# Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
# for Sunday, 20 September

# Children's Talk: Wanting What's Bad for You

We do not always know what is good for us. There are some things we want a lot of, like sweets, but that would be actually bad for us if we could have them all the time. That is one reason your parents don't give you everything you want, even if you want it extremely badly.

There is a story in the Lord's Word about a time when the Children of Israel desperately wanted to eat meat instead of the manna that the Lord had been feeding them. You remember that the manna was delicious bread from heaven. But they had gotten sick of it and wanted meat.

> Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense desire; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!" (Number 11:4-6)

> So Jehovah said to Moses: "...you shall say to the people, "Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of Jehovah, saying, 'Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.' Therefore Jehovah will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes hateful to you, because you have despised Jehovah who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, 'Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?'" (Numbers 11:18-20)

> Now a wind went out from Jehovah, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of Jehovah was aroused against the people, and Jehovah struck the people with a very great plague. (Numbers 11:31-33)

The people desperately wanted meat instead of the food the Lord was giving them. So the Lord gave them what they asked for. Did it work out well for them? No! He let them have so much that they became sick of it, and it even made them sick! It turns out that what the Lord was already giving them was good for them, and what they wanted was bad for them.

Now this is true in a lot of different areas of life, but I want to focus on one: screens. Most of you have probably had a time when mom or dad told you it was time to get off of the smartphone or tablet. And many of you, at some time, have probably so much so wanted to have more screen time that you broke down in tears, yelled and screamed, and did everything you could to spend just a little more time on that screen. There something so fun about a screen that you could play it forever and always want more. It is just so fun.

But actually spending all your time on a screen would be like the Children of Israel chowing down on the quail: they desperately wanted it, but when they got the chance it was terrible for them! So would spending all your time on a screen. It distracts you from things that matter more like the Lord and other people. It would be awful to get to play on a screen as much as you wanted.

Now especially when you are young, it is really hard to resist strong desire. Which is why it is actually lucky that the Lord gave you to your parents. You don't have to always know when to stop listening to what you want, because your parents can do it for you.

The next time you really want something and your parents say know, try to remember that: you are lucky to have parents who care enough about you to not give you everything you want. You'll actually be happier for it.

# Technology: Useful Tool or Useless Distraction?
A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
20 September, 2020

We're going to spend some time this morning talking about technology. I'm specifically talking about all the things we use that have screens: smartphones, tablets, TVs, laptops, computers, and game consoles. We all have some kind of relationship with these technologies, all the more so since the advent of Covid-19. On the one hand, this pandemic has highlighted the blessings of technology: the majority of people watching this sermon are doing so through a screen, for example. People around the world can communicate and connect no matter where they are. That is an amazingly good thing for the world. But we've also seen the downside: we are yearning to get back to in-person worship, where we can worship and socialize as a community. The endless slog of zoom meetings has become, for many, a slog to get through. What we have seen is that technology, in itself, is neither good nor evil; but, like any tool, is only useful depending on how it is wielded. It is on us to examine our use of technology and consciously work towards having it support our spiritual growth, rather than detracting from it.

The Word of course does not mention smartphones, so we can't just look up the passage or parable that will explain how we are to interact with a technological world. But the Word does give us principles about the material world and material possessions, and how this fit into the Lord's kingdom. We'll start there, and then move on to the specific implications for technology. The Lord tells an interesting parable that contains a paradox. It is a parable about wealth (sometimes translated as "mammon") and how a good follower of Jesus is to view wealth:

> He also said to His disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.'
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> "Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.'
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> "So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, "A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.
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> "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?

"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Luke 16:1-13)

So the paradox in Jesus' teaching is this: He encourages us to make friends of unrighteous mammon, but then insists that we cannot serve both God and mammon. In other words, we must make use of material things, but must do so in complete subordination to the Lord. We must use the things of this world without becoming enslaved to the things of this world.

So let's take that principle and apply it to technology. Now our relationships with technology vary. Some of us are immersed in technology constantly; some of us avoid it like the plague. Some of us love it and dive right in; some of us fight with it violently and hate it with a passion. Some of us have found that perfect balance where it's a net positive in our life; some of us not so much. Regardless of your personal relationship with technology though, there are some universal qualities that will affect how we use it and whether it becomes a distraction from being useful or is in service to what is useful.

The most prominent quality of technology is how it allows people to transcend the limits of time and space. In an instant, you can be connected to almost anyone, anywhere, in the world. This is an immense asset in having technology become something that can serve the Lord. In this very moment, you are sitting kilometres, or even thousands of kilometres, away from me. And you may be watching this live or as a recording. And yet here we are, sharing a worship service together. We have come together around the common purpose of worshipping the Lord and learning from His Word, and neither time nor distance is intervening to stop that from happening. The same is true when you call a friend, zoom with grandparents, or develop a project with co-workers around the world. Technology frees us from many time and space restrictions. This sounds a lot like the spiritual world: a place where merely thinking of someone brings them into your presence, and time passes on the basis of the work that is being accomplished.

