

Boundaries with Technology

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[0 : 00] Well, I don't know if you've been watching any of the soccer World Cup at the moment. Maybe you're not interested in soccer. That's fine. I'm not particularly. I mean, I'm more of a rugby guy, but I have watched a few of the games.

Anybody watched one or more of the soccer games? Put up your hand. Okay, quite a few. Quite a few soccer fans here. As I was watching one of the games, I think it was the one between Belgium and Senegal, I was thinking, actually, the game of soccer is a great illustration for this series that we're doing in Boundaries.

Because if you look at a soccer game and you look at a soccer field, you'll notice something on it. You'll notice all these painted lines. They're these lines and these boxes and these circles and semicircles.

Now, you might not know what they mean or what they're for. Maybe you think that the field would look much better without the lines, but they actually play a very important purpose. They form the boundaries of the game, and they determine what areas are in and what areas are out, what areas the goalkeeper can handle the ball with his hands and what areas he can't.

They're quite important for the game to work without the boundaries. If someone came and rubbed all those boundaries out, the game wouldn't work properly. And the same is true in life with boundaries. We learned last week, and that's why we're doing this whole series.

[1 : 20] We learned that without clear boundaries, our lives don't work properly. Without knowing what is appropriate for what different times and places and relationships in our lives.

That's why we're doing this series, and it's a very important topic for our lives to work properly. And boundaries is something that is deeply biblical. And that's what we saw last week. But today what I want to do is I want to talk about something that can easily rub out the boundaries in our lives.

And it's something that you probably have in your pocket right now or in your handbag. It's this little thing. Cell phone.

Think about, just think with me for a while, about how this little piece of technology that probably most of us in this room have on us right now.

Think about how this has advanced over the last generation, just over the lifetimes of the people sitting here today. And how those advancements have actually, each of them, changed the boundaries in our lives.

[2 : 28] And so it started with this. When I grew up, we had, actually when I grew up, I remember the old rotary ones.

You know, today I saw a video on YouTube. They put one of those old rotary phones, gave it to a teenager, and they didn't know what this was. And they said, how would you call someone?

And they're like, well, there's no buttons. What do we do? Anyway, you may have grown up with that or grown up with a slightly more modern one, but they're all landlines. They were connected, right, to a particular location.

And so, yes, while someone could phone you remotely, they could only do that when you were in certain places, right? Either you were at home or you were at work and they phoned you at home and you had a home number, or they phoned you at work and you had a work number.

But then, of course, the cell phone came and now you could be contacted at any time. And so a natural boundary that already existed in our lives was removed the moment phones became mobile.

[3 : 33] The boundary of people can only contact me when I'm at certain places was now suddenly removed when cell phones came. But those cell phones, when they first came, were not quite like this.

They were more like this. Remember these? These old button phones where you just push the buttons and then you can maybe call someone, maybe send them a message, and that's pretty much all you could do.

You could maybe play like a silly game, but that was pretty much the limit of these little phones. And when they first came, when we were first starting to use cell phones, it would cost you quite a bit to make a call or send a message.

And that itself, that cost, was another natural boundary. In that you would only really send a message, and each message you sent cost you something. You had to pay for each message. So you wouldn't send a stream of messages. You would send one or two, and you would make calls only when it really justified contacting someone. But now, of course, things have changed again with these phones, these smartphones connected to the Internet, and with Wi-Fi in many of the places we go.

[4 : 47] Now you can instantly message or call someone at little or no cost, and so another boundary has been removed. So you see, that's how technology actually works, whether it's phones or any other technology.

Every time technology advances another step, it removes a natural boundary that was there before. Now, to be fair, that is exactly what it is meant to do, right?

Technology is designed to overcome limitations that we had before, so we can do things that we didn't before. Now, some of those limitations, it's good that they've been overcome. Some of them were just inconvenient.

I love the fact that I can send Jean silly memes whenever I feel like it. I don't know if she appreciates it as much as I do. But we have great freedoms now.

A lot of inconvenient boundaries have been removed in our lives because of technology. But some of those boundaries were also healthy boundaries that have been removed.

[5 : 51] You see, it's not always good to be always connected to the outside world, is it? We know that. It's not good to always be contactable by anyone at any time.

We know that. And so while technology does remove a lot of limitations in our lives, at the same time, it removes good boundaries.

And we let it. We don't really distinguish often between the inconvenient boundaries that it removes and the good boundaries that actually were better for us that technology removes.

And over the last generation or two, technology has advanced so quickly that we have found it difficult as humans to keep track and to adapt to all the boundaries that's removed in our lives.

