

**Temptations of the Digital Age (Part 3)**  
**Selected Scriptures**  
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*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher*  
*Countryside Bible Church, Southlake Texas*

Lord willing, next Sunday we will return to our study of the Book of Romans and finish up that great eleventh chapter and the doxology that's there. One of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. And I know it is true for many of you as well. But today I want us to finish what we began several weeks ago and are considering on the issues of the temptations of the digital age: those temptations that aren't new with the digital age, but that have come upon us in new ways and with a greater intensity in the technological age in which we live.

Most of us this morning either have in our pockets or nearby a smart phone, a cell phone of some kind. Do you understand how that works? Most of us have very little idea about how it really works. I read an article called "The Physics of Cell Phones," by Carolyn Kinder, in which she writes this:

Bell Laboratories introduced the idea of cellular communications in 1947 with police car technology. Motorola was the first to incorporate the technology into a portable device that was designed for use outside of an automobile. Dr. Martin Cooper, former general manager at Motorola, is considered the inventor of the first modern, portable handset, and made the first call on a portable cell phone in April of 1973 to his rival Joel Engel, Bell Labs head of research. [There's a story there, I'm sure.] In 1977, AT & T and Bell Labs constructed a prototype cellular system, and a year later public trials of that new cellular system were started in Chicago with about 2,000 customers. The cell phone system, as it's created today, divides an area of service [the article goes on to say] into a set of cells on a hexagonal grid. The phone tower, or base station in the center of the cell, covers an area two or three square miles around the tower. As you pick up the phone and

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make a call, cell phones transmit to the towers, which then connects you to the normal land-base telephone system to route the call. [And, by the way, there's an ingenious technology by which those calls as we travel from one cell area to another is transmitted and handed over to the next cell tower and continues on the land-base lines to deliver our calls.] The digital phones that we use change our voices into binary information (zeros and ones) [And that's way beyond my pay grade now to explain that.] and compress it, and then it's sent and received by a modulated electromagnetic wave.

It's really ingenious technology. It is very modern in its history. In fact, as you heard me say, it dates only to 1973. It's amazing how far it's come in that period of time. But what I want you to understand is that that smart phone or cell phone—some of you have dumb phones—that that phone that you have, that is composed of raw materials. And all of those raw materials, and all of the human intelligence and creativity that it took to pull those raw materials together to make them work the way they work, and all of the natural laws (the spectrum of waves that allow our voices to be transmitted in binary signals), all of that was created by and only works because of Jesus Christ. In Him all things are held together. And so your iPhone belongs to Jesus Christ. You belong to Jesus Christ because He created you. And if you're a Christian you're twice His, because He bought you with His own life. By creation, by ownership, and by redemption, Jesus is Lord of you and all of your digital devices. He has the exclusive right to tell you how they should be used.

Over the last couple weeks we've been reflecting on the unique temptations that come with the digital age. Through our devices and through the internet we are confronted in our culture with temptations in several specific categories. Let me just remind you of the two we've looked at so far. First of all, we examined the principle temptation that comes through the digital age, and that is substituting the trivial for the essential. I think this is greatest and most pervasive, most

subtle, and perhaps the most destroying temptation of all, because we end up taking that which is truly important and ignoring it to fill our lives with the meaningless and trivial. A second temptation that we looked at I call the internal temptations: substituting powerful sins for a pure heart. We looked at sins like covetousness, envy, anger. Sins that are absolutely pervasive in the digital world in which we live. And the Scripture says those are terrible sins, but we have become inoculated against them and even accepting of them. Today I want to consider a couple of other categories of temptations that we face through the digital and technological world in which we live, so let's look at them together.

Thirdly, beware of the sexual temptations that come through the digital age: substituting momentary gratification for God-given, God-ordained pleasure. Now, the three primary expressions of the sexual temptations that come at us through the digital world—and these aren't all of them but, I think, the three primary ones. The most obvious one, probably the sin you expected me to start with several weeks ago: pornography. Now understand this. Pornography has existed since the fall. If you doubt that, you can visit some ancient sites like Pompeii, for example, and see far more than you wish you'd ever seen. What has happened, however, with our digital age is that pornography has become far more pervasive. It has become far more relentless in the pursuit into the individual life. The digital world is filled with the pornographic. That includes such things as texting and messaging sexual images, searches on Google or other search engines for sexual images, visiting pornographic web sites, watching YouTube videos, and on and on it could go. The list is seemingly endless. It is a huge problem.

