



Practice Guide | *Simplicity & Generosity*

WEEK 5—Simplicity and Technology

Meeting Prep

1. Listen to this sermon: “[The Case for Digital Asceticism](#)” (58:47 *audio only*)
 - * *Note:* This message is great, but long. The intro is worth listening to, but main points begin at 18:06.
 - * *Content warning:* Parents, this message discusses sexual issues related to technology usage.

Read this Overview¹¹

If the battle of screens is a battle for formation, then curation, not abstinence, is the answer. If screens were simply harmful or evil, then this would be a lot simpler—just stay away from them. But screens—like most technologies—are far more nuanced than that, which makes our task much more complicated, because it is almost always harder to use something responsibly than it is just to stay away entirely.

Justin Whitmel Earley
Habits of the Household

There is little debate among psychologists, sociologists, and ordinary people that for every leap forward in digital technology, we pay a cost. Inundated on all sides by screens, entertainment options, outlets for curating a fabricated image of our lives, we are—as Ronald Rolheiser worried—“distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion.”

The endless dopamine drip feed of new information, photos, updates, headlines, likes, comments, and outrage have so dulled our once hungry attention spans that many of us—whether we realize it or not—no longer have the attentive wherewithal to endure a single meal or movie or conversation or get-together without our itchy twitching fingers stabbing at a touch-screen display.

The same digital technology useful for communicating, finding your way home, and enjoying art can also distract and anesthetize us, steep us in noxious fantasy, damage relationships, and incite us to sin.

In a world of normalized digital addiction, disciples of Jesus remember the uncompromising words of Paul, “I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). Rather than allowing ourselves to circle the drain of the digital vortex, we instead “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

¹¹ *Practicing the Way*, “A Digital Rule of Life,” <https://practicingtheway.org/unhurrying-with-a-rule-of-life/part-two>. Accessed March 2, 2022.

Begin with Prayer & Silence

After gathering and settling in, keep silence together for a few minutes, simply being with God to listen for his voice and to experience his loving presence. Close the silence with a brief prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your time together.

Discuss the Teaching

1. In groups of 2-3, briefly share your memories of your earliest encounters with technology. (This will be especially fun in a multigenerational group!) What attitudes toward technology were in your home when you were growing up?
2. What stood out to you from the message? What most resonated with you? What surprised you? What was most challenging to you?
3. If you have a smartphone, go to the settings that list your screen time or app usage. (iPhone: *Settings* > *Screen Time*. Android: *Settings* > *Digital Wellbeing*.) How do you feel about what you see there?
4. How have you experienced technology to be good, useful, and redemptive? How have you experienced it to be draining, detrimental, or damaging?
5. Have someone in your group read Romans 12:1-2.
 - In what ways has technology “conformed [you] to the world?”
 - How would changes to your use of technology be or feel like a “living sacrifice?”
 - What would your life look like when “transformed by the renewing of your mind” through a different relationship with technology?

Individual & Group Practice: Fasting

The quote that began this week’s guide suggests that our strategy for simplicity with technology should be “curation” rather than “abstinence.” Even so, *temporary* abstinence from a good thing—fasting—has been a core practice of Christian spiritual formation since the Bible, seen in Jesus himself (e.g., Mt. 4:1-11). Fasting offers us a unique invitation not only to be freed from addiction, but to know God and ourselves better in the process. (Also, this guide’s initial publication was during the first week of Lent, a season in which fasting often plays a part.)

A “digital fast” from tech may be helpful (see the optional family practice below). But a literal fast from food instead of or in addition to tech could prove equally helpful. This is because fasting has a spillover effect; as we are freed from being controlled by an appetite in one area of life, our other appetites loosen their grip on us as well.

This week experiment with a simple fast, though you may find you need a longer period of time (like the seven weeks of Lent) to experience a big difference. There are a couple basic kinds of fasts:

- **Partial fast:** Refrain from consuming a particular kind of food or drink for a set time. Common examples are dessert, coffee, or alcohol.
- **Total fast:** Refrain from all food and drink, except water, for a set time (one meal a week, one day a week, a whole week, 40 days, etc.). You may want to consult your physician before doing this. If you have struggled with eating disorders or body image issues, we do *not* recommend that you do this. (You might try fasting from something other than food.)

During your fasting period, don't just fill yourself with something else. Let the experience of lacking what you're used to having turn you toward Jesus. Tell him what you're experiencing, and ask him to draw near. With any kind of fast, you'll encounter some withdrawal-like symptoms as your body and mind adjust. How do you experience God being with you? What are you becoming more aware of in your spiritual life, your emotions, your relationships? How does fasting from food impact your relationship with technology? (Remember, changing anything as deeply ingrained as our eating and technology habits may take much longer than one week.)

Jesus teaches us to practice secrecy in our fasting (Mt. 6:1-6, 16-21) to protect us from hypocrisy, vanity, and legalism. However, he also knows that we need the help of a community. So inviting friends into this experience is a great idea, assuming that none of you treat it like a spiritual competition! Knowing that others are fasting with you builds solidarity and perseverance. And debriefing it together helps you to bear one another's burdens.

[Optional Family Practice: “Digital Rule of Life”]

A “rule of life” is an ancient tool that helps us find freedom and joy in aligning our behaviors with what we say we value as followers of Jesus. You might already be familiar with the Soma's Community Rule of Life, but you can also create a *personal* rule of life and a *family* rule of life. Either of these will likely have to grapple with our relationship to technology.

A rule of life establishes rhythms and practices that help us move toward the flourishing life God intends for us. That includes our technological life. In *Habits of the Household*, Justin Whitmel Earley encourages us to see a digital rule of life as the “curation” (rather than the elimination) of our family's screen-based habits.¹² This curation has two parts:

- **Step 1 – Setting limits:** Define a few clear boundaries about when and what kinds of tech are available. And then stick to it! (Eliminate the “anytime might be screentime” mentality.) Consider setting screen time and app limits on devices. Some tweakable ideas:
 - Screen Sabbaths: start by simply declaring one day a week off limits to screens.
 - Off-time as the norm: the default setting for devices is “off,” and the times when it's OK to ask to turn them on should be really clear.
 - Date nights & family movie nights (for a “yes” to technology)
 - No screens in cars (unless on a highway trip?)
 - Screen-Free Zones: no phones, tablets, or laptops in bedrooms or at the dinner table (and screen time limits set)
- **Step 2 – Choosing well:** Once boundaries are defined, fill them in spiritually and relationally healthy ways:
 - Choose *good* content over *new* content (and random auto-play content). Making a watch list helps with this.
 - Be present. As Earley puts it, “Spend less time thinking about whether ‘bad words’ are present and more time thinking about whether *you* are present.”¹³
 - Watch together, process together. This is where spiritual formation happens: in discussing how the gospel both *resonates with* and *defies* the media we consume.

¹² Justin Whitmel Earley, *Habits of the Household*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021, pp. 93-114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

In addition to Earley's *Habits of the Household*, here are a few more good resources if you need some help getting started or want to go deeper:

- Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.
- Amy Crouch & Andy Crouch, *My Tech-Wise Life*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2020.
- Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019.
- Felicia Wu Song, *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

Close with Prayer

*O Lord, Creator of all things,
you created nothing that gives me more pleasure than you.*

*Teach my spirit to be full of yours
through the emptiness of my belly;
teach my thirst to be quenched
by the living water that you provide.*

*Take my addictions and attachments,
give me simplicity in return.*

*Take my crooked and half-hearted loves;
straighten them, strengthen them;
order them, amplify them,
to reflect your own heart,
which loved this world into being.*

In the name of our loving Savior, Jesus. Amen.