

# OpenTheo

## Technology Is Neither Good, nor Bad, nor Neutral with Tony Reinke and Samuel James

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### Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

How should the Christian think about technology? How should we use technology? Are we better off as Luddites who avoid new technologies? In this episode—ironically, interrupted by many technological glitches!—Kevin talks with two of our leading writers when it comes to God, technology, and culture. Although Tony is a techno-optimist and Samuel is more of a techno-pessimist (or “realist” might be better), they both agree that technology can be a gift from God and also has the potential to reshape us in harmful ways. Listen in for a discussion that is part biblical musing, part intellectual analysis, and part practical application.

Timestamps:

0:00 Intro and Sponsor

1:58 Guest 1: Samuel James

4:03 Guest 2: Tony Reinke

6:16 Technology Optimism and Pessimism

17:41 The Tech-Blessed 21st Century

25:49 Dangers of Tech and Digital Discourse

48:40 Sponsor 2

49:18 Should We Throw Out Our Smartphones?

56:03 How Should We Parent concerning Tech?

### Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and everything. I'm Kevin

Deung and I'm here with Tony Ranky and Samuel James who I'll have them say a little bit more about themselves in just a moment.

Good to have all of our listeners back. It's been a little bit before we've had, since we've had one of these interviews, we had to have somebody reschedule so we'll get that interview at the end of the season sometime later this spring. But good to be back with a couple of friends here today to talk about technology.

Cue the Napoleon Dynamite technology song if you're of that Gen X vintage. I do want to thank our sponsor Crossway and mention in particular the ESV study Bible. Really everyone can benefit from a really good study Bible and there's plenty of good ones out there but I am partial to the ESV study Bible.

I think it's the best one over a million copies sold. ESV study Bible is created by a team of almost a hundred leading Bible scholars and teachers from nine countries, 20 denominations, 50 seminaries, colleges, universities. It has 20,000 study notes.

Here's a word from John Piper the scope and theological faithfulness of the ESV study Bible. Study notes is breathtaking and there's a student study Bible. There's a concise study Bible which I found a lot of people at our church like.

If you don't want to lug around the huge orange hardback version there's a concise study Bible. So great gift for yourself or for others and if you go to [Crossway.org/plus](http://Crossway.org/plus) you can find out how to get 30% off with your Crossway plus account. Speaking of Crossway Samuel James.

Samuel what do you do? You work for Crossway. You also have lots of insightful commentary on various things online. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Yeah thanks Kevin. Yeah so I live in Louisville Kentucky with my wife Emily and our three kids Charlie, Ruthie and Wesley. I've been in Crossway for almost six years.

I've gotten Justin Taylor a lot of coffee in that time so yeah good grateful to be able to minister to him in that way. I serve in acquisitions at Crossway which basically means I help authors kind of shepherd their book proposals through our process. So I've been doing that for close to six years and yeah just doing a lot of writing on this side.

I have a newsletter called Digital Liturgies that I write at Substack and then I've been writing pretty regularly for the last few years for gospel coalition desiring God a few other places and really interested kind of in the intersection of theology, technology and culture. I've been doing that writing for several years now so and I do have a book coming out in September called Digital Liturgies. And I'll say this I've said this to a number of people Samuel probably doesn't know this but I've with all of the the dangers of internet discourse we're gonna talk a lot about that.

I've told people many times that Samuel's a good example of someone just started writing and consistently thoughtful and a good writer and fresh insights and through that just really quality content has built up a following in a good way and is somebody especially on these issues that people listen to and are well to do so. Did you mention your book? You have a book coming out? Digital Liturgies that's the name of your substack right and it's the name of the book. That's right it's the name of the book and the subtitle is Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an online age so it's due September from Crossway.

That's what's Crossway. All right Tony Ranky if you're anyone watching this online you can see Tony is in a you can see he's a tech guy because look at he's got this cool indigo sort of vibe behind him looking very furtively into the camera. Tony what do you do and give us a little bit about yourself? Yeah I live in Phoenix with my wife and our two youngest who are 16 and 15 now so that's our those are our babies and yeah love living in the desert we've been here for three years.

I've worked for desiring God and John Piper for about the past 11 years. Primarily what I do is the Ask Pastor John podcast with John Piper and you might have heard of him and we're moving in on I think episode 2000 now so trying to build kind of a reservoir of ethical content from him. He says APJ is kind of him making up for all the sermons he preached without 10 minutes of application so APJ is like 10 minutes of application every day three times a week or we'll soon be going to two times per week but yeah it's it's been a fun ride.