A couple of years ago, Barna conducted a massive survey of Americans of all kinds (not just Christians but of Americans) regarding pornography. They published a summary in an article entitled "Porn in the Digital Age: New Research Reveals Ten Trends." I'm not going to give you all ten trends, but let me give you a couple of them, just so you can see where we're going with pornography in this era.

First of all, they found that there is a growing acceptance of porn, especially among the younger generation. When they polled adults 25 years of age and older, 54% of them said porn is wrong. It's troubling more don't, but 54%. But when they polled teens and young adults from the ages of 13 to 24, only 32% of them said that viewing pornography is wrong. It's a problem of growing acceptance.

Secondly, it is a pervasive problem. The survey discovered that 6 to 12% of people age 13 and older view porn daily; 14 to 21% view it on a weekly basis. The only good news (if there is any good news from this study) is in this massive survey, half, 49% of people said they never seek out porn.

A third trend that this article and the research highlighted is that the biggest factors that influence the frequent use of porn are gender, age and faith. First of all, taking the gender issue. Forty-seven percent of male adults 25 plus use porn versus 12% of females. But when you look at the younger age groups, 67% of young men use pornography versus 33% of young women. So the numbers of both are growing, both men and women who are involved in pornography. The most frequent users by age group are young adults 18 to 24 with 57% of them frequently using pornography, 37% of teenagers, and 29% of adults 25 years old and older. When it comes to faith (and this was both encouraging and discouraging at the same time), of those who identified as practicing Christians in the survey (so, self-identified as Christians), 13% said they seek out porn. Which, of course, means 87% said they did not.

A fourth trend that was highlighted in this article is teens and young adults don't see pornography as a serious sin. In fact, the survey asked them, "What activities are either always or usually wrong?" OK? There's the question. What activities are always or usually wrong? The number one answer was theft at 88% saying it's always or usually wrong. Not recycling ranked number four; 56% said it's always or usually wrong. Watching porn was number nine

with only 32% of teens and young adults ranking it as morally wrong. In other words, it's a greater act of immorality not to recycle your trash than to watch porn.

Number five. Only one in five (about one in five, 18%) adults feel significant guilt when they use porn. In other words, four out of five of those who participate in porn have somehow seared their consciences to say this is OK, this is acceptable, and they feel no significant guilt when they involved themselves in it.

Clearly, pornography is a pervasive problem, but that's only one source of sexual temptation that has come with the digital age. There's also social-media adultery. This includes fantasizing about being married to someone other than your spouse, and (this is a huge problem) reconnecting with a previous romantic interest via social media. That has become one of the leading reasons given for divorce in today's world.

A third source of sexual temptation is through entertainment-induced lust, entertainment that encourages lust. This can happen with music (It's filled with sexual images.); video games in which the players, as a sort of reward for achieving the next level, involve themselves with a prostitute; all kinds of things with shows and movies. Media producers like Netflix, HBO, even TV broadcasters have continued to push the boundaries of what they will include in their programs. There is a skid. And I'm not going to take you down that road. I was thinking about it even this week (in my own lifetime) to see what gradually became acceptable. Its shocking what's happened. But as that slide has continued in the culture, sadly, Christians have become increasingly comfortable with being on the same slide, just a little bit behind. They've become comfortable listening to and watching entertainment with explicit sexual content. Can I just say, viewing sexually explicit content encourages sexual lust, and it encourages fantasizing, and it encourages a growing discontent with the spouse God has given you or your own life circumstance if you're single.

But what does God say about these things? This is what the culture says. The culture says there's no problem with this. In fact, it's more permissible than failing to recycle. But what does God say? What is the biblical perspective? Let's look at what our Lord says. Turn with me to Matthew chapter 5. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes up the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, and He instructs us with how they misrepresented the Old Testament Law. They didn't teach it accurately. So He sets the record straight. Look at Matthew 5:27:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Now, Jesus quotes the seventh commandment, and, clearly, that is what God forbids. That's in the Ten Commandments. And by His response in the next verse, He implies that what the scribes and Pharisees were teaching is that as long as you didn't commit the act, then you were OK, God was happy with you. And Jesus says, no-no, you have misunderstood the basic, divine intention behind this commandment, because “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Now, this expression “looks... with lust.” What is lust? Lust is a strong desire. In this context it's a strong, sexual desire. In fact, I would define it this way: it is looking at another person (however you look at them: whether in person, whether on a two-dimensional image, or whether in the three-dimensional digital world) looking at another person in order to provoke or to fulfill sexual desire. Someone other than your spouse. Looking at another person who's not your spouse to provoke or to fulfill sexual desire. That's lust.

