

“AMERICAN IDOL #2 (GADGETS & GIZMOS)”

(Matthew 19:16-22)

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[PROP NEEDED: “Wall-E” Movie Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-8-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Matthew 19:16-22 and Pray.
2. [VIDEO INTRODUCTION TO SERIES (“American Idol” theme music & logo)]...
3. Today we’re continuing a series addressing some of the idols of American culture – idols which, like those of the popular TV show, capture our hearts and captivate our attention, but which, *unlike* those of the show, also often threaten the very fabric of society itself.

A–We began last week by talking about the idol of Materialism, and in many ways the idol of Technology that we’ll discuss today is just another *form* of that first one.

B–But because of its subtle and pervasive character, I felt that it merited a separate message of its own. (*Refer to bulletin notes*)
4. And while today’s scripture from Matthew 19 *directly* addresses Materialism *in general*, I believe it has special value in helping us address the dangers of Technology *in particular*.
[Contemp. Service ONLY: Let me read it... (*Read MSG version of Matthew 19:16-22*)]

A–I want us to notice/remember that all the commandments Jesus gives in this scripture are *relational* in character (“don’t murder; don’t steal; honor your father and mother, etc.) – i.e., they deal primarily with social interaction and interpersonal relationships.

B–And his point to this young man is that if your possessions get in the way of your God-given relationships, then they’ve become an idol, and you need to take some drastic steps to get out from under their control.

C–Now, its true that “Technology” is not mentioned here by name, but if you think about it, technology is merely a *form/type* of Materialism that almost *always* causes problems in our relationships when it’s idolized or misused. ¹
5. In fact, human history bears this out because **Technology has often been the bane of human social interaction and interpersonal relationships.**

A–For example, when writing was first invented, it forever changed human social interaction ² – one-on-one storytelling became rare, because now you could write stuff down and people didn’t need to be face to face anymore to communicate.

B–Much later in the 18 and 1900s, the technologies used to build the great industrialized societies of the world also caused massive social fragmentation: work in factories and mines caused families to be split up, and children forced to work in brutal conditions – all because of the *misuse* and *abuse* of Industrial Age technology.

C—When the telephone and air conditioning were invented, all of the sudden you didn't need front porches on houses any more, because instead of sitting on your porch talking with your neighbor on *their* front porch, now you could stay the comfort of your air conditioned home and talk to them on the phone – and it wasn't quite the same.

D—The invention of the automobile did something similar: ...instead of living near work and *walking* there every day (talking & interacting with people along the way), automobiles allowed us to live far away (in something called “suburbs”), passing others in *their* cars on the way to work, but never communicating (except with occasional hand gestures!)

E—And now in today's Information Age, with the computer, the internet, email, and social media, we can network with people all over the world, and yet still feel lonelier than ever, because relationships built solely by electronic-technology like email and Facebook or Twitter postings are *never* quite the same as *in-person* interaction.³

6. You see, while technology claims to *improve* human interaction and relationships, in fact it *often* does just the opposite – relationships can suffer, and interpersonal skills are lost. At the very least, it always *changes* our social interactions (and not always for the better).⁴

–II–

7. So, my point is that for all its glitz and glamour, **technology also has its subtle dangers** which we tend to either ignore, or are just blind to, resulting in us *idolizing* it.

A—And we Christians are *not* immune to this, either, as my own life illustrates:... I know some of you tease me about things like not being on Facebook or Twitter, or having the newest “Gadgets and Gizmos.”

1—But you've got to understand that when I was younger, I was *the* certified clergy techno-geek:

- (a) I was one of the early adopters of email (challenging others to use it);
- (b) I had a “bag-phone” for my car almost when they first came out;
- (c) And I used my computer for almost everything in a day when that was kind of geek-y.

2—But over time, my “addiction to technology” (if you will) started affecting me in ways I didn't intend: people noticed I didn't spend as much time with my family and friends because I was always playing with my technology.

3—Trish complained that she'd become a “computer-widow,” and in times when I would lose my temper, it would *never* be with my wife or family or even with church members, but with my *computer* or other gadgets that weren't working!

4—You see, I'd slowly allowed these “Gadgets and Gizmos” to take the place of real life relationships – I'd become enslaved by the idol of Technology.

B–The same thing can happen to any one of us (even as Christians), and if we’re not careful, we might just end up with a society that looks something like this...