That's great it shows I didn't realize I think I knew Samuel you lived in Louisville but I didn't realize that you were in Phoenix Tony when did you move to Phoenix what precipitated no precipitation. Three years? Yeah so we were in Minneapolis for eight years total and just kind of done with the winters and so moved to the desert very much a desert creature. I love it out here in Phoenix and so yeah we've been out here for about three years now so you had no makes for some very early morning interviews.

Oh that's oh I'm doubly sorry then I was thinking about central time. He didn't see that we were in Eastern time when we were planning this so yeah it's it's good 6 a.m. It's a good 6 a.m. All right well thank you for that oh because you didn't do daylight savings either. That's right yeah you Arizona's you got something right.

That's right Rebels. Yeah Tony has written a lot of thoughtful things about technologies most recent book God technology in the Christian life published by Crossway came out in 2022 so here's how I want to start our conversation to put you guys into some camps and I know you you probably agree on vastly mostly everything when you talk about these issues but maybe come at it from some different angles so I would put Samuel in the category of a technology pessimist and Tony as a technology optimist so though you're going to want to agree let's just for the sake of good discussion if you'll own those

categories Tony why are you a technology optimist? Yeah reformed theology pushes me in that direction pushes me against a lot I did them and what I've seen over the past I mean basically let I did them has ruled the coop for a hundred years in church and 20 15 20 years ago I started to think through let I did some and sort of the theological underpinnings of it and started to realize it didn't answer all the questions and it really didn't provide the substance that I thought we needed as Christians to live in the tech age like we do and started to press into it and started to realize that there was a different trajectory in thinking through these things that went back to Calvin went through the reformed Orthodox the Puritans went through Spurgeon bob and Kuiper there was a different way to think of technology and human engineering then then simply a default Ludditeism that sort of began a hundred years ago and so I started to press into that theologically and then eventually got to the the text exegetical text I think there's like 14 key texts and came to the conclusion that basically I'm an anti-Luddite is I guess how it about it is thinking through technology in a way that's a little more theologically robust than a default position of anti-tech right tell us a lot of people have probably heard that term Luddites where do we get that as being somebody who's against technology who because they're actual historical derivation to that term yeah kind of industrial revolution era kind of pushing back on this idea that machine should take all human labor away or as much human labor way as possible and so it kind of became a theological position that was that's how it kind of got coined and it's just kind of I think of it more as just kind of a default position thinking like if you if you say if you say undermining things about Twitter or smartphones or nuclear power it it feels Christian it feels holy it feels pious and I'm pushing on that because I don't think it actually is that simple all right we're gonna come back to that Samuel you likely agree with most or all of that but in your writing you often come across more as a technology pessimist and at least when it comes to the the effects that the digital world has on us so if I can just put you in that category what do you want to say from the technology pessimist side yeah and it's a good it's a good question to kind of like where I identify on that spectrum I think technology realist would probably be a little bit more accurate for for how I would think of myself what the people who have deeply shaped my thinking on this kind of tech critical persuasion so I'm thinking of Nicholas Carr his 2010 book *The Shallows* which is really just kind of the spirit that I'm trying to capture in my book but then also Marshall McLuhan Neil Postman these kinds of influential cultural critics who really looked at particularly mass media technology as posing some serious challenges to how people are formed kind of intellectually emotionally even politically so you know Neil Postman especially gets into that so I think one thing that shaped my perspective was simply my age and my experience so I I'm old enough to have to have some very vivid memories of a childhood without internet access but I'm young enough that I came of age and kind of you know intellectually came into my own with the internet and particularly with social media kind of mediating my experience of the world of ideas and a lot of social circles and so that experience has really I think shown me some of the particular ways that I believe we are different kinds of people for the fact that these