And Jesus here says that looking at a person to lust in that way is a sin that violates the spirit of the seventh commandment against adultery. In the Divine mind, that is the intention behind this command: to prohibit such behavior. So Jesus goes on to say in verse 29:

“If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble [that is, into sin], cut it off and throw it from you; for [it’s] better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Now notice that not only is lust a sin that violates the spirit of the seventh commandment, but unrepentant lust alone is eternally damning. It’s what Jesus says. Where there is an unbroken, unrepentant pattern of lust, if that’s all you ever did, if you never engaged in any sexual act with another entity other than your spouse, but you engaged in an unrepentant, ongoing pattern of lust, Jesus says that’ll send you to hell.

Let me just stop here and say, if that’s your life, if you live in an unrelenting, unrepentant pattern of lust, then Jesus says that will condemn you, alone, to hell. My plea with you this morning is to understand your only hope is the gospel of Jesus Christ, because Jesus came into this world as one of us, and Jesus Christ never thought a single impure thought. He never lusted a single time, not once in 33 years. He never spoke a single word that was sexually inappropriate, and He never acted a single time in a way that was sexual sin. He lived the life you should have lived. And then God put Him to death on the cross in the place of those who would believe in Him to satisfy God’s justice against our sins, including our sexual sins, so that God could forgive us. And God will forgive you if you will repent of your sin and put your trust in Jesus Christ, in Him alone as your only hope as being right with God. But if you persist in your sin, if you persist in your rebellion and you refuse to take Christ, Jesus says listen, if lust is all you ever do, that’ll damn you to hell forever. I plead with you this morning, put your trust in Christ. Repent of your sin, and put your trust in Jesus Christ.

There's another point made in verses 29 and 30, and that is once we become His followers we must cut lust from our lives. And we must take whatever steps are necessary to do so, even radical steps. Notice He says cut off your hand and pluck our your eye. He doesn't mean literally. There were those in the early history of the church, including Origen, who mutilated their bodies in order to curb their lusts. They discovered, first of all, that's not effective. And then in the Council of Nicaea that was condemned as not being what Jesus meant. Most of church history affirms that's not what Jesus has in mind here. What is Jesus saying? He's saying that you must be willing to take radical steps to destroy the source of your temptation. If it's your eye, pluck it out. If it's your hand, cut it off. Again, don't mutilate yourself, but take dramatic, radical steps to deal with your sin.

What does that mean in our era? It means, if you struggle with internet pornography, you put a filter on your computer. If means, if that's not enough, you get accountability software where somebody else sees all the websites that you visit and can hold you accountable. If that's not enough, you get rid of the internet. If that's not enough, you get rid of your devices. If that's not enough, you do whatever it takes. That's what Jesus is saying. Up to plucking out your eye and cutting off your hand. If your job is the source of your sexual temptation, get another job. That's what He's saying. Do whatever you have to to cut the source of your temptation out of your life. Even radical steps. Listen, understand this, lust is not a harmless peccadillo. Jesus says it is a terrible, damning sin. And if that's all you ever do, it'll send you to hell. It's far worse than not recycling.

Turn to Ephesians chapter 5. Paul here is dealing with sexual sin, beginning in verse 3, running down through verse 14. I taught through Ephesians. If you want more detail, you can go back and listen online, but let me just give you a thumbnail sketch here. Notice in verses 3 and 4 he tells us that we must not tolerate any category of sexual sin. Notice what he writes:

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

Now all of those are sins that are sexual sins. I make a number of arguments for that in the series on Ephesians 5. I'm not going to make those arguments here. You'll just have to accept my point at this stage. But there are three categories of sexual sin mentioned in verses 3 and 4. The first is sexual sins of speech, verse 4. Three Greek words: "filthiness," "silly talk," "coarse jesting." The first word is a sort of comprehensive word about sexual things, talking about inappropriate sexual things. The second word has to do with the person who tells crude, vulgar sexual humor. The third word translated "coarse jesting"—which, I think, is a bad translation, because it's a little misleading. This third word has to do with the more polished, sort of double entendre, subtle innuendo that can be taken any way, it can be taken either way. It's that kind of sexual joke. It's not the crude sexual joke of the, you know, to be told on the construction site. It's the polished sexual innuendo of the board room. All of those are forbidden.

