

IS MY PHONE CHANGING ME

2nd July 2017

Readings: Luke 8:4-7 & 11-15

When I told one of my children, who will remain nameless, what I was preaching on she rolled her eyes and said, “Dad, you’re too old. You only use Facebook (FB) to catch up with family. I know what you’ll say...” - and then shook her head. And she may be right. Still in the light of the impact and influence of smart phones on culture and individuals I’ll take the risk and jump in. “Is my phone changing me?”



Now at the onset I need to make two things clear. First I love living in the age of technology. I love gadgets. I love being able to e-mail. I love being able to Skype my grandson. I love apps that help me organize my world. I love banking online. I love being able to use google maps to get where I need to go. It's great

The second thing I need to make clear is I'm preaching to myself today - and you're most welcome to listen in. In some respects this is no different than any other Sunday, but managing screen time so it's productive and beneficial - instead of a black hole that wears the soul is a constant tension. It's very much a work in progress.

Let's pray

Let me set the scene. Over the past few decades Kiwis have led the way as early adopters of technology. So, although the following are USA statistics they reflect us Kiwis. The average person spends eight hours a day in front of some kind of screen - whether it be computers at work, TVs at home or smart phones, tablets and the like. For Facebook (FB) alone the average time is 53 minutes per day across various platforms. Of those in the 18-24 age bracket, 75% say they check their phone before getting out of bed. Once out of bed, we check our phones once every 4.3 minutes, or 221 times a day.

With these sorts of stats you can see how smart phones have huge potential undermine or enhance our faith. So what's the plan for this morning? First I'll outline a guiding principle from Proverbs. Then we'll look at the threat smartphones are to our faith before exploring an insight from Jesus that's a game changer. Then we'll finish with two practical steps to help negate the threat and nurture our faith.

I. Guiding Principle

So, to our guiding principle which is found in Proverbs 22:3

The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. Proverbs 22:3 (NIV)

The Message version of the Bible puts it like this

A prudent person sees trouble coming and ducks; a simpleton walks in blindly and is clobbered.

A smart person does two things. She looks ahead and sees trouble coming. Secondly she gets out of the way! Others sense trouble's coming but do nothing and get clobbered. Indeed, many see aspects of smart phone and are uneasy but aren't sure how to get out of the way. With this in mind let's look at the threat we have to get of the way from.

II. The Threat

Now we have a lot to thank C S Lewis for. Not just his Chronicles of Narnia but his theological writings like Mere Christianity, The Great Divorce and the Screwtape Letters. In the Screwtape Letters he uses letters written from a senior devil to a junior to highlight a number of Satan's plots and schemes. One of which is what Lewis calls the "Nothing" strategy of Satan. This is the idea that Satan wants us to focus on things unsatisfying to our souls and unhelpful to our vocations. Things that aren't satisfying and won't make us better people. So, it's the Nothing strategy. It's the dreary flickering of amusements. In his own words Lewis writes

And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a **dreary flickering** of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the **gratification of curiosities so feeble** that the man is only half aware of them... C S Lewis, Screwtape Letters, Chapter Seven

And if Satan can get us stuck here - "with the gratification of curiosities so feeble" - our souls will not be satisfied and we won't be better people. So we get stuck in this nothingness. Let's see how this plays out in practice. Another quote from Lewis

You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do.

Now C S Lewis wrote this before TV's let alone the screens we have today. Listen again.

You can keep him up late at night... staring at a dead fire in a cold room. All the healthy and outgoing activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and nothing given in return...

And this is what happens to us with social media. Different technology - same affect. In the palm of my hand I can fill my life with an amazing amount of nothing. A nothing that will never make me happier, nor satisfy me, nor lead to real joy. The technology I hold is like another sugar hit I have to come down from - unless I go looking for another sugar hit. It's like a dopamine hit, a rush - even a fix. The need for affirmation lures me back everyday. So, I go to Facebook, or twitter or Messenger for validation. How many likes I have from my 200-300 friends, about average for a Facebook user. And I'm drawn back again and again as I look for evidence that I matter, that I'm worthwhile, that I make a difference. And so instead of finding approval in Christ and before God we try and find it with our friends on social media. Yet, when I step back, how much of all this has become a "dreary flickering" and a series of "gratifications so feeble" we're only half aware of them.

The only difference between now and the generations before is that with smart phones the impact is so much more immediate and compelling. The potential to undermine, choke out and quench our faith is much, much closer.

And here I've been touching on some areas key areas that impact our faith: distractions and affirmation. So, like the person in Proverbs 23 looking ahead and seeing when to duck for cover let's turn to insight from Jesus. What's he got to say?

III. Insight from Jesus

For Jesus knew Satan's schemes and addressed the Nothing strategy in one of his parables. Let's remind ourselves of The Parable of the Sower, where seeds are scattered here and there. Some land on a hard path, others on rocky soil, some amongst weeds and other in good soil. Afterwards the disciples ask Jesus what's all about. Now, as I read Jesus' answer which do you think fits Satan's "distraction with nothing" strategy?

Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. Luke 8:12-15

So, what do you think? Which of the four - the path, rocky soil, weeds or good soil is most like the Nothing strategy?... It's the weeds. Listen again. "They are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature". This distraction, this filling our lives with dreary flicking which never brings deep satisfaction is like the weeds that chokes out God's life and God's word.

So, knowing this is Satan's strategy, howbeit with 21st century technology, how are we to follow Proverbs 23 - to protect ourselves - to duck for cover and not be clobbered. Well, some would say ditch the technology. Throw your smartphone out. Rid of yourself of the multiple screens that rule our lives and go back to a simpler way. What do you think? This is not the answer. Why? Well, for many our vocation - our job or schooling - require we use screens. And after the ease of Internet banking who would go back to writing checks? But more importantly Satan's Nothing strategy was effective before smart phones and so retreating to a simpler time only changes the distractions and not negates them. So, because of distractions, this Nothing strategy is here to stay I've two suggestions to counter the threat: orientate your day and Linger

IV. Practical Steps

1. Orientate your day

What do I mean by this? Well, start your day in the Word and not a screen. Instead of waking up and looking for affirmation from social media - who's following my Instagram, who liked my late night FB post, start the day by looking for God's affirmation in his Word. Instead of starting the day in a news app so we're in the know and ready for the lively conversation with friends over coffee... Instead, make a conscious effort to orientate your day around God and his ways. Now in a previous generation I'd be saying get into God's Word before the newspaper or listening to radio news - either way orientate your day around God. Start with a quiet time, open God's Word, pray, reflect. And during the day too. Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, used to say if he had 30 seconds to spare between tasks he'd shoot up a prayer to God. If we have 30 seconds spare we fire off a tweet or check our FB feed. Yet with practice, with commitment, with God's help we can orientate more of our day toward feeding the soul and away from those dreary flickerings that dull the mind.

2. Linger

The next thing we can learn is to linger. What do I mean by this? Let me remind you that I'm not anti technology. I'm not. A frustration of this morning is not having time to explore the wonderful ways smart phones can encourage our faith and feed our soul. Facebook can help us reconnect with a friend we haven't seen since school days, our fitbit encourages us get out and walk to get our 10,000 steps in and there's some stunning Bible apps allowing us to access God's Word on the go. So what I mean by linger. Slow down and spend time in the text you're reading.

I'm not sure of those under 20, but for the rest of we've been conditioned to speed read text on screens. To hunt down the information and move on. If you're reading the Bible on your smart phone - great. But learn to linger. Personally I prefer my hard copy Bible for lingering - for devotions and to ponder. I happily use an electronic version for study and sermon prep but hard copy to linger. Josh and I are going through a book on leadership in ministry - a chapter a week. It's out of print but I can printout a chapter a time so we can linger - highlight, write notes and then discuss.

Whether hard copy or electronic - learn to linger in God's Word. And also, anywhere else where your soul is nurtured. Walk on beach, music, hanging with special friends, playing with the kids. Linger!

Now as we draw to a close some may have been feeling a little smug thinking, "I don't have a smart phone so none of this applies to me". Well, think again. Satan's "Nothing" strategy worked before smart phones, before TV and before newspapers. Whether we are surrounded with the latest gadgets or can't turn a smart phone on let alone use one - we all face distractions that want to choke our soul. We all face distractions that lead to a **dreary flickering of the mind** and **gratification of our souls by feeble curiosities**. Smart phones with social media, clickbait and endless memes of kittens just make this dreary flickering more immediate, more compelling and more accessible.

Now I've just scratched the surface this morning, Dealing with one aspect of social media and our increased connectedness. I haven't had time to explore the dark side of the net and the impact on our faith of pornography, cyber bullying and depression caused by everyone else's wonderful online life while ours is a mess. I also haven't had time to look at the amazing features smart phones offer to nurture our soul and enhance our vocation. There's some creative people out there doing some great stuff. However, with Proverb's 23 reminding us to look ahead and duck and not be clobbered we've seen how smart phones are effective tools in Satan's Nothing strategy. Where he seeks to distract us from anything that nurtures the soul and to replace them with dreary flickerings and feeble curiosities. We've seen from Jesus' parable that this acts as weed, a thorn, that choke our faith and impedes our soul. Throwing away our smart phones won't remove this threat as the Nothing strategy has worked for centuries. What we can do is start our day in God's Word not a screen. Orientate our day so our chief affirmation comes from God and not one or two of our 300 Facebook friends. We also saw that learning to linger in God's Word makes all the difference - whether by screen or by paper learn to slow down in God's Word. And not just in the Bible learn to linger when walking along a beach, over a good book, when conversing with special friends.

And all this Jesus Words of nurture ring out. Listen to his invitation to linger in his presence.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28–29

I invite the worship team to lead us in a couple of songs as we come to communion. Let us linger in the music and then the bread and the wine. Jesus invites you to his table.