[WATCH VIDEO CLIP (41:15-42:56) from 2008 Disney movie “Wall-E”]

–III–

8. So what’s the answer, then? **How do we keep ourselves free from the snare of technology? And how do we get free** if we’re already trapped (like I used to be)? Well, let me suggest three things that are either directly found in today’s scripture, or are at least consistent with it: ...
9. First of all, we may need to **GIVE UP** some pieces of technology altogether.

A–This, of course, is the most *literal* meaning of what Jesus is saying in today’s scripture: if a particular possession (such as a piece of technology) is getting in the way of our relationships with God and others (e.g., if it’s causing or tempting us to act or behave in unhealthy or unGodly ways), then we may very well need to just get rid of it! ⁵

1–This is what some faith traditions like the Amish and certain Catholic monastic orders have done quite *literally* – rejected technology so they can live more simply for the sake of others. ⁶

2–The spirit of this advice is what I was thinking about when I read a USA Today article back in February about the growing number of people who’re begun *ditching* social networking altogether so that they can reclaim more personal & family time. ⁷

B–And I must say that this is precisely why I’m not currently on Facebook. I know all the arguments why I should be – that I could reconnect with old friends, and keep up with current and new ones.

1–But with the schedule I keep right now, it’s tough to find time just for the relationships I *already have*, much less adding new ones!

2–So, I’m not rejecting social networking because I think it’s inherently evil... it’s just not good *for me* at this particular point in my life because I know myself well enough to know I’d allow it to become an idol (like I used to do). ⁸

C–Now, I’ve picked on social media here, but the same can be said about almost any type of technology, whether it’s the TV, computer, smart phones, or whatever.

D–Some of our personalities are such that we can’t use these things *without* them being idols. And in those cases, Jesus’ advice is clear... *give them up!*

10. A second thing we can do is not quite as drastic, but is still difficult: we can **CUT BACK** and learn to live with simpler types of technology. ⁹

A—For instance, maybe we don't need the newest, coolest smart phone on the market, but a less fancy one, or maybe even just a plain cell phone.

1—Maybe we don't need a 120" large-screen HDTV with a Blu-Ray player when a 20" regular TV and DVD player will do.

2—Maybe we don't need a computer with the fastest CPU or highest memory capacity when something less than that can still meet our needs quite adequately.

3—You know, my laptop is now 5 years old – practically a dinosaur in computer-time. But it still works fine. And even though part of me would *love* to have a new one, I don't really *need* a new one as long as this one is doing what I need. So I choose to cut back on my *wants* and get by with something simpler.

B—And I think cutting back is consistent with Jesus' advice in Matthew 19, because even though we're not literally selling our techno-possession, we *are* nevertheless "selling" (so to speak) the *attitude of possessiveness* that keeps us in bondage a certain type/level of technology– in spiritual terms, we're "surrendering" our wants and desires to God.¹⁰

11. And finally, we can also **SET LIMITS** on the technology that we *do* use – in other words, learn to better manage the technology we *do* have so it doesn't become an idol in our lives.

A—This is again consistent with Jesus, because remember his words here are offered to prevent our possessions from becoming barriers in our God given relationships.

B—And to the degree that a particular piece of technology does that, we need to set limits on its use so that it *doesn't!*

1—For example, after my wife said she was a "computer widow," we came together and established a family rule that in the evening, unless it was for homework or something that just *had* to be done, we're will NOT be on the computer, so that we could actually be with *each other*.

2—A few years ago, we added another family rule: "*No cell phone use at a meal table*" (whether at home or out, whether for breakfast, lunch or dinner).

3—And still another example that many of you already know is that several years ago I also added my own rule that I won't respond to emails on weekends or on vacation so that I can be mentally and emotionally *present* with my family.¹¹

C—Now, the limits you set for *your* life might look very different from these:

1—It might still include limiting the time you spend on email, Facebook or Twitter;¹²

2—...Or setting boundaries on the types of contacts you make, or on the information you give out;

3—...Or maybe setting limits on how much money you spend on techno-gadgets and gizmos over the course of a year; or even learning to say “No” to the purchase of a new “gadget” just on the market if your old one still works perfectly well!

4—In fact, the new Georgia State law banning texting while driving is just the most recent example of our own society’s growing awareness of the need to limit the dangers of this kind of technology.

D—But whatever form they take, one key is to learn how to better *manage* technology so that it does not control or hinder us in our God-given relationships.

–IV–

12. You see, when we learn to *Give Up, Cut Back, and Set Limits* on technology, then not only does it no longer have the power of an idol over us,...

A—...But the *money* we save can now be *better* spent on projects that help poor and needy, and the *time* we save can now be spent with our families, friends, and volunteering for ministries that make a difference in the lives of others – all of which help advance God’s kingdom here on earth.