The second category of sin is sexual sins of thought. Notice the word "greed" in verse 3. In context, that word greed is talking about sexual lust. And then finally, sexual sins of action. Verse 3: "immorality." That's sexual intercourse with something or someone other than your spouse. And "impurity" is sort of a blanket term for all the rest of the sort of aberrations of sexual behavior. It would include things like sadomasochism, fetishes, etc.

So what Paul says is when it comes to Christians, there should be no dirty talk. There should be no dirty thinking. And there should be no dirty acts. Get it all out of your life. In fact, notice what he says: it shouldn't "even be named among you." What he means is not that you shouldn't talk about it. He does here in Ephesians 5. What he means is it should be so uncommon among believers that you don't even have to bring up the vocabulary, because it's not happening. Don't let it happen among you Christians. Verse 4, because it's "not fitting." It's not appropriate.

And notice, he goes on to say in verses 5 and 6, those whose lives are characterized by sexual sins of thought, speech and action are simply not Christians. Verse 5: “For this you know with certainty [all Christians know this] that no immoral or impure person or covetousness man [again, sexual greed is the idea], who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” It’s not saying Christians can’t struggle with these sins. Of course they can, or he wouldn’t even be writing this and admonishing us. He’s saying Christians are not controlled and enslaved in this way. This isn’t part of a Christian’s life. You don’t live in an open, unrepentant, unbroken pattern of these sins. Verse 6:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these [sexual sins] the wrath of God [is coming] upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them... you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth).

Live in keeping with who you’ve become in Jesus Christ. Stop acting like you did before you came to Christ.

Now if you’re here this morning and you consider yourself as addicted to pornography (and I know there are those who like to use that expression), I understand what you mean by that. But let me encourage you to read a very helpful, recent article. It was written online by Dr. John Street of the Master’s University. Don’t read it now, by the way, but it’s entitled “Enslaved, A Theology of Addiction.” It’s a very helpful article, because Dr. Street makes the point that a more biblical and more helpful way to view your sin is not as an addiction. Why? Because addiction implies you can never truly change. The world has taught us to say, “Once an addict, always an addict.” In other words, you’re never going to really be changed. Is that what the gospel teaches? Absolutely not! First Corinthians 6:10-11 lists a bunch of sins and then says,

“Such were some of you; but you [have been] washed, you [have been] sanctified.” You’ve been changed by the work of God through the gospel. So addiction gives the wrong message. But, you can be set free from that which enslaves you. That is the message of the gospel. So understand what’s really going on.

Now again, Christians struggle with these sins. We all struggle with these sins. There’s no person here who hasn’t been tempted in these ways. So what do you do? How do you battle sexual temptation? Well there’s a lot that can be said about that. If you really want to delve into this more, go back and listen to the messages I did on Matthew 5 and Ephesians 5. But let me just give you a brief little list here. How do you battle sexual temptation?

Number one. Make sure you’ve been transformed by the Spirit. Because in the end, you can modify your behavior (and unbelievers sometimes stop watching certain kinds of porn because something else is more important to them), but you can’t truly be changed at the heart level. You’ll just become a different kind of idolater. But ultimately, for real change to take place, it has to happen because the Spirit of God has changed you. Look at Romans chapter 6. We studied this in detail. Just to remind you. Romans 6:6. For believers, we know

that our old self [the person we were before Christ] was crucified with [Christ], in order that our body of sin might be done away with [or rendered ineffective], so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.

When you came to Christ, at the moment of salvation, you were united to Jesus Christ, and you died with Christ. The old person you used to be died, and a new person came into being. You don’t have to be a slave to sin. In fact, notice that’s exactly what Paul says down in verse 17:

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed [the gospel],

and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. [Verse 22]  
But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

In other words, the slavery of sin was broken at the moment of salvation, and that initiated an ongoing pattern of growth in holiness: a decreasing pattern of sin, and an increasing pattern of righteousness. That's only possible when you've been transformed by the Spirit. So start there.

