Becoming in the Age of Algorithms

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Passages: Deut. 6:4-9; 1 Cor. 6:12; John 10:10, 8:32

Key Principle: *What you're scrolling through is scrolling you.*

Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome to a two-week series on something we talk about a lot here, one where we examine how the tools we use every day may be using us, and what they may be doing to us, whether we realize it or not.

This week was a wild one; normally, what happens with Mag 7 companies and aspects of technology is part of the news the world watches from our backyard, but this week it WAS the news. We watched Jensen Huang at Nvidia resign after personal controversy.

The man who helped build a company that has had an outsized impact on our country's economy and the world's technology. We also saw an enormous Microsoft outage that left untold numbers of people with full outboxes of emails going nowhere, disrupting communication worldwide.

And if that wasn't enough, on Friday afternoon the FAA stopped every departing flight in the country for hours because of a communications issue. I watched that last one happen firsthand while waiting in a Dallas airport to get home as the scene went from confusion to chaos.

Some of you work at Nvidia or have friends who do, and all-hands meetings and stock you're vested in feel shaky as you wonder who's in charge now. This disruption underscores the challenge of becoming who we are called to be in a world like this.

But make no mistake: in an age of algorithms, we ARE becoming something and someone; the question is, what are we becoming? Who are we becoming? The way of Jesus has always challenged us to ask this question: what is shaping us? But more is shaping us than ever before.

So before we go any further, I'm going to pray for us. If you've never been here before or heard me speak, I pray kneeling before I speak. After this week, I'm thanking God for being home safely with you. Would you pray with me?

Now look at this. A hundred years from now, someone will look at this behind glass at an exhibit, wondering how humanity could function with such a crude and primitive device. Now think about how you use it. What is the first app you scroll to start your day? Work, fun, news…faith practice?

It's easy to think about all the ways this device and the digital tools it represents in our lives can make our lives easier, but how are they making them harder? For many of us, these little screens and the algorithms feeding them are deciding the last thing we see at night and the first thing in the morning.

This rhythm of how we end and start our day is ancient. God's people Israel had a pattern like this too; they called it the Shema, and we find it in Deuteronomy 6:4–9:

> *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."*

This regular reminder of their true identity shaped their entire lives and was a constant presence in their homes. You couldn't have spent 5 minutes in a Jewish home without seeing, hearing or experiencing this practice of God reminding His people of His presence.

In a way, we treat our phones like they treated God. When they woke up, they had a rhythm with God; when they went to bed, they had a rhythm with God. We have rhythms too, but we don't shape them; advertisers' algorithms largely shape what we see.

And before you think I'm above all of this, it can happen to me too. Years ago I started charging my phone in another room to break this habit, and I got a normal alarm clock that doesn't even connect to the internet…but even I can slip back into bad habits. This is for all of us.

Last week we talked about refocusing our minds on the kinds of things that help our minds and our lives align with the Kingdom of Heaven, and even if you're not a Christian, it felt like a brain cleanse in a world constantly dumping slop on us.

The challenge I gave you was around the thought we can sometimes have that 'we can handle it.' And we rationalize that, because we don't want to be overly restrictive or legalistic, we can become really lenient about what we put in front of our minds.

And I'll push back on that…I think it also extends to HOW MUCH we think we can take too. We are human beings created in God's image, with infinite dignity, value, and worth…no matter what you believe or how you live, that's all true AND…

Part of that implies that living as human beings means we have God-given human limitations. The problem is that from what we consume on our phones to the new wave of using AI to radically increase our output, we are constantly being told that we can live without limits.

Technology isn't bad; I'm really grateful for it, but we have to be more aware of what it is doing to us and reclaim our agency in how we use it. Scrolling has been described as the new smoking; we do it when we're bored, nervous, irritable, tired…it numbs us.

But here's something most of you already know: every time you pause, rewatch, or finish that thing late at night…every interaction with that device and the services you feed is logged and used to decide what comes next, not in your best interest, but in a company's.

In other words, "What you're scrolling through is scrolling you." I hope that line bothers you, like gum on your shoe; it makes you think about it with every step. Every time you go for that smoke (I mean, scroll), you'll remember that there is an incentive structure to keep you locked in.

Two Cautions

So, with our limited time, I want to share two cautions, two passages, and one way you can take this into the week ahead.