B—So, yes... “*Gadgets and Gizmos*” are cool and fun! But when they interfere with our life with God and others, then they’ve become an “American Idol” from which we need to be free – and *that’s* what God wants to do for you and for me!

13. [PRAYER: “*O God, we confess that too often we’ve allowed our use (and misuse) of certain pieces and types of technology to become stumbling-blocks in the relationships that you’ve given us. Once again, we’ve replaced people with things, and our souls and relationships are poorer because of it. Forgive us, and give us the power, wisdom and boldness of your Holy Spirit to have the courage to do whatever we need to do to prevent our idolization of technology, whether it be to give it up, to cut back, or just to set limits. If there are those who we’ve hurt because of our technology addictions, help us to ask their forgiveness and seek reconciliation, as well, and perhaps even ask them to hold us accountable to whatever boundaries we establish. Rather than technology, help us instead to reach out and claim you as the one and only true God of our lives. For we pray all of this in the name of the one who gave his all for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*”]

ENDNOTES:

1. The dictionary defines “Technology” broadly as “*the practical application of knowledge.*” (Mirriam-Webster Online Dictionary, Term “*Technology*” at www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/technology). However, what I mean here can simply be any human invention that we look to to improve life, or to be our “savior” (which in itself is a form of idolatry). And yet, we tend not to think of it as something that’s dangerous because we either take its safety for granted, or we at least downplay its dangers.

2. Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press during the Renaissance had a similar effect, of sorts. The masses now had access to books in way not possible before, and it changed the way they related.

3. For instance, a person’s tone and facial expressions are lost, and written words are often easily misunderstood or misconstrued. I’ve noticed that common courtesy and civility often go out the door –

people are blunt, rude, don't know how to be tactful or gracious, and *don't care to be!* So, even though today's Information Age technologies purport to help us get and stay connected with others (through things like social media), when we idolize this technology they *in fact* often do quite the opposite (i.e., they *harm* true relationship and interpersonal connection).

4. So, while we might hail some new invented gadget or gizmos for how it might help us, we've got to be on guard for the flip side of how it might equally harm us.

5. It's as if Jesus were here today speaking Verse 21, he might say,... (NRSV) "*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your iPad, iPhone, your PC or Mac, your HDTV, and your Blue-Ray Player and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*"

6. The problem is that even in these examples they did not get *rid* of technology altogether, but merely *halted* its progress at a particular point in their tradition – so the Amish, for example, far from discarding *all* technology, merely stopped including new inventions and continued to use the technology of the 19th-century even into the 20th and 21st centuries.

7. USA Today article from February 10, 2010, "*Some Ditch Social Networks to Reclaim Time, Privacy*" by Marco R. Delia Cava.

8. That may change, but I know myself well enough to know that for now, these are *not* good for *me* if I want to avoid them becoming idols in *my* life, and if means I seem out of touch or irrelevant... we'll I'd rather risk *that* than risk what *for me* would be an addiction to an idol that would take me away from family and other God-given relationships.

9. Since today's world is one that is becoming more and more integrated with, and dependant on technology, not less, the answer to the idolization of technology is not always as simple as just getting rid of it, nor do I think Jesus advocating that we do so in every case in today's scripture.

10. In other words, perhaps Jesus' advice here to "*sell everything*" doesn't *always* have to be taken literally – it may be what this *one man* needed, who was so obviously enslaved by his possessions. But in other cases, perhaps it merely means that we are to spiritually "sell off" the attitude that allows that piece of technology (or "possession") to possess/control us.

11. If you email me during one of these periods, you'll get an automated reply. If its an emergency, I have a cell phone, and I and the other pastors share an emergency pager where we can be reached 24/7. But if it's *not* an emergency, then it can wait until the next work day (or until I get back in town)! In the meantime, these limits allow me the mental/emotional time and space I need to actually *be* with my family and friends (instead of being *physically* but not *mentally* present).

12. In her online blog, author Beth Kanter offers a few suggestions on how to better discipline ourselves to that social media becomes a more efficient part of our lives, rather than a time-waster:

1) Limit your use to certain times of the day (don't continually check your email or go to Facebook throughout the day)

2) Set a time limit (establish what 2-3 "must do" tasks you need to do on your social media, do it, and when you're done, get off!)

3) Limit the number of sites you use (choose no more than three accounts with which to actively participate; any more than this becomes difficult to manage)

[–Beth Kantor, "How to Avoid the Digital Drain," cited in State Farm's "Good Neighbor" newsletter (June 2010, page 8)]