Number two. Cultivate a spirit of constant dependence on Christ. We get in our minds that we can fight these battles on our own. That's not the reality. Jesus said in Mark 14:38: "Keep [on] watching and [keep on] praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." In other words, cultivate a spirit of dependence on God in prayer. In John 15:5, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing." He's talking about bearing fruit in your life. So you have to cultivate a spirit of constant dependence on Christ in prayer.

Number three. Don't just pray. Don't say, OK God, I prayed, why didn't You zap me? Number three. Take practical steps to cut lust out of your life. That's what we just saw in Matthew 5. Do whatever you have to, even making radical steps if necessary, to cut the sin of lust out of your life.

Number four. Arm yourself with the sword of Spirit. Ephesians 6:17: "Take... the sword of Spirit, which is the word of God." Paul is not talking there about all of Scripture. He uses the Greek word for the little, short sword that the Roman soldier used in hand-to-hand combat. He says take that. What he's really saying is take short statements of Scripture that you can take into hand-to-hand combat when you're dealing with temptation. In other words, meditate on, memorize, and preach to yourself passages of Scripture that have to do with your sin struggle and the source of your temptation. Do exactly what Jesus did. Use short statements of Scripture

in the moment of temptation to fend off that temptation. Memorize Matthew 5, the passage we looked at a moment ago. Memorize Ephesians 5, the passage we're in now. There are other helpful passages that deal with lust and sexual sin and how it damages the soul, how it's deceitful, how it lies to you. Memorize those passages. In the moment of temptation use the sword of the Spirit to fend off that temptation. But the bottom line is, in this digital age beware of and armed against sexual temptations. They are a constant reality.

There's a fourth category of temptations that are persuasive in our digital age. It's the relational temptations: substituting sinful responses for biblical love. There are a variety of sins that fall into this category of our relationships that come to us through the digital world. There are many of them that I could identify, but I want to highlight just a few primary ones. So let's look at them together. Here are some relational temptations.

Number one: misusing speech. This one is huge. The internet and social media are rife with sins of speech, and somehow Christians think that if it happens on the internet it's OK. It's not OK. What sins? Well, let me just identify a couple of sins of speech that are just everywhere on the internet.

First of all there's gossip. Here's a definition of gossip from the *Dictionary of Biblical Themes*: "It is idle talk which foolishly or maliciously [so it could happen either way] foolishly or maliciously spreads rumors or facts." In other words, it might be true or it might not. That's not the issue. Here's how the leading Greek lexicon defines the New Testament word for gossip: "Derogatory information about someone that is offered in a tone of confidentiality." "Did you hear about...?"

Another sin of speech that's rampant on the internet is slander. Slander is speech that denigrates, defames, reviles or disrespects. In fact, the most common Greek word for slander is the word from which we get the word *blasphemy*. When it's used of God, it's blasphemy. When it's used of

people, it's ridicule, it's name calling, it's belittling, it's attacking the person. "You blankety-blank." Or, "You good-for-nothing." Or, "You're always that." Or, "You're"...whatever. It's name calling. It's slander, and it is everywhere on the internet. Read the comment section of just some innocuous little post, and it's there. But the fact that it's there, the fact that it's ubiquitous, doesn't mean that it's acceptable for us as Christians.

Listen to Leviticus 19:16: "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people... I am the Lord." Psalm 15:3 is talking about the righteous man who will dwell on God's holy hill, and it says, "He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend." One writer commenting on that verse says this: "The righteous are aimed at promoting the well-being of other members of God's people by protecting their welfare and reputation." Let me just ask you to examine yourself for a moment. Are your online comments and posts pursuing and promoting the well-being of the other members of God's people by protecting their welfare and reputation? Proverbs 6:16-19: "There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him." God finds these completely repulsive. "[Pride] haughty eyes, [lying] a lying tongue... hands that shed innocent blood [so murderers]." Guess what number six is? "One who spreads strife among brothers." Proverbs 16:28: "A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends." Often the name calling that is slander comes with anger. It usually does, in fact. And Jesus said this in Matthew 5:22. We saw it couple of weeks ago. "Whoever says [in anger], 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell."

Where does this kind of speech come from? Where does this slander come from? According to Romans chapter 3 it comes out of a fallen heart that is like a grave. That's the image Paul uses: "Their throat is [like] an open grave." In other words, everything about their speech is characterized by decay and death. And that's because it comes out of a heart that's characterized by decay and death.