technologies tend to mediate our experience of the world and particularly when I when I started looking at scripture and I started looking at the kind of portrait of thinking and of living that the Bible holds out and then I would read somebody like Nicholas Carr who presented all of this kind of empirical not necessarily Christian but just kind of cognitive research about the way the internet technology shapes how we think I started to realize that this has enormous theological significance that it matters that we're able to kind of feel and to think in accordance with a physical embodied world the way the world really is and so putting those two things together has kind of put me in a more tech realist camp and I tend to not I tend to not enjoy kind of hitting tech optimism versus tech pessimism because the question is what technologies are you talking about so everyone's a tech pessimist and some things that everyone's a tech optimist and some and other things so like we're you know we're not in the same room right now we're all you know far from across the country and we're we're joined together by technology that I don't think any of us would necessarily take a pessimistic view of but but that's not to say that this technology is neutral and I think that's that's one thing that I'm trying to get a lot of Christians to think in terms of is just because something is not intrinsically bad does not mean that it's neutral that it has no effects that it doesn't situate us in a certain way so that's kind of the the background of where I've been writing and thinking for the last several years that's great I want to get into some specifics of both of the things that you have written I certainly don't want to claim I'm the the third way between the two of you or that there is a between but maybe there are others who resonate with me in this sense that I feel like I live like a tech optimist I live with all of these things we're doing this you know as you said through the internet and I've been on Twitter and I was one of the you know first kind of wave of bloggers and I tell people sometimes jokingly though it's it's true I would make fun of the bloggers and then I did a blog and I had sermons where I said how dumb Twitter was and then I got on Twitter I think I learned my lesson not to say podcasting was dumb but now I do podcasting so my my kids have at least my older teenage kids they have iPhones we have streaming services so all of these sort of technology I feel like I am living in a lot of technology and yet I find my heart and spirit resonates with the I'll just say tech pessimism in fact Tony I can I can really be drawn to a Luddite but I don't do it but I'm drawn to that in my spirit when I read some of the books that Samuels mentioned and even some of the things Samuel's written and not blaming him for this but I find myself you know because I read Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan and all those folks or Jacques Aloor and I read some of these guys and I find myself let's throw my iPhone into the ocean get rid of my TV get rid of the streaming get rid of all of this get off a Twitter just boy my life would feel cleaner better Tony is that a a Christian sentiment you come across a lot is there anything that feels good that you resonate with what sort of good bad or otherwise can you speak to because there may be a lot of people listening who feel that I'm using all the technology but a lot of me feels like I just wish it would be buried in the ocean that's what I mean by default let it is them well I have it in my heart what I'm saying yeah yeah yeah 99% Christians have that in our heart have the tech and in since hate the tech what I'm

saying is why don't we bring God into this equation why is he always left out why can't we thank God for the gift of the smartphone why can't we thank God for the gift of Twitter why can't we step back and look at technology as a stewardship of a divine gift why do we always have to deal with it some as a human engineering is this thing this sort of like you know Steve Jobs just he manifested the iPhone out of nothing you know he's like this godlike figure who makes everything out of nothing he doesn't God makes everything out of nothing Steve Jobs makes things out of the things that exist and so looking at technology less is sort of like if it's a human product then it's somehow we should be we should resist it and thinking more in terms of the gift of the material universe that God has given us we did not invent electricity we did not invent nuclear fusion we did not invent fossil fuels those were all things that were embedded into this pregnant creation that God gave us so when we talk about gas powered engines or we talk about things powered by electricity why do we not start with gratitude and say God these are gifts from you that we now need to steward to love you and to serve others and that's what I'm trying to help Christians wrestle with is why when we talk of technology is God always pushed out of the conversation because I don't think that is a healthy way to go about it and I think there's a different way to do it that was being done prior to say World War one and that trajectory is there in the reform tradition and so yeah I I resonate with that I was in that position for a number of years just feeling torn and I especially as I was raising my teenagers right I wrote 12 ways your phone is changing you which is very negative on smartphones negative on social media this is the way it's changing us is being it's affecting us and 12 negative areas that we need to be aware of so I wrote that book and then at the end of that what I realized is I didn't have then a foundation of gratitude for tech that my kids could build off of and build an ethics of what they use and why they use it so why does mom and dad have a smartphone and the 12 year old in the house doesn't you know I've got to explain to my 12 year old why they don't have a smartphone and why mom and dad do right so why does mom and dad get one and the 12 year old doesn't and what I realized is I was engaging in that conversation is I had no theological foundation for stewardship built in their mind it was just a godless conversation as soon as you talk about smartphones social media anything like that it was just like God was out of the conversation altogether and I had to reckon with that and that's what this third book is is reckoning with is how do we bring God into the tech conversation in a real and biblical and substantial way Tony I want to follow up just just piggyback a little bit you have this section in your book which I really like you give this little vignette this example of I forget who it is who gives this story but ask the question if you could trade places with is it John D Rockefeller a hundred years ago the world's richest man who by today's standards what you know would be 20 30 billionaire and some money is no object you can buy anything that the world has to offer and yet this little thought experiment when you're initially drawn to say well yes I would go back a hundred years to be the world's richest person I could build a castle for myself and yet it only takes a few moments reflection to realize oh you you don't have a car that can drive you right you can't fly easily places if you want to go to Europe you got to

