Digital Well-Being

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

1 September, 2024

Children's Talk: What Do You Care about Most?

There is something almost magical about screens. They invite you into a colourful world of sights and sounds, actions and adventures. They give you a challenge that you can overcome, and when they do it is so satisfying to get that reward. I bet most of you like screen time, and I do to!

But screens can become a bit of a problem. They become a problem when we start to care more about screens than we do other people. The Lord warns us not to set our heart on worldly things, because they don't actually last:

> Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

We sometimes treasure screens as if they were the most precious thing in the world, and so forget about heavenly treasure. People sometimes yell and scream at their parents because they have screens taken away. Some people ignore their friends because they are so excited about what is going on in the screen.

What do you think are some of the things in life that are more important than screens? How can you make sure that you love those heavenly things more?

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Raise your hand if you have a cell phone in your pocket or purse, or somewhere with you, right now. Raise your hand if you have looked at a screen today: a phone, computer, TV, video game, tablet. You should all raise your hands. We even use screens in church. The digital world is inescapable, whether you yourself are immersed constantly in it or only visit from time to time when necessary. Anything that is so ever-present is worth thinking about from a spiritual perspective. Yet this principle can be a challenge when it comes to the digital world: neither the Word nor the Teachings of the New Church mention screens, laptops, computers, tablets, social media, or video games. The Word does, however, give us principles that will guide how we use all of these digital devices.

One of the most important principles comes from Jesus' teaching about serving two masters:

> No one 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. (Matthew 6:24)

"Mammon" is a term that refers to wealth or possessions, or material things in general, personified as if a god to be worshipped and served. The Lord is telling us that we cannot serve both Him and the world equally. We have to pick which one will be the master and which the servant. This applies to anything that is selfish or materialistic: pleasure, greed, money, lust, excess, alcohol, and so on. But the relevance to today's topic is of course that digital things can become a master that pulls us away from the Lord.

I seriously doubt that any of us would claim to love the digital world more than the Lord or our neighbour. But the attachment can creep in in unexpected ways, and pull us away from what matters spiritually:

- Avoiding obligations because screens are more satisfying; such as chores around the house or garden.

- Neglecting relationships because screen time is easier; spending time on phones when the family is around or at times when there are opportunities to connect like at meal times.

- Numbing from what you feel with online content; like if you're stressed or anxious and video games help you avoid dealing with any of those feelings.

Now this isn't to say that it's bad to spend time in the digital world. Sometimes there is a greater obligation such as work or a relationship online; sometimes escaping from stress is exactly what you need for a bit. But when these habits get in the way of actually doing the things that matter to fulfil your obligations, maintain relationships, and work through the challenges you're facing, then that can become a problem.

Since the digital world can be good or bad, how are we supposed to tell when it has become like a god to us? What is the actual spiritual problem that arises from our relationship with screens and how can we better identify that? I think it can become more apparent through the comparison with idolatry. Idolatry was strictly forbidden to the Children of Israel, in part, because it promised something that it could not fulfil:

> What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it,
> The moulded image, a teacher of lies,
> That the maker of its mould should trust in it,
> To make mute idols?
> Woe to him who says to wood, "Awake!"
> To silent stone, "Arise! It shall teach!"

> Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
> Yet in it there is no breath at all.
> But Jehovah is in His holy temple.
> Let all the earth keep silence before Him.
> (Habakkuk 2:18-20)

This passage highlights that an idol can do nothing for someone, yet the one who worship's it trusts in it, he calls on it to awake and guide him, when yet there is no breath in it; in other words, it is lifeless. He is looking for something in all the wrong places.