And we let it remove good boundaries as well as bad. And so this morning, I just want to consider two things. And I want to bring the Bible's wisdom to bear on this question of technology.

[6 : 53] And the first thing is, I want to consider why it is that we so easily let technology remove good boundaries in our lives. And secondly, how can we get them back?

And so let's look at those two issues with God's Word as our guide. Firstly, why do we let technology remove good boundaries in our lives so easily?

The answer, according to the Bible, is that we don't like the idea of being limited as humans. We really don't like limitations, even when those limitations are good for us.

And we never have. We've never really liked limitations on our lives. Now, you might think that the Bible doesn't have much to say about technology.

I mean, how can we have a Bible sermon on the question of technology? But if you think that, you would be wrong. Because the Bible actually does have technology in it.

[7 : 56] Did you know that? There is technology in the Bible. It's not quite smartphones and electric cars. But if you were listening carefully to that passage that Dylan read from Genesis, you would have noticed there was a technological advancement that happened there in the ancient world.

And it was this technological advancement that was the cause of the incident that we know as the Tower of Babel. Let me read to you again, and maybe you can pick it up from verse 1 of Genesis 11.

Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinnah and settled there. They said to each other, come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.

They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves.

Did you see the technological advancement there? They, for the first time, had bricks. They could use bricks. And the author mentions that as a particular point that caused them to have these aspirations.

[9 : 07] They had new building technology, and they had tar to stick these together that they didn't have before. So this new technology allowed them to actually break a boundary.

Remember earlier I said every time we have a technological advancement, it breaks a boundary? Well, we see one right here in Genesis 11. They could build taller buildings now that had more structural integrity.

And they thought, because of that, that they could overcome the boundary between the ground and the sky where they thought God lived. And that led to them thinking they could actually become like God with their new technology.

But did you know that every technological advancement since then has still had the same effect and made humans think that we can become a little more like God?

And it still does. Psychologists actually have a name for it. They call it the illusion of limitlessness that comes with technology. The illusion of limitlessness.

[10 : 13] It's the belief that we can transcend our natural human limits through technology. And we see it all over with technology, all the things that we can do, and all the limits we used to have, and that now we can break those limits.

We can transcend them. So, for example, today, we can virtually be at multiple places at once. You can be sitting in your office in Cape Town, writing an email to someone in America while Whatsapping someone in Japan, all at the same time.

So we can essentially be omnipresent. And then with AI now, with ChatGPT and Google Gemini, you can answer pretty much any question you have on any topic instantly.

And so not only are we omnipresent, but we're omniscient today as well. Just like God. We think more and more like God with every technological advancement.

Just like our forefathers at Babel. We've always wanted to be limitless. But the truth is, we can't be.

[11 : 31] And we were never designed to be. But our technology, even something as simple as this, makes us think we can be. And when we think that, when creatures who were designed with limits think that we can be limitless, you know what it leads to?

It just leads to being burned out and exhausted. It exhausts us to try to be like God. But the more technology we have, the more we think we can.

It's funny though, isn't it, today? The technology that is meant, you know, we've got all this technology, and it's meant to save time and make life easier, right?

So then if that's true, if we've got all this technology that's meant to save time and make life easier, why is it that we're more busy than we've ever been? It's because we are not limitless like we think we are, and we think the technology is going to make us.

And that is why, it's because of this, that we consciously need to rebuild some of the boundaries in our lives that technology over the last two generations has removed. We need to actually, for healthy living, to live well, we need to put those boundaries back, the good ones that technology has taken away.

[12 : 53] And so how do we do that? Well, I think we've got to distinguish four areas of life that technology has removed good boundaries, and think of how we can bring in our lives boundaries back into those areas.

Four areas of life that technology has significantly changed in the modern world. The first is our time, and how we see our time, and use our time.

So a generation ago, there were natural rhythms of work and recreation. And you couldn't easily take work home, and you couldn't easily do recreational activities at work.

But today, that's different, isn't it? Now, technology allows those times of work and rest to actually kind of seep into each other.

We can answer work emails from our lounge. And then during our work day, we could play a game or catch up with friends on WhatsApp.

[13 : 59] You see how the times that used to be distinguished from each other are now kind of overlapping, they merge together. No longer do we have a time that is dedicated to just one thing.

We want to be able to do anything at any time. It kind of reminds me of those, you know those drink machines that you see at, kind of, I don't know, Spur or Wimpy, where they've got the Fanta and the

Coke and the Sprite, and you've got the cup, and you can go pour whichever one you feel like. But now, sometimes you'll get a kid who just can't decide. And so they'll just pour all of them, a little bit of each, into their cup. They mix them all together, which obviously, I don't know, that's not going to taste very good.

