

SPRINGBOARD FOR RELATIONSHIPS

“As we know from decades of research, people who interact with others face-to-face are less likely to be lonely. Recent research suggests that those who spend more time on social media, in contrast, are more likely to be lonely.”

— Dr. Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego University

We can't consider ourselves digital ministers unless we acknowledge the danger of isolation in the digital age. I'm intentionally using the word *danger*. Researchers have reported for the last several years a “loneliness epidemic” in adults and young people, and that Gen Z is the loneliest generation of all time.¹ In the church's earliest years, they were warned about the importance of staying in community with each other. “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encour-

¹ <https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2019/08/gen-z-loneliest-generation/>

aging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24). In the previous chapter we examined God’s desire for us to not stir up strife; here we discover *what* we should be stirring—love and good works—and *how* that stirring occurs—meeting together. The context for this instruction is hope and love. It’s vital that we stay in Christian community in order for hope and love to increase. We have to watch ourselves so that our screens don’t replace relationships. The digital age threatens Christian community in two ways: distractions and substitutes. We need to identify both while adopting practices that prevent us from falling into the potential traps of technology. With intentionality, we can purpose our screens as *springboards* for relationship rather than *substitutes*.

Identifying Distractions

A quick Google search will render plenty of scientific and sociological evidence that proves we need to limit our use of technology. Studies show that when we use apps for social media, games, online shopping, etc., our brains release endorphins. Just like a child who’s seen something entertaining, this chemical response in the brain begs us, “Do it again!” and a cycle begins. I’ve seen it in myself. Sometimes I plan to watch one or two short YouTube videos as a break, and before I realize it, half an hour has passed. There are apps and settings that have the ability to tell me how long I’ve spent on my screen, but even those require self-awareness and discipline. I’ve found that scheduling my breaks from technology in days rather than minutes helps more than most things I’ve tried.

In the chapter on listening, I mentioned how I designate certain times for work or play on my screens. I also plan days off. One day a week, usually on my Sabbath, I give no attention to my laptop or phone (except to call my mom the old-fashioned way). Each month I abstain from my personal technology for a four-day weekend—no apps, no shopping, no extraneous scrolling. I get my news and spiritual encouragement from other sources. Something about this grounds me in real space. Then I return to digital space with a strengthened sense of my purpose, which is to walk by faith in what God has set before me and to glorify him.

I don't ever refer to my breaks from technology as "fasts." Instead, my practice is one of setting and keeping regular boundaries. I've heard of social media fasts before, when people delete their apps to focus on God. Fasting is instructed by God as a way to increase intimacy with him, and if you desire to take up fasting, that's a wonderful thing. Just keep in mind that fasting shouldn't be a tool for time management. Some of my friends have shared with me that when they are struggling with keeping boundaries or feelings of insecurity while online, they decide to take a "social media fast." But I've noticed a few pitfalls with this. If you delete your social media apps, but fill that time with other digital entertainment—like binge-watching shows and movies—you might avoid the insecurities that arise while on social media, but you haven't tended the issues of your heart, and within a short time after returning, your old habits or insecurities also return. My friends or students who neglected intimacy with God experienced this cycle in digital space: overwhelm ⇒ digital fast ⇒ resolution to change habits ⇒ overwhelm. I think the inability to find a steady balance was inevitable because fasting isn't the