take a long boat ride you maybe have some primitive air conditioning in your house you don't have it anywhere else one in ten children are going to die on and on and on I sometimes use the example I was reading a year or so ago David Calhoun's two volumes and Princeton seminary which I just love being Presbyterian and reading about old Princeton and I get this nostalgia feeling I wish man if though if only I could have been back in the 19th century with hodge and then there's this one line where one of the Princeton guys was hodge or Alex and or somebody you know had some problem and they had 12 leeches on his groin nostalgia gone get me back to the 2020s as fast as I can Tony why why is it because I've got another books - on there's one by the Cato Institute that had like a hundred charts and graphs on how the world is objectively now not spiritually okay that we can't debate that but but objectively by human prosperity and ease by a magnitude better than at any time in history why do people struggle to see this we've lost a sense of wonder number one number two we think of these innovations we think of you know safer cars safer medicine the fact that you know children just don't die of natural causes you know it like they did a hundred years ago and I mean I was just a daily common life a hundred years ago we have streaming devices we can communicate like this we have insulated homes they've got air conditioning heating lighting we've got all of these things and again this is why I think if we press in and realize that the creation is pregnant with all these blessings we start to get this wide-eyed wonder of God's generosity to us I am a spoiled brat in the history of humanity God has blessed me with more technologies than Jonathan Edwards could ever dream of you know and so I wake up in the morning and look at all of the all of the computer chips that I own hundreds of them all over the place these are gifts from God that he's given to me that I then steward but I'm feel both a wonder and an awe for the the generosity of God that leads to all of those statistics you can go through all sorts of different statistics whether it's entertainment safety travel speed of travel you can get on a plane and go across the world in a day you know that's in that's insane we're not talking about boats that take weeks and weeks we're talking about jets that go 600 miles an hour at 40,000 feet it's just mind-boggling the technology that we have and so I don't want that technology to be lost on Christians who don't have a category for wonder and awe and worship for the God who makes all of that possible and so that's what I'm trying to reclaim like you don't want to live a hundred years ago trust me if you could spend a day a hundred years ago and be a billionaire then and come back to your life now you would come back to your life right now every time yeah you look at the chart of global GDP for example and it is for all of human history it is a basically flat line until the end of the 18th century and it starts to go up and then you get a hundred years ago and it's the hockey stick and it goes straight up and even in the last 20 years global poverty now there's still too much of it we all agree but global poverty has been just drastically reduced the number of people who live in abject grinding poverty is safe to say at the lowest percentage by far it's ever been in human history because for most of human history that was how most people lived and yet all of those measures we become blind to it's like when you do a you know somebody you've all had a performance evaluation

on a job and or you've given one to somebody and you tend to just take for granted all the good things somebody does in their job you just take that as a baseline of course they're really good at that and you zero in on the things that really need to be improved and we can be like that with the world we live in we just take for granted well of course I would have this medical care of course you know comedians have done these bits about you know they're sitting in a plane I'm flying in a metal box in the air and the internet bouncing off of satellites is taking so long what a terrible world I live in so we just yeah we become blind to it I'm gonna get to Samuel in just a moment say a bit more you know one of the texts I think of Tony is right at the very beginning Genesis 4 and Cain and his line there who are the progenitors of culture technology civilization but Cain's a bad guy how do we read Genesis 4 what sort of exegetical insights do you get from there well Moses wants us to trace professional music making basically rudimentary genetics with livestock and metalworking back to these forefathers of innovation that's clear in the Bible the Bible wants us to trace the lineage of those professions back to Cain's great great great grandsons who are going to be washed away in the flood which raises all sorts of questions about well then how does how does their tech get into the restart of humanity and that brings in Noah's ark I mean Noah's ark is a midwife of all human engineering prior to the flood into the restart of humanity that just blew my mind when I realized that that the reason we can trace those forefathers of those innovations is the fact that Noah carried their technologies into the the new create the restart this raises the question of yeah what Cain deserved death he should have died he should have been executed for his murder his cold-blooded murder of his brother that's very clear in the rest of the Old Testament like you kill somebody you murder them in cold blood your life is gone right and somehow God for some reason God puts a mark on him it says don't touch him don't mess with this dude don't fight him don't kill him he is going to be protected because he has a lineage that I have you that I have need for and that that then Cain himself becomes sort of a urban planner or city builder right he's not going to grow crops anymore and then out of the city the city becomes the the volcano of technological innovation and that comes out in his his lineage so right from the you know first few pages of the Bible we've already gotten in place a very central story for how God is going to send innovation into human human experience and he's going to do it through a lineage like Cain so he's going to use non non-believers rebels to do it and so already from from there we've got a more a more robust story than simply going to Babel and saying I'll see the tower Babel it's human engineering it's human engineering is bad it's it's it's right there from Genesis 4 and it goes on to Genesis 6 Genesis 11 you have all these stories that start to compound and build and tell this story of of God's relationship to human engineering so let me throw it to Samuel now anything in what Tony's been talking about I've given him the floor for a bit to riff about the goodness of technology you resonate with that anything you want to say yeah but I absolutely resonated resonate with it and in fact I was I was telling my wife just the other day I didn't grow up flying an airplane my family almost never flew and so as an adult when I've when I've had various jobs that have put me on airplanes more I I still have a sense



