Door of Hope Northeast
A Simple Guide to Digital Detox

INTRODUCTION

In 2024 we began calling everyone in our church to begin examining our relationships to the digital technologies in our lives, especially our smartphones and social media. The data is in: These technologies are leaving us distracted, lonely, anxious, tired, and increasingly unable to make space for intimacy with God and one another (see our recommended reading below). Anecdotally, it seems there are few people who are happy with the amount of time and the ways in which they spend that time on their phones. How many of us have deeper loves and passions that get squeezed out of our lives by scrolling things that leave us empty? For all their benefits, it is difficult not to see these technologies as part of a larger, dehumanizing culture.

Amidst all of this, Jesus's words in Matthew 11:28-30 are like rain in the desert. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." He's offering us loving, gracious, humane treatment. We want to be a community that takes Jesus up on his offer. We want to take *His* yoke upon us. But that will entail taking off many of the yokes of this inhumane age.

This short guide exists to offer you a few ideas and resources for disentangling yourself from the unhealthy aspects of your technologies. These are ideas for a "digital detox," if you will. What might it look like if a local church community committed to freeing itself from distraction that we might be more present to God, to one another, and to His good world? Let's find out.

FIRST STEPS

The very first thing you can do right now is identify the apps on your phone that cause you the most distraction. Which do you most instinctively reach for? Which do you feel most addicted to? Which are prominent gateways into temptation and sin? If they're not necessary for your job, delete them. Turn off notifications from most of your apps, as well.

Second, find ways to physically distance yourself from your phone at times. Do you reach for a screen right when you wake up or when you go to bed? Move your charger to somewhere more inconvenient (not right by your bedside). Consider setting windows of time (5pm-8pm?) where your whole family will put their phones away. Get an alarm clock or start wearing a watch if you need to further disincentivize looking at your phone.

Third, (if you don't already) get, use, and bring a paper Bible to church. Digital Bibles can be great for study, but it could be a powerful thing for basic devotional reading, note-taking/journaling, and prayer to be done apart from screens. Journaling Bibles [like this one](#) are great for keeping your notes with your Bible.

EDUCATION

Sometimes a little education goes a long way to motivate us to attempt big changes. Below are a handful of books that will help you evaluate your relationship (and your children's if you have them) to your technologies. A couple of them are on the more academic side and a few are by non-Christians grappling with the same ideas. Read their descriptions to see which might be most helpful for you.

> [A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation](#) by Anton Barba-Kay
> [The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains](#) by Nicholas Carr
> [The Life We're Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Digital World](#) by Andy Crouch
> [The Tech-Wise Family](#) by Andy Crouch
> [The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness](#) by Jonathan Haidt
> [Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age](#) by Samuel James
> [Digital Minimalism](#) by Cal Newport
> [Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age](#) by Alan Noble
> [American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers](#) by Nancy Jo Sales
> [The Digital Fast: 40 Days to Detox Your Mind and Reclaim What Matters Most](#) by Darren Whitehead

Here are a few shorter articles worth reading:

> "[Simple Steps to Combat Smartphone Addiction](#)" by Tara Isabella Burton
> "[Redeeming Time in the Age of TikTok](#)" by Joe Carter
> "[After Babel](#)" (Substack) by Jonathan Haidt and more
> "[6 Ways Digital Technology Deforms Us](#)" by Josh Rothschild
> "[Why Is the Loneliness Epidemic So Hard to Cure?](#)" by Matthew Shaer

TOOLS

As more people begin to recognize some of the unhealth related to our digital habits, more and more tools are being developed to help. Consider if one might be a good fit for your needs.

There are a number of apps that work to dumb down your phone from distractions with a little more accountability and barriers to re-downloading than simply deleting apps (or only relying on something like Screen Time). Look into [Freedom](#), [Opal](#), or [Minimalist](#). [Brick](#) is a similar concept but requires touching your phone to a physical magnetic "brick" in order to disengage it. There are others.

For some, simply getting a simpler phone altogether is a great idea. Consider [Light Phone](#), [Wisephone](#), [F1 Horizon](#), or [Nokia 2780 Flip](#). For kids especially look into [Bark Phone](#) or [Gabb Phone](#).

DIGITAL FASTS

As a church, we are going to invite our entire congregation into what we are calling a "Digital Fast"[1] over Advent (beginning 4 Sundays before Christmas) and Lent (beginning on Ash Wednesday). A similar fast could also be done any time—and you are encouraged to do it whenever you feel it would be beneficial—but we will carve out these specific times to try it together.

So what is involved? We're borrowing the basic idea form Darren Whitehead's book (see above) and from other churches that have tried something similar. Here are the basics:

First, take your smartphone (if you have one) and make it as dumb as possible. Go through every app on your phone and ask the question "Is this a genuine utility?" (like phone calls, texts, cameras, maps, calculators, weather, calendars, stuff needed for your job, etc.) or "Is this a distraction?" (like social media, your web browser, games, entertainment, news apps, YouTube—anything that will let you infinitely scroll an endless feed). There are some that might be tough to categorize like email, music, or podcasts—you'll have to be honest about how you personally use each app and treat each accordingly. You'll need to delete every app that isn't a genuine utility and commit not to download it again until at least the end of the fast.

Second, commit to staying away from TV and any other device that regularly feeds you digital content. While for most of us our phones are especially troublesome because they are with us so often, they're not the only challenge to our digital sanity. Stay off of Netflix and other streaming services.

The fast can be done for the whole duration or with breaks—like one day per week, for example. When the fast is complete, most of us will probably have recognized some important things about our relationships to our technology. You can use those insights to consciously choose to reintroduce whatever gives you joy on the others side. Probably there will be certain habits or specific apps that many of us choose to leave behind for good.

REPLACEMENT

Whether doing a specific digital fast for a time or just generally reducing your reliance on screens, there are at least two benefits. First, (if the experts are correct) you can expect to find focus, time, and lessened anxiety returned to you. But second (and more important), the greater benefit comes through what you replace your old screen time with. The central point of a digital detox is not the abstaining itself, but the space that is created for what we value more deeply. The goal is to replace the time and focus regained with time given to God and the things that God values—the things of genuine human flourishing.

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[1] "Fasting" traditionally refers to abstaining from food, specifically, but the term carries connotations that we find helpful, so we're using it here rather than an alternative.

We encourage you to revisit our [Community Commitments to the Disciplines of Grace](#) in tandem. How might the space reclaimed in your life be given toward sustainable, life-giving habits around our seven key disciplines for communing with God: prayer, Scripture, community, worship, serving, giving, and inviting? In the early days when you're still instinctively reaching for social media or news, what if you used that as a cue to text or call a friend? What if you began your day self-consciously with the Lord's prayer rather than checking Instagram? What if the time regained added up to a sizable investment you could make in your spiritual gifts, your creative pursuits, or anything else that feeds your soul?

One last note: This detox isn't a way to earn God's love. God's love for you is complete in Christ. His grace is sufficient and His power is made perfect in weakness. If you struggle with your relationship to technology, He is gracious. If you struggle to complete a digital fast, He is gracious. In Him alone is the power to find healing and flourishing. Our simple hope for all of this is that we would find ourselves able to give Him more of ourselves on the other side.

In the end, whatever it looks like for you, we hope after a period of digital detox that you will find yourself more present to God and what He is doing in your life, your community, and your world. We want to lean away from the voice of the Algorithm and big tech and lean into the voice of the Holy Spirit—and we want to do it together!