assume that the buffet-like offering of new digital media will never end. With such an offering, our necks crane down, and we grow blind to the created beauties around us. Scripture tells us to stop, look up, and see God’s raw power and presence – in the splendor of nature and in the grace of the people around us – and to let divine gratitude swell in worship of him (Romans 1:18–23).

### **6. We Become Like What We “Like.”**

Or more accurately, we become what we most love, and whatever we most love is offered to us on our phones. We are porous beings. Whatever we focus our attention on is the thing we are becoming. We are surrounded by images of bodies we cannot resemble and luxuries we cannot afford. Yet our desired self-projection slowly morphs who we are. We become what we are most attracted to, a profound mystery. Instead, Scripture beckons us to behold the transforming glory of Jesus Christ, and to find our transformation in his image. Either our idols shape us into their own dead image (Romans 1:18–27; Psalm 115:4–8; 135:15–18), or Christ shapes us into his glorious image (Romans 12:1–2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10). This is Anthropology 101.

### **7. We Get Lonely.**

Smartphones tempt us toward unhealthy isolation and a creepy voyeuristic enjoyment of looking at others from behind the safety and secrecy of a screen. We want to connect, but we also want the safety of our phones to buffer us from others and to broker our relationships. Technology makes relationships cleaner and easier. Or so we think. But Scripture commands us to focus our attention on those who are least likely to appear in our feeds: the needy, the poor, the elderly, and the cognitively disabled.

### **8. We Get Comfortable in Secret Vices.**

Online anonymity is an illusion, but behind the fake veil we indulge in forbidden fruit, like pornography, a poisoned apple that destroys our spiritual appetite. Scripture calls for the utmost vigilance in protecting

the desires of our hearts, through radical self-discipline in the face of virtual sin that feeds our sinful imagination. “If your eye causes you to sin . . .” — that’s a warning for us to reclaim today (Matthew 18:9; Mark 9:47).

### **9. We Lose Meaning.**

Viral videos, breaking news, snaps, and texts all grab for our immediate attention on the fast-moving surface of social media. But Scripture calls us to seek wisdom by earnestly clawing for it like a treasure hidden underground, invisible to skimming eyes scrolling down a screen of ephemeral bytes (Proverbs 2:1–15).

### **10. We Fear Missing Out.**

Of all our digital fears, the pain of getting left out seems to cut the deepest. As if it is some unwritten contract we signed, we believe that we will never miss out, as long as we enslave our attention to our phones. We pull down to refresh. And do it again. But Scripture tells us of a place none of us has seen, where everything we’ve ever missed out on in this life will be replaced and restored forever (Acts 3:21).

### **11. We Become Harsh to One Another.**

Gossip has always been a favorite pastime of sinners envious of one another. But now we can text and snap rumors or incriminating photos and evidence. On a crystal screen, slinging dirt seems so easy, so hygienic, so sanitary. Scripture helps us to realistically see the sinfulness of man — to see all the dirt and baggage we carry around ourselves — and then helps us to show grace and mercy toward one another. Contrary to the impulses of online outrage, we are called to cultivate a heart of gentle patience as we bear with one another’s weaknesses and shortcomings (Ephesians 4:2).

### **12. We Lose Our Place in Time.**

Our attention span is shattered into 9-second bursts, as we struggle to manage the waterfall of texts, snaps, photos, breaking news prompts, and new and weird and crazy and scandalous things. Conditioned to think that what is most important is what’s happening online right now, we can concentrate on nothing. Our digital ADD makes us lose our sense of place in the world. But Scripture reveals to us a cosmic, universal storyline that roots our existence in something bigger than the immediacy of our feeds. The word “remember” occurs about 400 times in the Bible, and there’s a precious rooting of ourselves in history — in God’s story — that we must have to flourish in this life.

### **Flourishing in “Never-Offline” Culture**

All of Denzel Washington’s questions point to the emerging anxieties of our “never-offline” culture — faced by those in our hometowns, our neighborhoods, and in places all around the world. And these smartphone questions open new doors into a labyrinth of eternal questions.

Yes, we’re all being digitally distracted to death (and we welcome it). And yes, all the studies say that we need less screen time (but we really don’t want to hear that). As we humble ourselves and learn the art of digital self-control, we can speak into our generation with pointed insight into the purpose of our lives and what it means to flourish in the digital age — undistracted with eternal purpose in view.

With Scripture in hand, Christians are positioned to pick up the conversation where the culture can go no deeper in the search for answers, and we can move the discussion forward into ultimate realities and

eternal possibilities. And that means moving the conversation from the digital offerings of our shiny new devices to the eternal offerings of our gracious Savior.

To this end, endless opportunities are in front of us.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/denzel-your-phone-is-changing-you>