But that's kind of what we do with our time in the modern world. The things that used to be separate and distinct, we now merge together, and we think we can do anything in any time, but that's actually bad for us when we do that.

And the reason is because God designed us to have different times, to have different rhythms, and different times demarcated in our lives of rest and times of work.

[15:13] And when we don't actually have those different times clearly separated, what happens is that we fail to truly rest when we're meant to be resting, and we fail to productively work when we're meant to be working, when the times are all merged together.

And so if technology has caused our times to seep into each other like that, how do we separate them out again?

Well, lots of people have lots of good suggestions, but I think one of the best is just deciding on deliberate time in our lives where we don't engage with technology.

Because if you think about it, if technology has been the cause of our time seeping into each other, the way to separate out that time again is to just put technology away in certain times in our lives.

To demarcate what we might call sacred time. Sacred time from technology where we don't engage, we put the phone away, or we don't engage with technology, we do something analog, we read a book, or we play a board game with someone, or we just go and sit in the garden and watch the birds, or just have certain times where there's no technology.

[16:35] We limit our screen time. You may be familiar with that concept, especially if you're a parent, right? Limiting screen time. Maybe you're a child or a teenager and you don't like that concept of limited screen time.

Your parents only give you so many hours per day or whatever it is. Now, as parents, we know that that's a good thing. There's so many good reasons, so many good reasons why we must limit our child's screen time.

But you know what? We should limit our own as well. We should limit our own screen time. We should have disciplines in our life to make sure we don't spend so much time on screens.

In fact, if you go into your phone and you ask it to tell you, and you can do this, how much time you've spent in a week on certain apps, most people are shocked when they see that number, the amount of time we actually, that our screens take from us.

And so it's important to have disciplines to limit our own screen time. I actually recently, over the last few months, have had this forced upon me by my terrible phone battery life.

[17:47] So I've had my phone for a long time and its battery has become worse and worse. And at the moment, there's only a certain amount of hours per day that my phone will be able to operate and have its screen on.

So that forces me to basically have limited screen time in my life. Now, I bought a new battery. It's one of those, it's a phone that you can't just take the battery out, and then you've got to open it up and put the battery and install it.

And I've hesitated to do that for like a month because I actually like the fact that my battery is bad because it forces me to do something that I might not have the self-discipline to do by myself.

And I find when I know that I can only use my phone for certain hours a day, it helps me to concentrate more in what I'm doing. And so we need methods, whether it's that or whether you've got self-discipline, to limit the amount of screens that we have in our day, but also in our week.

It's good to have weekly times, maybe sometime on the weekend, that you put your phone away, that you don't have it. And then also, what I find is when I go on holiday, a really good thing to do is to have a screen detox, to use your holiday time to detox, just to switch your phone off.

[19:04] I'm about to go on leave this week coming up. And if you try to call me this week, you're not going to get through. You know why? Because I'm going to switch my phone off.

And you know, just for doing that for a few days, when you're on holiday, and you just enjoy where you are, it slows you down, it helps you to enjoy the things around you, and it helps you to just focus, and it actually makes for much better rest when we do that.

So, having times in our life, daily, weekly, and annually, where we have these times without screens is really healthy for us.

But there's another area of life that technology changes that is closely related to time, and that is space. Our physical space around us.

So, we used to have more clearly separated spaces as well, where you would have certain spaces that defined pretty much the activity and the focus of what you would be doing when you were in that place.

[20 : 11] So, your office would be a space of work, your home would be a space of rest, your dining room would be a space of eating and conversation. Each space had its own kind of focus and purpose.

But that is no longer the case today because of these, right? You might be physically present in one place, but your mind is at work because your boss has just messaged you.

Or, your mind might be in the Middle East because you've been scrolling the news feeds. And so, what happens because of technology today is that we more easily let outside spaces invade into our spaces that we're in.

And when we do that, when we erode the walls that used to separate spaces out from each other and we let all the things outside be in our space right now, what happens is we lose what we used to have as spaces of refuge.

You know, when it wasn't as easy for the news and the bad news of the outside world to come into my space, we would have spaces where we don't actually think about those things and we find peace and we find refuge, which we need.

[21 : 25] And so, we need to actually learn how to not just guard our time, but to guard our spaces as well. There's a verse in the wisdom literature in the Bible, Proverbs 4, 32.

It says, Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life. Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life. What it means is what you let in from outside will affect what you put out in your life. And so, you've got to actually put walls to guard what you let in.