1. Dysinformation

You may have heard this described as misinformation, but I think that's selling it short. It's not a set of individual lies; it's a designed system. A week of headlines, even correct ones, can still leave us anxious and convinced that the world is ending. The system is built through repetition and frictionless dopamine rewards. Author James K.A. Smith argues that, *"habits shape the heart before ideas reach the head."*

For most of us, the most consistent liturgy we have in our week is scrolling our phone, and it has a plan for our lives. It's quite possible that all the news you consumed this week was accurate, but accurate information doesn't mean it's good formation…

Pew Research tells us that 41% of all US adults say they are online "almost constantly," and 63% of those who are 18-29. I'm not asking anyone to stop using technology, but I wonder what it would look like to consider how technology can stop using you, or at least use you a little less.

The Apostle Paul famously told us to pray without ceasing. Four in ten of us found something else to do without ceasing.

2. The Screen Economy

The second caution I want to give you is why this system of anxiety through the architecture of dysinformation exists: the screen economy. For years this was called the attention economy, and more recently it's shifted to the attachment economy, but I would argue those are both covers.

Attention and attachment are the masks. Addiction is the business model. Remember the "scrolling is the new smoking" line? Turns out that's more true than we thought. In order for the addiction to set in, our attention needs to be hacked to make us attached.

Just like any addiction, we develop a tolerance where the feed has to keep escalating because last week's hit no longer…hits the same way. The feed doesn't have limits but the problem is, we do, even if we are pretending not to.

Just like any addiction, we can experience withdrawal: phantom buzzes without our phone, reaching for it when it's not there; you're not failing, you are having a chemical response to addiction.

Just like any addiction, recovery starts by admitting we have a problem, so here's what I want you to repeat after me. "Hi, my name is _____, and I'm a screenaholic." It's been noted that the pull-down-to-update feature doesn't really need to exist anymore because apps can do it automatically.

Part of the reason it's still there is that it gives us the same cognitive push that a slot machine does; it keeps us coming back. This week, try going screen-free for a set period of time and notice something. *"When something we depend on is gone, we're inconvenienced. When something we're dependent on is gone, we're overwhelmed."*

And if some part of what I'm describing is your job or the job of someone you care about, I'm not making anyone the villain here. The system is built to generate engagement to get revenue; it's how business works. I don't think these digital tools were built to enslave us, but here we are.

Some of those same software engineers and tech workers brought everything back online this week, and our world needs followers of Jesus bringing principles of goodness and integrity into the world of technology too.

Pastor and author Tim Keller once put it this way, *"Faith gives you a world and life view that shapes the character of your work, without which work could master and use you."* So don't just consider what you're buying; consider what you're building, even if it's vibe coded.

Two Passages

> *"'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything."* (1 Cor. 6:12)

We live in a culture like this, whether we call it rugged expressive individualism, secular humanism, or good ol' "it's a free country." We don't assume we can't; we assume we can and rarely ask the next question: Is it good for me?

Paul describes a new life in Jesus, a life that extends with Him into eternity, but just because we have this freedom doesn't mean everything we do with it is good for others or ourselves. What areas of your life is your use of freedom around technology leaving worse?

The dopamine might feel good while you're doing it, but how quickly do you become more bored, more tired, more anxious? Are we living in light of what is scrolling through us as we are scrolling through it? My phone has never once made me more patient. Jesus has.

But Paul doesn't stop at helpfulness; he goes on to talk about domination or mastery. He says that he won't let anything in his life, even good things, become ultimate. The original word here carries the idea of being brought under something's authority.

When I give myself over to something, I am coming under its authority. You've probably never thought you were coming under the authority of Instagram, TikTok, or Google, but when we live without limits, that's exactly what we are doing.

Paul is giving us two challenges within this bigger promise: God has something better for us. Paul's subject here is sexual immorality, but the principle he uses reaches much further. He's asking: Is this thing good for me? And does this thing own me?

Remember, Paul isn't trying to say that something like our phones or technology is evil, but he is cautioning us not to let it become our boss. When it comes to social media, no one is going to ask to be your boss, but lots of people are going to ask you to follow them.

If you're a follower of Jesus, you probably already know that Jesus invited each of His disciples to follow Him. Every time you choose to follow someone, they are taking you somewhere. It's up to us to figure out where, and whether or not it's somewhere we want to go.

Some of us may need to stop following some things to follow Jesus more deeply. And actually, Jesus gives us something to do that goes deeper than following Him. Part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is to increasingly live every moment of our lives with Jesus actively guiding us.

> *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:31-32)

It's impossible to live for God unless we are learning to abide in Him, which most simply means to stay with Him.