of wonder that I can have breakfast in Minneapolis and have dinner in Louisville like that that still doesn't seem like it should be the case and so it is kind of it's just a wonderful for me to think about so I absolutely resonate with what Tony's been saying I think where my thinking has been located the last few years has been to kind of take digital technology and internet technology in particular and to say it this is something that can bring great good and this is something that we should try to bring great good out of but is there something intrinsic to its nature that undermines in some way the kind of people and the kind of life that we're supposed to have under the Lord and and so for example we're talking about we're talking about GDP and kind of the the wealth of nations and how technological and financial advancement in the last 200 years has benefited people around the world countless probably billions of people I think that's absolutely true and yet I can hear perhaps a secular atheist hearing us have that discussion and then kind of turning the table on us and saying and but why do you Christians say the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil it doesn't make sense because here you are talking about the goodness of all this wealth and yet you have all of these Bible passages that you quote the warning against the pursuit of wealth warning against the love of wealth and I think that's just kind of where we are as Christians with money and I think there's a way in which that's true of technology true as well I think when we think about our relationship with money it's true that there's nothing intrinsically wrong with wealth but yes the Bible's attitude toward wealth is not neutral its warnings about wealth are not neutral there's not a sense of well it's 50/50 you know you can either you can try to become a billionaire or you can try not to and the Lord's indifferent to it actually there are so many Bible passages that kind of condition us to think hey wait a minute there's actually danger there's spiritual danger with devoting your life to trying to accumulate wealth and I think there's I think that speaks to kind of the tension that's at the heart of the technology conversation where something can be capable of great good and have virtue in itself and yet there's a posture that we have to take to it as take toward it as Christians and the posture that I am thinking most of these days is embodiment so what does it mean when because of the internet because of digital technology I my sense of myself as a person becomes entirely divorced from my body from my physical place from the from the created world that God has actually made what happens when I can conceive of myself and conceive of others purely as mental projections on a screen and I think one of the answers to that question is that the teaching of scripture becomes less plausible to us so for example when when I see in the scriptures that God made mankind male and female and that there's a beautiful complementarity between male and female and that this creates an equality of essence but a difference in roles but then I get online and I don't see bodies in front of me I see names and avatars and text and there's there's a kind of a devolution of personhood that and now what the scripture is saying doesn't make sense to me it doesn't make sense to think that it matters that only men can be ordained ministers and there's there's different roles for men and women that doesn't make any sense because my experience of the world is mediated through completely disembodied technologies

and to me it doesn't make any difference who you are or what body parts you may have because all I'm seeing is this experience of you reduced to words and images on a screen and so I think I think that is a big reason for some of the cultural crises that the church is facing with regard to gender with regard to sexuality I think that there's no instrument in the Western world has been as successful at kind of making people suspicious of and push back against their given embodied reality than the internet because as this technology mediates our experience of the world it just conditions us toward towards certain ends so I am I'm kind of of the same mind toward internet technology that I am toward wealth I think the Bible I think the Bible allows for it I think the Bible blesses the righteous use of it but I also think the Bible warns against pursuing these kinds of things because our calling as God's people is to be bent in a different direction and to value other things more yeah that that's really good the embodiment is one of the aspects that a lot of people are talking about and Christians need to think about and I want to talk about two specific pieces you've written Samuel and then get you to respond and then let's say let Tony as well but these are two fairly recent one from *Desiring God* last November the power of intellectual technologies and then from last December at mere orthodoxy untangling theology from digital technology and just want to highlight a few of the really insightful points you make so one on this DG article and here you reference Nicholas Carr and his book *The Shallows* which I benefited from a number of years ago when I read it in one of his central ideas which you've been really good to to also stress is that these technologies these digital technologies in particular Carr says they don't just extend our physical strength and he using like a plow or a microscope but intellectual technology directly reshapes how we think and one of the the underlying realisms and at times a very salutary warnings you're giving to us Samuel is to think technologies are not just tools that we use it's not just hey you had a hammer and now you got a bigger stronger hammer but these technologies so the internet is a is different than reading a book and books were a technology we don't realize that you know and probably Christians had a lot to do with the development of the Codex and people think that that's maybe even was speaking to their idea of a canon because before that you have scrolls scrolls you can add to you can sew in new you know vellum to it and a Codex a book is something that you hold in one place and is fixed it's got a front it's got a back it's got covers so books are a certain kind of technology that developed books physical tactile objects they train our brains in certain ways where and you point this out in the article you know an internet article is different you can be the same truth communicated but but there's hyperlinks there's browsers just the experience is different it trains you how to think differently which is not necessarily bad but you need to be aware of what's happening and then just to mention a few things from the second article in the mere orthodoxy because here and this is where I found you so helpful over these last couple of years Samuel as you think a lot about the internet space and what and how it shaped us as reformed Christians this this blogosphere the way that the internet I mean so many of our divisions and I've written about this too why the reformed community has splintered and the big elephant in the