Just don't let anything in all the time and at any place. You've got to guard what you let in and when and where because that determines what comes out of you.

Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life. If you always are concentrating on the bad news, if you're always on Facebook and you're always looking at the things that are going on around us with no limits, don't be surprised when you're always grumpy with the people around you because you're always letting in the bad news.

[22 : 34] Guard your heart. How are you guarding your heart from the things outside? Are you? Are there any methods that you've put into place that guard your heart from what's going on outside?

Or do you just let anything in anywhere? Do you find yourself checking your news feeds first thing in the morning after your alarm has gone off on your phone before you get out of bed?

That's not good for us. Right? That sets the tone for the rest of the day. And that's why people find something that's quite helpful to do just like our time to demarcate sacred time is to have sacred spaces as well in our life.

Spaces where we don't let devices intrude from the outside. So, some popular examples are the dining room table. To have, you know, lots of families have benefited from having rules that no devices at the dining room table.

And they found that very beneficial. Or, your bedroom. To decide no devices in my bedroom. Ah, but you know I need the alarm to wake me up. No, buy a cheap alarm clock from, I don't know, the crazy store and charge your phone in the kitchen.

[23 : 52] A lot of people do that and find it very helpful. Decide what sacred spaces in your life are going to be refuges from the outside world. Guard your heart. Then the third area that technology tends to affect and has affected quite significantly in our lives is our attention.

Our attention. So, the graph behind me was the result of a study that was done which studied the average attention span of people over the last 25 years and as you can see it's drastically reduced. As technology has improved our attention span has got less and less and they say the people who studied this say that one of the main contributors to our lower attention span is the increase in multitasking in the demand society and work has on us to do multiple things at one time.

Now, for most of history humans didn't do that. For most of human history we have monotasked. We have done one thing at a time. But now our technology allows us to multitask.

To have multiple tabs open not only on our internet browser but in our minds at any one time to have a few things on the go. And to add to that we've got constant pings of notifications.

[25 : 24] And those notifications constantly cause our minds to flit to move from one thing to the next thing to the other thing to the other thing every time a notification comes in suddenly whatever we were thinking about now we're thinking about something else.

So these notifications constantly change our focus. And the problem is that because we're now able to engage with everything we don't deeply engage with anything.

And what makes it worse is we become addicted to the distractions. Yes we do. Psychologists have shown they've observed actually that modern patterns of engagement with screens is very similar to people with substance addictions.

They've noticed a lot of alarming similarities between how we engage with our screens and people who are addicted to drugs and other things. Neuroscientists have actually shown that engagement with our screens especially if we don't know what's coming if we don't know what the notification or the message says or we don't know what's going to be next on the news feed when that happens it produces a chemical in our brains it releases called dopamine which is a reward chemical that makes us feel good and neuroscientists have proved that engagement with the screen produces this dopamine chemical and so what happens is we actually get literally hooked on checking our phone without realizing it.

Have you ever noticed yourself reaching for your phone for no particular reason? Or have you ever noticed that the moment a notification comes up on your phone or beeps you immediately want to grab out and check it before you can even think about it it's just an instinct that's dopamine that's a dopamine!

[27 : 21] And so what happens is that our devices actually start controlling our reactions and so we need methods to take control back you know the Bible says in Corinthians Paul says we are free but we mustn't be mastered by anything it's a very important idea and so you know you might not like all these rules about technology rules and spaces and times but actually you know we're free these aren't laws that we have to keep it's not a sin not to do these things but as Paul says we are free of all things but we don't want to be mastered by anything so we actually these rules help us to be free these rules help us not to be mastered by our devices and so we need to take control back from our devices as one person who I was reading this week said we've got to revoke you've got to revoke your phone's right to distract you so we actually by default give our phone a right to distract us but you can decide whether it has that right or not revoke your phone's right to distract you and there's two easy ways to do this first of all go into your settings and switch off your notifications yes it is possible to decide what apps are allowed to ping you when there's a notification and lots of people don't know that you can actually switch those off so control that you give your phone right or tick right away to distract you go and switch off try this it might shock you switch off all of them for a day a week and see if it benefits you or if it doesn't you might be surprised second technique and this is one that I've actually come up with that's really helped me because