But as Christians our speech is not to be like that. Look at Ephesians chapter 4. Here's what your internet presence or, frankly, your personal presence should be like when it comes to your communication. Paul has just talked about the fact that we're no longer (verse 17) to walk like those who are unbelievers, like we used to walk. Instead, (verse 20 and following) we've learned Christ. We've been radically transformed, and we're in the process of sanctification. We're putting off the old self. We're being renewed in our mind, verse 23. We're putting on the new self, verse 24. In light of our salvation and sanctification (verse 25), here's what our communication should be like: "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor[s], for we are members of one another." Verse 29: "Let no unwholesome [literally, let no rotten word, not one rotten] word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification [that is, building others up] according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." Let me ask you if your online presence is characterized by rotten words or whether it's characterized by words that are good for building others up and for administering grace to others.

Now look at verse 30. We often take this verse out of its context. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." That verse falls right in the middle of a passage about communication. Do you realize that when you don't speak with grace for the edification of others, you are grieving the Holy Spirit of God?

Verse 31: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger." Those are two words which stand for the two kinds of anger: clamming up and blowing up. "And clamor." That's yelling. That's shouting. Somehow people manage to do that even on the internet. "And slander." There's our word: name calling, ridiculing, belittling. "Let all [of these] be put away from you. along with all malice." The word malice means the desire to hurt somebody. The internet is filled with people who clearly want to hurt people. Paul says don't be like that. Instead, (verse 32) here's, Christian, how you're to respond: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other,

just as God in Christ... has forgiven you.” So ask yourself, is your online presence characterized by the kind of communication of unbelievers or that of believers?

There’s another common sin of speech. Not only gossip and slander, but (talking about misusing speech) I would say bearing false witness. Bearing false witness, the ninth commandment. Exodus 20:16: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” You say, “That happens on the internet?” All the time. The most common way that this happens with Christians in the digital world is when they post or repost a negative comment or article or blog about someone without legitimate evidence. You may be thinking, wait a minute Tom, how can it be a false witness to post something that I thought was true? Well, there’s a sense, of course, in which you can’t be a false witness in complete ignorance. I mean, if you witness something and you’re convinced your testimony is true, then your testimony may not be factually accurate, but it’s still not bearing false witness. However, posting and passing along negative comments about others may, in fact, be bearing false witness if you know you don’t know the people involved, and if you know that you don’t know the actual facts of the case personally. Proverbs 18:13: “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.” Proverbs 18:17: “The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him.” It’s wrong. The Heidelberg Catechism says the ninth commandment requires “that I do not join in condemning any man rashly or unheard.” Thomas Watson, the English Puritan, says, “As it is a sin against the ninth commandment to raise a false report of another, so it is to receive a false report before we have examined it.” So while you may not intentionally lie or distort the truth in bearing witness against others, if you know that you are not a witness personally, then you should know that your testimony is potentially false. And therefore you ought to be extremely careful, because you may easily cross the line and break God’s law. Be careful you’re not guilty of bearing false witness in what you write or repost about others out in your internet presence.

A second relational temptation in the digital world, not only misusing speech—there’s a lot more that could be said about that, obviously, but let’s move on to a second. Perverting justice. By the

way, let me just say, I told you with my categories there might be some overlap. There is some overlap with this one and the previous one, but I think it deserves its own treatment. This temptation has to do with misjudging others and therefore mistreating them. This used to be called among Christians “making a rash judgment.” We don’t use that expression anymore, but that’s a good expression: making a rash judgment. Here’s how one writer defines it: “It’s jumping to hasty and unfounded negative conclusions about another’s character without having sufficient, biblical cause.” Justice is routinely perverted on the internet. Just a couple of weeks ago I read an article in the BBC that is the worst example that I have read in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The BBC writes this:

Eight people have been killed in mob attacks in Bangladesh after false rumors about child abductions spread online, police have said. The victims were targeted over rumors that human sacrifices were needed to build the Padma Bridge south of the capitol. Rumors claimed children were being beheaded as offerings to the three-billion-dollar project. Vigilante groups in turn lynched people they suspected of the kidnappings. The police said, however, none of the victims were involved in child abduction.

Now the injustice that permeates our digital age doesn’t usually end in death; however, it always ends with a travesty of justice and with destroyed lives and destroyed reputations. How does this work? How do people routinely, how do Christians routinely pervert justice when it comes to their online presence? Let me give you two primary ways.