room is what the internet has allowed for all sorts of communities it's not just Christian or reformed or evangelical or conservative it's never been easier for smaller subsets of people to find other people like them it's never been easier to get your thoughts out there and yet you make the good point that this does a lot of things well one it trains us to think if I have something to say I should say it so silence is no longer expected it also means that we're talking to one another when maybe as humans we weren't even meant to have as many connections as we have maybe we weren't meant to say something about everything or to know what everyone thinks maybe we're not psychologically hardwired to receive the kind of praise that the internet can give us and the kind of condemnation that the internet can give us so you've been really helpful to just think and help us think about the way internet discourse in particular because so often when we're talking about you know what's going on out there in the church and the latest controversy Ali I'll talk to people at my church who they're not luddites but they're just not as online you know I'm on text threads with with Justin and a bunch of other guys that we know and between the four or five of us even if we try to stay off Twitter I feel like we all are so connected we know every little thing that's going on and I'll talk to you know even people my age who are not technology luddites and they'll say oh that Josh Butler article I hadn't heard about that what do you mean that was a nuclear explosion in the internet world and they say I didn't hear about it until you said something in your article Kevin and wasn't that like three weeks ago I don't hear anybody talking about that anymore so there's my my mini sermon from your good stuff Samuel so just riff on that what are the dangers in just the digital discourse and then Tony you can think if you want to agree or disagree as we highlight any of these dangers Samuel yeah it's a it's a great question I think I think the so the controversy you just mentioned and probably others we could mention as well are probably a good illustration of how are our mass kind of social media platforms are not the kind of like democratic garden of Eden's that we tend to think they are like it this isn't just like the public water cooler Twitter in particular has been deeply shaped and deeply influenced by journalist culture so Twitter tends to kind of place a magnifying glass on the information economy and kind of who's writing what and who is publishing what things so that's why for example the recent controversy over Elon Musk taking away blue check marks and then maybe giving them back I don't know what he's doing now but that's why people are are kind of like worked up about it and it seems significant well the blue check mark is simply an evidence of how Twitter became kind of this this gateway of information keeping that's sort that sort of way to think about how you know it's kind of people setting themselves up as the arbiters of information that's that's kind of the culture that that Twitter comes from and I think that is a good example of why it would be a mistake for Christians and particularly church leaders to look at Twitter as what the church is saying what I'm quote so when you look at Twitter you're not getting a glimpse of the church you're getting a glimpse of Twitter and you're getting a glimpse of a particular algorithm and that particular algorithm is drawing from particular sources that are shaped by particular outlets and and if you do enough digging it turns out that most of the journalistic culture

in this country is shaped by a handful of institutions mostly on the east coast so you get from elite culture and I think I've written elsewhere about how Christians need to be careful that what they mean by engaging culture isn't simply responding to the Atlantic every month or responding to the New York Times because you're not really engaging culture you're just engaging these particular elite bastions and in so doing you are seeding control of the conversation to these outlets so that's a good example of how the internet kind of flattens distinctions flattens geography and kind of focuses our attention in a specific direction and that a direction may not be the direction that we think it is because it's it's guided by particular algorithms by particular values that these corporations have and I think the danger and what I was trying to get at in the mirror orthodoxy article is that the danger is when we we do theology online and I'm not saying we should never do theology online I'm grateful we do that but the danger though is that when we when we're handling the word of God online and we're kind of trying to apply scripture to various issues online we're often completely unaware of these dynamics and how they shape our reaction so we are we're basically approaching what is a very analog I believe a very analog book the Bible that has a very analog view of human flourishing that emphasizes our bodily limitations our obligations to our our spouse our church our neighbors that has a very kind of localistic view of what the life that God expects from us and we're approaching that with a very kind of jaundiced mass media technology mediated view of how to speak to these issues and that kind of influences our instincts and how we talk to one another and and the kind of things that we choose to talk about and the kind of things we choose not to talk about so I see evidence of this of this dynamic in evangelical culture and I think a big part of responding faithfully to it is simply naming it and being able to identify it and say this is what's happening this is what the Bible kind of assumes of God's people and how do we bring this in more alive so that we're aware of these dynamics and able to kind of push back against them yeah that's really good let me piggyback on two things and then get Tony to weigh in one thing you just said there the way that elite media companies algorithms to set the agenda for the church that that's true and it's it takes discernment to know when we say think about just thinking about this you know it someone would have to look at the the stats right now is it objectively the case that in say 2019 2020 2021 to use a controversial example more African Americans were killed by police than they had been or was that more than our now because that that's not blowing up the internet at the moment now it's probably one new cycle away from happening but we're seeing all these shootings is this more prevalent than it has been or are we hearing about it more these are honest questions but it's just to illustrate the fact that once those outlets start talking about something all the time then we feel like cultural engagement means we also say something which it may or may not be wise to weigh into those things that's not the point but is they well what do we as Christians feel like the world needs to hear or that needs to be spoken so that's that's one concern I really resonate with another one that you you hit on in this article is the way in which the internet flattens discourse nationalizes or in some ways globalizes discourse so lots of people have written about

