Being human in a digital world

Life in the digital age

Independent but disconnected

"Smartphone technology has destroyed our sense of seasonality and place. Selfies at Holocaust memorials don't indicate disrespect as much as they signal the blurring of life into overlapping lines. You're supposed to be following up on email the same time you're having dinner. Keep up the social media clout as you vacation with the kids. Take the artsy photo of the pastor preaching while you reflect and pray. Everything is an occasion for everything else." **Samuel D. James, "Not Magic, But Not Nothing"**

Integrated but disembodied

"We may have always been daydreamers, but in the past if we lapsed into a daydream while in company, people would perhaps take it as a sign either of gaucheness or of madness, and we may have had a hand waved in front of our faces. Today we allow each other to travel back and forth from elsewhere within the stretch of a conversation, moving in and out of our physical bodies before each other's eyes." **Laurence Scott, The Four-Dimensional Human**

Involved but discombobulated

"'Why wasn't I consulted,' which I abbreviate as WWIC, is the fundamental question of the web. It is the rule from which other rules are derived. Humans have a fundamental need to be consulted, engaged, to exercise their knowledge (and thus power), and no other medium that came before has been able to tap into that as effectively." **Paul Ford, "The Web is a Customer Service Medium"**

Informed but distracted

Indulged but dissatisfied

"I now see that I spent most of my life in doing neither what I ought nor what I liked"… And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them…" **C S Lewis, The Screwtape Letters**

Discussion

1.   Do these descriptions of life in the digital age ring true?

2.   What are the good things here? What are the negatives?

3.   Do you see or hear non-Christian friends express misgivings about life in the digital world?

How do we then live?

Know your God

8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. **1 Thessalonians 1:8–10**

7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. 8 They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. **Psalm 20:7–8**

"In this Word to humanity we may learn that technology cannot displace reliance on God's grace, meaning it must not itself become a false home. In the house of worship God tells humanity that it does not need to frantically create a home because it has already been housed by a gracious Creator." **Brian Brock, Christian Ethics in a Technological Age**

Know yourself

15 The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. 16 They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. 17 They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. 18 Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. **Psalm 135:15–18**

"…the suggestion that we will eventually adapt to our technologies is curious. Why should we have to? Aren't our technologies supposed to make our lives better and easier? Aren't our tools supposed to serve us? … [this is] a kind of civilizational error in which it comes to be believed that the human soul must somehow be made to fit the requirements of modern technological systems, rather than ordering these systems to the requirements of the human soul." **Craig Gay, Modern Technology and the Human Future**

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. **1 Thessalonians 4:11–12**

Know your limits

13 As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; 14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. 15 The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; 16 the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. **Psalm 103:13–16**

"For those who labour under the Enlightenment (and latterly Zuckerbergian) prejudice that ideal reality is immaterial and universal, the notion that God could have a body is quite a scandal. But it is deeply, deeply good news that the Word "became" flesh. It means, to put it in the bluntest terms possible, that bang-average bodies like yours and mine are not bad… Perhaps it will become the lot of Christians in the coming decades to be thought backward for our embrace of ordinary bodies. If that is so, let us wear the moniker with pride: we are following in the footsteps of our Saviour!" **Chris Watkin, "From Meat to Meta"**

"In other words, 'to take up one's cross' is to let a particular tree press upon our actual shoulders, on a local road within a specific community… Twitter, Facebook, virtual conferencing - these allow us the illusion of being somewhere other than where we are. Positively we have a voice in places otherwise absent to us. But we type on our keyboards while sitting in a chair where we are - the local knowledge and work of the day in our place awaiting our presence. The danger here is that it allows us to give our gifts without giving ourselves… My point is no matter how far technology allows our gifts to travel, we ourselves, the persons that we actually are, remain rooted to one place at one time." **Zack Eswine, Sensing Jesus**

Know your world

"We need to seriously consider the possibility that our despair comes in large part from a sense that we enslaved to things we don't even enjoy. What is addiction if not an ever increasing compulsion for an ever diminishing reward? The language of addiction is indeed appropriate for talking about digital habits, especially in light of how social media and streaming platforms engineer their products to be as binge-able as possible. Tech-enslavement does not necessarily mean that we don't do anything other than drowning in the Twitter or YouTube algorithms. No, it need only mean that as mindless use of digital technology becomes more established in daily life, our minds and emotions rebel against it in the form of an unshakeable sense of frustration… Frustration is looking up and realizing that yet another day has been wasted in the pit of autoplay, or the emotional tyranny of trending topics, or the lonely envying of a feed full of picture-perfect lives. We get past this frustration by accepting it as normal, as inevitable, perhaps even as the price of participation in modern life. We get past it by not thinking about it, by swiping one more time, perhaps only pausing to take one more drink." **Samuel D James, "We're Unhappy, and We Know Why"**

"It seems clear enough that the problem of isolation and loneliness predates the advent of the Internet, social media, and smart phones. It seems clear as well, contrary to the claims of the prophets and ideologues of connection, that they mediate relationships in a manner that does not assuage the root causes of isolation and loneliness. What's more, it may often be the case that they aggravate the condition." **L M Sacasas, "Social Media and Loneliness"**

"A culture will not invest in wheelbarrows or pumps if its decision makers feel there is a surplus of time and woman – or manpower. Only a society with a theological climate that values human dignity begins using technology as a force for human emancipation and empowerment." **Vishal Mangalwadi, The Book That Made Your World**

Know your purpose

Ask the right questions

1. Does my use of technology express my freedom as a new covenant Christian to turn away from sin, or am I being enslaved by passions and pleasures?

2. Is my use of technology driven by a God-given, Christ-centred purpose, or am I letting my purposes be shaped by my tech?

3. Could someone learn something about the character of God and the order of creation through observing or benefitting from my use of technology?

4. Does my use of technology promote love for God and love for others, such that my relationships with God and neighbour are deepened because of it?

5. Does my use of technology demonstrate that I am living for the world to come, or that I am seeking satisfaction and meaning from this world alone?

Discussion
- What has been challenging or encouraging from this session?
- What one thing do you need to do to respond?
- How will this session shape your prayers?

For further reading
Digital Liturgies – Samuel D James
The Life We're Looking For – Andy Crouch
The Frailest Thing – L M Sacasas
Breaking Bread With The Dead – Alan Jacobs
12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You – Tony Reinke
Modern Technology and the Human Future – Craig Gay
The Abolition of Man – C S Lewis