I also I find myself reaching for my phone sometimes and I'm you know I reach I switch it on and then I go what am I what am I looking I didn't actually even decide to do that and so what I do because I know that's kind of the reward center of my brain wanting the hit what I do is I make the cost of reaching out for my phone and checking it outweigh the potential benefit that I'll get from it and so the way I do it is when I'm in my office I will get up from my desk I will go put my phone on my bookshelf and then I will go sit back down on my desk so that I can't just reach out for my phone I've got to get up to go get my phone and I'm lazy enough that I'm not going to do that so it actually helps me to make the cost outweigh the reward and so that I can focus on what I'm doing so that I don't let my phone distract me but then there's one final and I think probably the most vital area that technology has changed and that is our relationships our relationships you see in the olden days you could only really have relationships with people that were physically in your same space people you were physically with and that alone that was a boundary that limited how many people you could have a meaningful relationship with now things are vastly different now we can interact with far more people in any given day online through messaging through social media we interact with possibly hundreds of people every day but we do it remotely and because it's remote we don't actually put as much investment into each of those relationships and so what happens is we spread

our emotional energy far wider but far thinner and that is why ironically it's been found that people are way lonelier today than they used to be psychologists have studied this and they've observed that in the modern world with all our technology all our contacts all our online friends we are actually lonelier by and large and because of this a very good boundary that they recommend putting into our lives is something called the face first rule and the face first rule is simply that you prioritize face to face relationships over remote relationships when you are face to face with someone you put your phone away not just face down you put it out of sight it's actually very important because it signals something to the person you're with that they are more important than whoever else might be contacting you you put your phone away and you give your full presence to the person in front of you because there's something very important to being physically and fully present with someone else something very key and special for that deep relationship actually depends on physical and full presence

I mean anybody who's tried to have a long distance relationship will know what I'm talking about you can't really know someone behind a screen or remotely and you know what that is why even God himself doesn't relate to us remotely as we read the story of the Bible we discover that God didn't settle for a long distance relationship with you and me one of the most astonishing truths that we discover in the Bible is something called the incarnation incarnation it literally that word literally means in the flesh and it's what God did so that you and I can have a significant relationship with him listen to how the apostle John puts it we read it earlier

John 1 verse 14 he says this the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us we have seen his glory the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth when our relationship had been distanced our relationship with God had been distanced because of our sin and that's what sin does our sin our rebellion us wanting to become like God actually distances us from God and when that had happened and humanity was far away from God God decided to fix that because he loves us that much he didn't want that situation to remain he didn't want that distance to remain and so God decided to fix that not just by sending us messages remotely not just by sending us a holy book to read no the unique claim of

Christianity is that God showed up in the flesh and he lived among us so that we can truly know him in the face of Jesus Christ and that showed us that God values physical presence and he values presence with you he values being face to face with his people while technology encourages us to break free of our physical limits God chose to do the opposite he chose to take on our physical limits to come close to us because that's who he is and you know that's what it means to be truly human and to be made in the image of God we're not meant to be remote from each other and we needed God to do that we needed God to take on flesh and to come close to us if we were ever to be saved from our deepest problems you know people today especially more than ever believe that technology can solve humanity's problems problems with smarter

[36 : 15] AI better medicines greater efficiency in production and distribution and to be fair technology is great and it can solve a lot of our problems and it can make life much easier but it can't solve our deepest problems it can't forgive our guilt it can't fix our alienation from God and it can't conquer death only the God who came in the flesh to take on himself our sin and our death can save us from those things and reconnect us with himself and so as we wrap up this morning let me ask you a question are you feeling disconnected in a world of connection where we are connected with everything are you still maybe feeling a deep disconnection are you still feeling disconnected not only from people around you but more importantly from the

God who made you well if so you need to realize that God came to you in Jesus to give you what technology never can a real living relationship with himself God does not want a long distance relationship with you that's why he came he came close and I invite you to come close to him if you've not yet come to our discover jesus course do so because we're starting it in august and it's a great way to to learn about how God came close in jesus christ and how to come close to him how to respond appropriately to that but if you have if you've come close to God through following jesus christ what does this all mean for us well I think the takeaway for us this morning is this that just as God chose to be fully present with us so he now calls us to be fully present with others because that is what it means to be human that's what it means to be made in God's image and that is what we are made for we are made for real face to face full presence relationship with God and with other people and so my challenge to you in this coming week is to learn to make sacred times and spaces where you can put your phone away and give

God and others your full attention just as God gave his to us let's pray for his help in that Lord we thank you that you did not remain at a distance from us but you came close and Lord we pray that you would help us help us as we navigate the rapid technological changes that surround us every day help us to think wisely about the boundaries in our lives and what are healthy boundaries and Lord just as you made yourself fully present with us help us to be fully present with those around us and not let technology get in the way of that we thank you Lord for the age we're living in we thank you for the technologies we have but we pray that you would help us to be wise to consciously put into place healthy boundaries and as you were present with us help us to be fully present with each other in Jesus name
Amen