The Teachings of the New Church warn against this kind of idolatry, which replaces God and spiritual things with self and material things:

> For any person or thing that is loved above all things is God and is Divine to the one who so loves. For example, to one who loves himself or the world above all things, himself or the world is his God. (*True Christian Religion* §293)

This gives us insight into how we treat digital things. Digital things very easily become idols when we use them to seek for something spiritual that they cannot, on their own at least, possibly provide. There are many things that digital things can help us with and do! But if we have a spiritual problem or need, we should probably look elsewhere. Here's an example of what I mean: I come home from work having had a poor interaction with a co-worker. I feel terrible because I think I've hurt him and then handled the fallout very poorly. So I'm guilty and stressed and really wanting to feel differently. I want to feel good. So I plop down on the couch and start playing a video game, hoping it puts the day behind me. Now if I'm tired and I'm looking for some easy entertainment, then a video game might be just what I'm looking for! But if I'm struggling to feel better about myself, and try to fix that through a video game, I'm going to be disappointed. A video game can no more restore my connections than an idol can heal its maker. There is no life in it. It's not going to

change anything about my relationship with that co-worker. It will just distract me for a bit.

So where do we go to find life? What will actually sustain our souls? The Word directs us to first and foremost go to the Lord:

> Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
> And your wages for what does not satisfy?
> Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
> And let your soul delight itself in abundance.
> Incline your ear, and come to Me.
> Hear, and your soul shall live;
> (Isaiah 55:2-3)

Spiritual problems require spiritual solutions; and spiritual solutions come from the Lord. We cannot solve a spiritual problem through entertainment or by hiding in our phones. We need to learn how to ask ourselves what we are seeking, what we are hoping to find; and then figure out what could actually provide that desire or facilitate that goal.

But I think trying to connect with something spiritual can feel as equally abstract as hopping online or scrolling your phone. For spiritual things to have any substance they need to be embodied. That is, they need to be tangible, concrete, present in this real world. Love means very little if it is not shown in words, actions, and objects. Wisdom is pointless until it has been put into practice. So we cannot do away with physical or material things. But we do need to find those material things that are not devoid of life, but rather that lead to life. Perhaps the best way to find this is in other people. A person, insofar as we are able to interact with them, is nothing but a collection of muscles, organs, bones, and flesh, plus anything that they do through words or actions. Yet unlike an idol, which is *just* material things, a person is a spirit or soul in physical form, the image and likeness of God walking around in flesh and blood, in a body.

The digital world is in many ways profoundly disconnected from bodies, and in turn disconnects *us* from bodies. The digital world can immerse us in ideas, abstractions, images and concepts that one second are there and the next erased. We could talk to someone whose face we never see and whose voice we never hear, and likewise them us. I know that I can scroll on Twitter for hours and forget entirely where I am or how I'm feeling. It's like I've left behind my body and entered a realm of pure thought. The appearance may be that the more removed from a physical body, the more pure and spiritual the interaction is. The reality is the opposite: the more removed from a physical body, the more abstract and impersonalized the interaction is. The result is less spirituality, not more. To connect with God I need to be able to feel that connection in myself, i.e. in my body. We need a body in order to be spiritual beings, but the digital world can so quickly uproot and destabilize us spiritually. That's why we need to keep coming back to tangible, physical, embodied reality in order to reconnect to others, ourselves, and God.

The question is not so much to fix or to do something with the idol of the digital world, but rather to replace it with something genuine, with a direct connection to the Lord, or with other people who are conduits of the Lord's love and wisdom. The point today is not so much how do you reduce or moderate screen time and the like, but how do you develop a real, genuine relationship with the Lord? What would it take to actually do this? To put aside idolatry in which there is no life, and connect with the people and things in whom there is life, life from the Lord, present in tangible ways? I'll make a few suggestion or possibilities, but of course you will have to find what works for you. The principle though is to find something that is concrete and tangible, and yet also spiritual or meaningful.

Ponder these questions:

- In what ways does screen time remove me from embodied connections, with self, with others, and with God?

- What am I trying to get out of this interaction with the digital world? Will it actually be able to supply that? If not, is there a better way of looking for what I need, a way that is more grounded in relationships with people and with God?