this that all politics has become much more national that local races are tied to national figures and national referendum so often and I think that the internet does that so for example take another one of these internet kerfuffles the the the winsiness debates are Christians to win some or they need to be more winsome well it it what's your context what are you thinking of are you thinking about talking to the person right in front of you and does anti-winsome mean what we really need is when we have personal conversations we need to be more abrasive and more aggressive or are we speaking against winsomeness because some people have made a whole cultural strategy of how they talk to people on the internet in a certain way so I'm aware of this and I don't know how to get around it but we all when we say something write something online we have in our head probably you know three tweets that I saw in a conversation I had with somebody at church here that went in a certain direction and maybe somebody's you know article that I read that really annoyed me and then you get out there and you're speaking and then a whole bunch of other people come up and say well wait a minute but don't you know you don't what you don't know how terrible my church is right what a bad pastor I have my father was horrible and he was comp and all of these sort of stories and you want to say well I wasn't I wasn't meaning to talk to you but of course it's the internet so you're talking to everyone what what do you think Tony how do you read as someone who's rightfully reminding us of the gifts of technology and you spend your professional life helping John Piper reach a digital audience how do you think about what Samuel's pointing out the way this internet culture is shaping us in some really negative ways up on everything he said I think it maps on to where I was leading in 12 ways your phone is changing you might the question that I step back on is is technology neutral or is it never neutral and that that's kind of the question that comes to my mind so Melvin Kranzberg who was the late tech historian at Georgia Tech he had this great line he he penned the six laws of technology in this first law was brilliant it was this it was technology is neither good nor bad nor neutral it's none of those things which is a great way I think to say it and I chuckled when I first read it but it's pretty profound saying technologies are neutral doesn't get us very far in this conversation at all every technology is preloaded with certain biases that we have to acknowledge and we have to work through as Christians and these biases often provoke something in us by its potential is potential to be used virtuously or sinfully by how the tech is fundamentally bent and you know so trying to disentangle what's a virtuous use of a media and what's a sinful use of media that's that's what I was wrestling with 12 ways your phone is changing you there's a sense among many Christians today that you must first address the problem tech before addressing God's glory in the gift of tech and so I really I think had write that book first before I could write God technology in the Christian life but one thing I discovered that was new to me as I was writing this new book is that a theology of technology is basically a theology of the city it's the same story I was I was trying to see how human engineering human innovation mapped into Genesis to Revelation and what I realized is going back to Cain these are just intertwined with the story of the city they're one story and so our cities are not merely good or bad and they're certainly not