The irony is that this very quality also makes it possible for technology to immerse us even further into the material world and distract us from spiritual reality. At the touch of a finger you can have all the worldly satisfaction you desire. Want to numb out from your current situation? Hop on social media! Need to procrastinate? Binge on Netflix! Have a moment of free time? Scroll endlessly through the internet! Since there are few limitations on technology's ability to satisfy us, it easily becomes the lowest common denominator that we default to. It reminds me of Jesus parable of the sower sowing seeds: the seeds fall in different ground, and as a result, they have varying success. Some falls on good ground, but thorns grow up and choke them. Jesus explains it this way:

Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. (Matthew 13:22)

I have definitely felt like technology immerses me in the cares of the world, making me unfruitful, i.e. unproductive.

It's worth spending some time on why exactly something like technology, which can seemingly free us from material limits, can also be so destructive. In church we spend a lot of time talking about rising above materialism and focusing on

the spiritual. But there's actually something important spiritually about remaining to some degree rooted in the phyiscal world. After all, the Lord created the physical world and us within it on purpose, and surveying His creation declared that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). The Teachings of the New Church explain why we can't escape the material world too soon:

> Natural and temporal things are the outmost and lowest ones into which a person first comes, as he does when he is born, in order to make it possible for him to be afterward introduced into interior and higher ones. For outmost and lowest things are containing vessels, and these exist in the natural world. So it is that no angel or spirit was created directly, but that they were all born people first and in this way introduced into interior and higher things. This provides them with outmost and lowest constituents which in themselves are fixed and set, within which and by which their inner constituents can be held in connection. (*Divine Providence* §220)

Notice that although the goal is to grow spiritually, there needs to be a physical, set, fixed environment for this to happen. There's something about the limitations of physical time and space that force us to grow spiritually. We can see this with some practical examples. When I'm on a zoom call with my family, we talk for as long as we want and then logoff. But when I'm in the same house as my family, I can't just turn them off when I get bored. Because we are sharing the same physical space, we have to learn how to put up with each other. When I play a video game, everything is smooth and designed to keep me happy and give me a sense of satisfaction. But when I set out to accomplish a real-world task, it is anything but smooth and teaches me how to deal with disappointment and dissatisfaction. When I feel awkward around people, I can scroll on my phone and suddenly be hundreds of miles away. When I don't have that crutch, I have to push through the awkwardness and connect with an actual human being. So yes, technology, in some sense helps us transcend physical limits; but sometimes it helps us avoid the limits that would force us to grow spiritually.

Given that technology can be good or bad, a blessing or a curse depending on how it gets used, it becomes important to do an assessment of technology in your life. Is technology, or any given piece of technology, a tool in your service to the Lord, or is it an idol that controls you, that distracts you from the spiritual work you need to be doing? Remember, make friends of unrighteous mammon, but serve the Lord, not mammon. I'd encourage you to do a self-assessment on something specific, keeping in mind the principles we've talked about. Here are a few questions you might want to ask yourself:

1. To what extent does this allow me to be part of a broader community with common interests and goals?
2. To what extent does this help me accomplish goals and tasks that are useful?
3. To what extent does this fit into my broader life, including spiritual growth and my relationship with the Lord?
4. To what extent does this allow me to escape from things I should be dealing with directly?
5. To what extent does this disconnect me from people and from a potential community?

6. To what extent is this a distraction from more useful things that I could be doing?

So to use an example that I should be working on myself, I need to ask, "to what extent does Reddit allow me to be part of a broader community with common interests and goals?" Since Reddit is a platform of communities that are based on specific interests, I'd say pretty well. But then if I asked myself, "to what extent does Reddit allow me to escape from things I should be dealing with directly?" the answer is not so good. Reddit has definitely become a lowest-common-denominator crutch that pulls me away from more challenging but also important real world growth. So what I want to work on is maximising using Reddit to be part of communities scattered around the world, but minimize how often I use it as an avoidance mechanism. In this way, I can use Reddit as a tool that helps me be useful, without become a slave to it, or having it distract me from the Lord.

These questions are by no means a comprehensive list, but I think it is a good start in getting started thinking about how technology fits into your life. More important than these specific questions is taking your time to assess the principles we have covered, namely, to what extent is this element of technology a material tool, that supports spiritual connection, and to what extent is it a way of getting around limits that would force you to grow spiritually? And then, more importantly, *act* accordingly: arrange the outer parts of your life (including technology) so that they best serve a healthy spiritual life, in service to the Lord.
*Amen.*