

Unfiltered Thoughts of a Smartphone Addict

Every 4.3 minutes.

That is how often the average American checks their smartphone while awake[1. Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, 16]. I am positive that I am average. And when I use the word “addict,” I am not trying to devalue the word. I just know that people get physiologically attached to their phones[2. www.psychologytoday.com/Can-You-Get-Addicted-To-Your-Smartphone?].

We know the stereotypes probably better from images rather than data: people walk down the street and everyone is staring down at their phone instead of noticing things around them...a couple is lying in bed and both are on their phones instead of talking to each other...people take pictures or video of “the moment” instead of actually experiencing the moment in 3D and real time.

This is me. This is too often my real life.

So in the spirit of brutal honesty but also with an attempt to wrestle with problem-solving and public accountability, I want to write about the smartphone abuse epidemic. I want to write about my personal struggle—the things I think but never say.

First, I feel shame over my smartphone habits.

I was late to the smartphone game, not owning one until 2012. I remember being mesmerized by how I could then watch videos and get on Facebook conveniently and without a big, clunky computer.

And in five short years, I have allowed this small device

(with several upgrades) to become a dominant force in my life. I am the kind of person to be in a crowded room and on my phone the whole time. No matter how many times I put it in my pocket, I feel the temptation to reach for it within a few seconds or a few minutes and check it again. I feel slight panic when the battery gets low. Any time I post to Facebook I check it dozens of times the rest of the day to see who has liked or commented.

And this brings me shame. I hate the way it masters me instead of vice-versa.

The problem is not just *how much time* I spend with my phone but *what* I am looking at.

I don't even mean porn. That is something I have struggled with but due to being married and things like Covenant Eyes, I can't say this is the problem.

No, it's when I get on Twitter and find people I disagree with and read about 50 of their tweets because apparently I love being angry. It's when I fall down rabbit holes for a half hour reading inane things, as I did once with Jerry Seinfeld's answers to public questions on a BuzzFeed forum. It's when I watch ten straight Youtube videos of 80s Saturday morning cartoon theme songs.

It all seems harmless, but it is a huge waste of time and my phone's potential. I could be reading edifying articles on culture or practicing Duolingo Polish. Those would be a preferable way to spend 30 minutes[3. Though a little inanity every day keeps me sane.]. Yet I find myself watching the "Bushes of Love" Star Wars video or yelling at celebrities on Twitter far more often.

When I use my smartphone unwisely, my marriage is affected.

Not only do I mean that it takes time away from my wife, but also there are times when I will be on my phone or reading while my wife is away and what I see or read will cause me to be short with her or just generally unaware of her when she comes back.

Based on the last election, I am closer to the political middle than ever. This means people from both extremes annoy me. And as I said, I regularly feed my heart and brain political garbage, like an immature child gorging on potato chips instead of a healthy diet. And when my wife walks in, she can tell immediately that I am not all there. I'm distracted not only when I am on my phone, *but even after I've put it down*. Because I cannot stop thinking about what I was reading. That is messed up.

I have tried to get better but have often failed.

I have read articles on how to stop the addiction. I have heard tons of advice. I've been told to not keep the phone by the bed, to put it away when around people, to set times to check social media and not break those appointed times and many other things. More often than not, just reading the "how to"s has been useless.

One reason I keep failing is because I make the arrogant mistake of trying to dig deeper or use will power. At my church we preach that this is not how God works in helping us overcome temptation, yet I somehow get confused that this is how he works in my bad habits. I have felt this before with lust and other areas.

It's foolishness.

Genuine change in my worldview only comes by the grace of God.

And only when I start with this will I see results that matter. "Hungering and thirsting for righteousness" is the posture of a begging person who desperately needs help. Not a strong warrior who overcomes.

My goals must be specific, measurable and practical to bring success.

No two people are the same so this is not advice. It is just an example of how saying "I'm going to get better" is useless. I need a plan. None of this is cutting edge or even extremely sacrificial. They're just small steps that I have taken so far:

1. My wife and I consider all dates to be cell phone free.

This one we have broken, but only when we were both interested in looking something up, like the name of an actor we were talking about.

2. I turn my phone off while at church.

Sadly, I have broken this a few times this year. I do not want to be legalistic, but I personally know Sundays need to be as distraction-free and others-focused as possible.

3. Sundays are a no social media day.

This one is rather new. Maybe I'll make an exception for Mother's Day.

4. I do not use my phone 30 minutes before sleep or within 30 minutes of waking up.

I have read the research that says smartphone usage affects sleep[4. www.sleep.org/articles/Is-Your-Smartphone-Ruining-Your-Sleep?] but I still struggle to eliminate this completely at night. In the morning I have determined that God comes

before Facebook.

I want to keep evaluating and changing my smartphone habits.

I doubt I will ever totally eliminate smartphone usage, social media or screen time from my life because I think my ministry and witness are enhanced when I use them wisely. Yet there are many things I could and should do to keep the addiction at bay. I want to look into taking weeks and even whole months away from screens and/or social media. I want to not simply curb smartphone usage but find positive ways to spend that time instead, be it reading more or spending more time with people in conversation. I want to consistently seek God's wisdom in all areas of life, but especially in this area. Because without that I will continue to struggle and feel shame.

I am not and never will be a "5 steps to..." or "3 ways to..." person. I just like to talk about reality and how God collides with it. I want to be transparent, but only inasmuch as God's grace and transformative power are highlighted. I hope that is what I have done here. If so or if not, we welcome feedback below.