Number one: determining guilt without biblical evidence. Something happens in the news, someone’s accused of a crime, or there’s this what appears to be an incriminating video clip posted online, or in the Christian world something happens to one of the leaders of the Christian world, and people begin to write about it online. And tragically, the online community, including many Christians, immediately jump to a conclusion

about the guilt of the person. You say, what's wrong with that? It happens every day. That is the internet. Well, let me tell you what's wrong with that. Well first of all, it violates the law of love. Being quick to believe the worst about others is a failure to love them, because according to 1 Corinthians 13:7 love "believes all things." That means love is quick to believe the best until there is evidence to the contrary. Don't misunderstand. Love isn't naive or stupid, but it's quick to believe and hope for the best and slow to believe the worst. Is that how you approach what shows up about other people online?

Secondly, it's wrong because it violates the nature of God Himself. Jumping to those hasty conclusions violates God's very nature, because God is characterized by justice. Psalm 37:28: "The Lord loves justice." Psalms 97:2: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne." His whole reign is based on justice, so He hates all injustice. It's a violation of His nature, jumping to conclusions about someone's guilt.

Thirdly, it's wrong because it violates the biblical standards of justice. You know, justice is the opposite of today's—Have you heard about it?—"the cancel culture." Here's what happens online. Someone is accused of something online. And without examining the evidence or without any due process, an online mob forms and insists that everybody withdraw their connection to that person and treat them as a pariah. It's called the cancel culture. That's injustice. God demands us, as His people, to be careful to exercise justice. Listen to Exodus 23:2:

You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude... to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.

In other words, don't go along with the crowd in condemning someone when the standards of justice haven't been met. And be careful even in considering not to weigh the person into it. Don't treat the great with partiality, but don't even treat the poor with partiality. Be just, because that's God nature. Leviticus 19:15: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly." Why? Because that's God.

So what are the biblical standards of justice? Just file this away. Number one. There must be sufficient evidence that rises to the biblical standard of evidence. Deuteronomy 19:15: "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed." In other words, there has to be evidence heard that meets the biblical standard for evidence. Number two. There must be a judicial process. Deuteronomy 16:18-20 says judges were appointed in every town in Israel. There was a judiciary, and there always has been. And they're the ones who have the responsibility to follow through on this judicial process. And thirdly, there must be a legal decision by the judge that God appointed. In Deuteronomy 17:8-13 there are different courts with different jurisdictions established, and each one has its own right to hear and respond to those cases. The same is true in our world and in our country.

That brings me to a second example of common online perversion of justice. Not only determining guilt of someone without evidence, but secondly, determining guilt without biblical authority. You see, it's not our right. We don't all have the right to sit in judgment and render a verdict. That's what the internet tells us. That's what the culture tells us. But that's not how God sees it. God has delegated authority for that to happen. In the home, parents adjudicate the issues that arise in the home. In the church, the elders are called upon to adjudicate the issues that arise in the church. And in the world at large, government has been given that responsibility by God. It doesn't belong to every

individual citizen to sit in judgment. So be very careful about appointing yourself judge, jury and executioner, or following those online who do. Beware that one of the great temptations of the digital age is the perversion of justice. Don't follow the masses. God cares about justice for every person, likable or unlikable, wicked or good, poor or rich, powerful or completely without influence.

Let me just mention two other relational temptations that have exponentially increased with the digital age. Disrespecting authority. I'll, again, just touch on these. God has ordained order and structure. He's determined there would be different levels of authority and submission among mankind. He did so for our benefit. And so God has established duly constituted authority. He delegated limited, human authority to husbands within marriage, to parents with their children, to elders in the church, to human government with its citizens. Unfortunately, the internet is a breeding ground, social media, they've become a breeding ground for rebellion against all authority. Christian, don't be sucked into that. Realize what it is. God wants you, one of the commandments tells us we are to respect the authorities God has put in place in our world. We'll get to Romans 13. We're to treat even bad government with respect and obedience. So don't get sucked into the internet world that tells you all authority's bad: question authority and belittle authority and ridicule authority and throw off the shackles of authority. That is from Satan and not from God. The Westminster Larger Catechism says,

What are the sins we can commit against those who are in authority over us? [It says this] All neglect of the duties God requires toward them, and envying them, contempt of them, rebellion against them, refusing to follow their commands that are within their right and authority to give us, cursing, mocking, and all such stubbornly disobedient and scandalous behavior as proves a shame and dishonor to them and to their government.

