

C.S. Lewis' Thoughts on Tech Addiction Are Still Surprisingly Relevant

Why you should considering unplugging during Lent.



BY ADAM GRABER [TECH](#) / [CURRENT](#) March 01, 2017

Every year millions of people approach Lent asking themselves what sacrifice they should make to observe the church season. Many give up meat or chocolate. Some adopt new habits like exercise or devotional reading. In the last few years or so, it's become more popular to give up social media sites like Facebook or Instagram. This latest trend reveals a new awareness of technology's influence in our lives.

Lenten disciplines certainly offer potential benefits for the faithful. But does it make sense to give up devices and social media like this? C.S. Lewis actually had something to say about this.

Lewis, of course, never dreamed of anything like Facebook or even the internet. But we aren't the first generation to notice technology changing our habits and lifestyles. Lewis once received a letter from a gentleman asking his advice about "motoring." Cars and driving were very much a common part of daily life by the 1950s, and this man was looking for some guidance. Here's what Lewis had to say in a letter from 1956 (to a man named Michael Edwards):

Dear Mr. Edwards –

...

Of course enjoying equipment or motoring is not a sin. The point I wanted to make is that excessive excitement about gadgetry and the belief (Weston's belief) that the possession of, say, wireless [i.e., radio] & aeroplanes somehow makes one superior to those who lack them & even justifies one in conquering such people, is bosh. My motto w[oul]d be 'Have your toys, have your conveniences, but for heaven's sake don't start talking as if those things really mattered as, say, charity matters.'

As for 'giving up' things—well, when we've given up all our sins (the things everyone knows to be sins), we can think again! The problem will not be immediate. The devil is fond of distracting us from our plain daily duties by suggesting vague & rather faddy ones, you know.

In this letter, Lewis takes what is perhaps his strongest moral stance on "gadgetry." Despite everything he says elsewhere about technology, this is the first occasion where he brings sin into the conversation. In fact, Lewis makes technology a matter of faith when he compares the value of technology to that of charity or love. Lewis wanted Edwards to keep perspective: Love is more important than technology.

Whether we have this smartphone or that car is basically irrelevant when compared to loving others. Maybe the point seems obvious, but it's worth

being reminded to keep things in perspective.

After all, our perspectives drive our priorities. Don't I feel a little twinge of pride when I get the latest iPhone? Don't I pity, just a little bit, the person with an old flip phone? What exactly am I feeling proud of? Which phone I own says nothing about who's more loving. Yet, I still feel that twinge.

The latest gadgets can tempt us to feel superior to others—and even convince us of it. Lewis dispels that notion. Next to love, it means nothing. Lewis sees how our gadgets can derail our obedience to this, the greatest commandments. When technology becomes a status symbol, it merely turns into an obstacle to love. When owning this or device becomes a source of pride and superiority, it becomes a hurdle to faith.

Lewis knows that we will pride ourselves in our devices. Thus, we might be led to believe that we should get rid of these devices. If they tempt us to sin, shouldn't we get rid of them? Lewis anticipates this false and pharisaical conclusion and immediately refutes it. He turns around and says that "'giving up' things" isn't the answer either.

(If you're feeling relief right about now, you might need to be reevaluating your relationship with technology anyway.)

Lewis challenges his reader to keep his head and not simply reject technology. Uncritically rejecting technology is just as bad as uncritically adopting it. Instead, Lewis encourages his reader to stay focused on doing God's will—on being obedient.

Lewis is sort of re-appropriating the apostle Paul's reasoning and applying it to our modern era: Having technology is nothing and rejecting technology is nothing. Keeping God's commandments is what counts. (cf., 1 Corinthians 7:19)

Charity—Lewis's word for "brotherly love"—serves to set us straight. How

would our technology habits change if we asked ourselves, “Can this device help me love another person?” Would it guard us from temptation? Can we go on feeling superior if we’re trying to figure out how love others through our devices? Can we imagine conquering them if we’re busy think of ways to serve them?

“How can this device help me serve another person?” As we ask ourselves that, we may discover that the devices in our hands are less helpful than we have come to believe.