The more we lean on scrolling the less we learn to stay. You might think you can control the use or the urges to use, but "I can stop anytime" is what addicts say too. Scrolling trains you to leave. Abiding teaches you to stay.

Learning to live with Jesus and abide in your relationship with Him is a gift and it's one that will never be something you can drift or scroll into. So much of what culture tells us is that we can do more, be more, know more and experience more, but more isn't the measure.

> *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10)

Following Jesus and living our lives under His authority is so much better than what we settle for. Tim Keller put it this way, *"Jesus is the only Lord who, if you receive him, will fulfill you completely, and, if you fail him, will forgive you eternally."*

Maybe you're not ready for that, and that's ok but I hope you can begin to sense that you are living under the authority of something and it's probably less your own authority than you think and more the authority of algorithms that have an agenda they're not being honest about.

Remember, What you're scrolling through is scrolling you. That ad that seemed perfectly timed? That must watch video that seems perfectly suited to numb your disappointment or frustration but doesn't leave you any better after, those were designed with you in mind.

One Practice for the Week Ahead

Before you set your boundary ask yourself a couple of questions; what happens to my attitude when technology isn't available? What do I reach for first in the morning? What do I do when I'm in public and waiting?

So here are some boundary options based on those answers; just pick one and think about them like rungs on a ladder. First, see it; put the screen time widget on your home screen, every time that Screen Time number catches your eye, ask one question: What am I scrolling toward?

Second, Set it; Put a daily limit on a couple of apps you know are not helping you be the person you feel called to be, whether you are a Christian or not. If you keep bypassing the limit, ask a spouse, roommate or friend to set the code for you.

Finally, Delete it; if you can't handle it at all, try removing it, even temporarily and see what happens. When I've done this it's amazing how long I will still instinctively open up my phone and tap where it was on the screen out of habit, maybe put your Bible app in its place, haha.

These aren't magic bullets but for some of you they represent an important step.

I've had a few trips over the last several weeks and airports and airplanes have become two of the most digitally distracted places we all live in. Earbuds in, screens up and whether it's a show or a spreadsheet, we don't want to be interrupted. We don't even listen to the safety briefing anymore!

This week when I was in Dallas I was sitting at the airport as flights started to get delayed without explanation and there seemed to be something more serious than a narrow outage. I got texts from a couple of friends in other cities who were stuck and then the announcement.

And something happened, it used to happen more, everyone there had something in common. In a world with hyper individualized content, endless streaming services, noise cancelling everything, we finally had something in common to talk about.

Slowly I watched earbuds come out and people were talking together about this unbelievable situation in a way I hadn't seen in years. We were all in this thing together. It was scary but at the same time connecting with people gave you comfort.

For a few hours on Friday, the feed had nothing new to tell us. Every screen in that terminal said the same word: delayed. And when the screens ran out of things to say, we looked up.

Weddings that would be missed, a woman taking her boyfriend to meet her family, a girls trip, people shared personal details and their disappointment openly. Strangers became friends for an afternoon. Nobody planned it or optimized it; it happened because we had to stay in it.

I've been thinking about it all weekend. Nobody there was scrolling through anything. We were stuck, so we stayed. And staying turned out to be the thing so many of us have been missing.

The whole country got a ground stop on Friday that nobody asked for. Jesus offers you one you can choose. He calls it abiding. Because this week showed us how fast the systems we lean on can go down, and how fast the people we put on pedestals can fall.

Jesus was talking to people who were sure they were free. They told Him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.” It’s the same thing we say when we tell ourselves we can put it down anytime.

> *“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* (John 8:34-36)

Remember that word abide? It’s the same word Jesus uses here for remain. He isn’t asking you to stay with something that might go down by Friday. He’s inviting you to stay with Him.

The feed will never let you stay, and it will never stay with you. It will take your evenings and your peace, and it will forget you the moment you stop scrolling. Jesus knows your name. When every system you lean on goes down, He won’t. That’s why the boundary isn’t a rule to earn anything.

Freedom is a gift before it’s a practice. The Son sets you free, and the boundary is just how you start living like it’s true. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. A hundred years from now someone will look at this behind glass and wonder what it did to us.

I hope they also find a people who learned to set it down. Before we pray, would you do something with me? Take out your phone and turn it face down.

If you’re watching on one right now, I see the irony. Just set it down for a minute and listen. Next week we come to a table, and nobody brings a screen to that table. This morning, let the One who remains have the last word. Let’s pray.