So let me ask you, how are you doing online with your respect for the authorities God has put in place?

One final one I would mention. Another relational sin is meddling in other's business. Most Christians have forgotten that to involve yourself in matters that are not your own is a sin. Look at 1 Timothy 5. Paul is dealing with widows who are to be supported by the church, and he says the younger widows (verse 11) are not to be put on the list for support because of some concerns. Verse 13 lists some of those concerns. Because in the ancient world a woman who was a widow couldn't work outside the home, so there was no activity for her to be involved in. And Paul says my concern is this is going to happen. And clearly what he unpacks here would be sins for all of us. They might "learn [verse 13] to be idle." The word is not doing their own work. "As they go around from house to house." Literally, the Greek text says, "to go in various directions." The word means to go from place to place, to wander about. Boy, that's a description of the internet. "And not merely idle, but also gossips." The word *gossip* means to disparage others with outrageous comments, chattering maliciously. Bad-mouthing is another gloss of this word. "And busybodies," which means, literally, to be intrusively busy, a meddler, to pay attention to matters that do not concern you. And "talking about things [that are] not proper [that is, necessary or fitting] to mention." It is a sin to meddle in business that's not your own. We are to manage our own affairs and handle our own business.

So those, folks, are common temptations that have come with increased intensity with the digital age. The principle temptation? Substituting the trivial for the essential. The internal temptations? Substituting powerful sins for a pure heart. Sins like coveting and envy and anger. The sexual temptations. Substituting momentary gratification for God-given, God-ordained pleasure, whether it's through pornography or social media or through entertainment. And then there's the relational temptations. Substituting sinful responses for biblical love. We just looked at those together. Beware! That's all I want

you to do. My whole point here is to not allow us to be like fish in a bowl of water where you're so wet, but you're so permeated by wetness you don't even know it. That's what happens to us. We get sucked into the world. And we just become so used to it that we don't recognize it. I don't want us to be like that. Recognize it.

So what do we do? How do we manage our digital lives? I'm not suggesting you get rid of our devices. I'm not getting rid of mine. They're helpful. What do we do? Let me give you just three short thoughts. Number one. Let me encourage you to read a couple books. *The Next Story*, by Tim Challies, deals with the challenges for Christians in our digital lives. And the other is *12 Ways Your Phone Changing You*. I believe his name is pronounced Tony Reinke. He's with Piper's ministry, or was with John Piper's ministry. Both excellent books.

Number two. Practice regular self-examination of your use of technology. The unexamined life isn't truly living. Reinke suggests three questions to ask yourself about your smart phone. Let me broaden it to make it technology. Ask yourself, number one, does my technology move me toward God or away from Him? Number two, does my technology edify me and others, build me up in my faith, or does it build nothing of lasting value? And three, does my technology expose my freedom in Christ or my bondage to something else? Ask yourself those questions and respond appropriately.

And number three, third suggested way to manage our digital lives is remind yourself daily that you and your digital devices belong to Jesus Christ. And when you pick up your smart phone, you don't stop being a follower of Jesus Christ. He has every right. It's His phone. He made all the raw materials. He gave people the intelligence to create it, and He keeps all the laws working that make it work. He created you. He redeemed you. He owns you. He has every right to tell you how to use those digital devices. Are

you following Jesus Christ as Lord in what you do in the digital world? Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for the opportunity to reflect on these things. Lord, we do thank you for technology. We thank You for the many ways it blesses our lives. But Father, help us as believers to be aware of how Satan would intend to use it to destroy us, to destroy our spiritual effectiveness, or even to destroy our lives, and in the case of some who are enslaved to some of these things, to destroy their eternal future. Father, I pray that You'd help us to reflect seriously. Help us to step, as it were, for a moment outside our times and to look at our times and our lives soberly, seriously, and to respond as followers of Jesus Christ.

Lord, I pray for those who may be here this morning who are not in Christ, who perhaps came in thinking they were, but measured against Your Word (some of the passages we've even looked at today) they have to admit that they are enslaved to sin, that there is an unbroken, unrepentant pattern of sin in their lives. Lord, may they see the reality that they are not in Christ, that they need to be transformed by Your Spirit, set free from sin and enslaved to You. And may they cry out to You today in repentance and faith in Your Son Jesus Christ, the only One who has never sinned in any of these ways. We pray in Jesus name, amen.