neutral and so God's relationship to the cities of man is complicated but it mirror it mirrors that exact storyline of of technology in in the lineage that we kind of see from Genesis Revelation what we find for example is okay so if cities and technology are basically mapped on to the same storyline we get to Revelation 2 and 3 and we read seven letters to seven churches in seven cities each city spring-loaded with certain idolatrous biases and you would say well Christians run from the city flee from the city because the city has idolatrous bent right no they're not called the flee the city and so I think that same dynamic must be at work when we're thinking of technologies around us every social media platform is designed to encourage you to do things with it that would violate Christian standards of fairness and love and charity and modesty and that's why I think in the book I say you know if you're conscience approved living inside of a city among all this cultural pressures and idolatrous biases which is what we have in Phoenix right you come to Phoenix for the good life to golf to get a tan to retire right those are idolatrous bent a bent in Phoenix if you take it too far if you think the good life is moving to Phoenix and golfing every day if you think that's the good life that's an idolatrous bent that I have to fight against if I'm gonna live in the city of Phoenix and I believe God has called me here and I believe that I can minister to the people of Phoenix but I can't be naive the city is not neutral and none of our technology platforms are either I hadn't thought of that before but that really makes sense and it maps on to what you said earlier just that the instincts we have as Christians so I think a lot of Christians and I can feel this in myself can can feel like rural or country is is pure is better is is less trampled by modern idolatries and yet if anyone who who lives in those places will tell you yeah there's some real blessings and there's thick cultures and there's traditions and there's a lot of dysfunction there too and so then you get the people that swing the other way and because Christians can be nervous about cities make it sound like if you're not in the city then you're not a good Christian and you can see some of the same pendulum swings with with technology I want to get each of you to to answer at least one last question if you can stay just a few more minutes I do want to mention before I get there another sponsor scriptura they make great bibles heirlooms sort of bibles but also you just use I have a couple of them they're such nice leather you feel like you want to just sleep on them and maybe you want to think of a possible Mother's Day gift is coming up so check out scriptura and their line of bibles they also will restore your Bible put a new cover on it if you got a Bible that you've had forever you got your notes in it they can do that to LBE listeners can receive 15% off their order with the code LBE 15 so thank you to scriptura I want to give to each of you at least one last question and and I want you I'm going to bring to you my own pathologies and you can counsel me so let me start first with Samuel I read your stuff and I I can find myself as I said earlier agreeing with you 100% and feeling like I'm I want to get off I'm gonna cancel Twitter I'm just gonna write books that are hardcover I'm gonna I'm not gonna look at the internet I'm gonna get a rotary phone I don't want my any of this stuff because just to fight the beast with little nibbling around the edges feels like it's just not gonna work I I so see and feel the dangers that I want to just be rid of it is so help me or people like me Samuel should

some people do that would you counsel people not to do that what should people listening to this who feel all of those kind of dangers but they're very online how do you counsel them to live as disciples of Christ that's a great question and should I cancel Twitter and writing online and not my podcast but so I would I would start with the reality that so much of the Christian life is contextual so we have we have biblical commands in scripture that we're all bound to follow under allegiance to Jesus and then but so many of what specific steps we take to get there depends on person to person right so you wouldn't counsel necessarily to people who are in very different situations to necessarily have the exact same approach repentance might look different for both of them and so that's where I would start is that despite our desire for a one-size-fits-all approach like just just what is the absolute have to do list and I'll do it I was like well that doesn't exist there is no have to do list instead there are specific ways that we can be more faithful with the attention span that God's given us our attention spans are not infinite resources they're finite and we we choose to spend they're not fungible either we choose to spend on one thing and we don't spend on another thing excuse me so I would I think for me in my own life in my own journey through this it has not led me to a total rejection of online technology but it has led me to bring other people into my life who can change my password who can text me and as this happened about a year ago somebody texted me and said hey brother I think you should delete that and I said okay you're right I should delete it so I think bringing people in to my use of technology and giving them permission to say I want you to hold me accountable and to help me hold myself accountable that these technologies I'm not serving their values but they're serving mine in the words of Cal Newport I'm making this technology serve what I think is ultimate rather than just doing whatever Silicon Valley tells me to do with these devices so I would start there I would start by getting somebody who has authority in your life to say hey I want you to be able to pull me back from the brink if you if you can see that my kids or my friends are trying to get my attention and I'm just scrolling mindlessly and I'm just not present that I want you to be able to say hey what don't I change your password on that app for a few weeks and let's let's let's try to reset I would start there for for the vast majority of people I think some folks will need to take a seriously hard look at their subscriptions at their memberships because there could be in effect I think there probably are for most listeners there are ways in which we're using internet technology that really don't have any practical redemptive value and if they do have practical redemptive value for someone else then they're not giving it to us and we may not be able to use them faithfully I think people probably need to look at their own patterns of sin and their own patterns of vice and to see is there a particular social media or a particular internet technology that brings this out in you are you given to anger is there a particular platform that seems to monopolize on your anger are you given to lust is there a particular platform that seems to monopolize on your lust are you given to laziness is there so on and so forth and so it starts with just this kind of honest self-assessment letting the word of God cut us open like it does and then letting other people come to alongside us to say hey this is this is the patterns that I see in you and and the

last thing I would say is that the Bible's view of wisdom and of human flourishing places so much emphasis on the physical world that God made are embodied relationships with each other and the local church so the local church is not a virtual thing it's it's not it's it's a physical embodied congregation and we are we are body parts of it that's what Paul says we are members of it he's using physical language there and so I think the dominant note in our Christian life needs to be that the physical and embodied time that we spend either in the word or with other Christians needs to weigh so much more than the time that we're spending online communicating so what I what I told a group of Christians at a church just a couple days ago was if your instinct is to follow someone in your church on social media how about you call them invite them to coffee instead get to know them instead of just following them if your tendency is to you know try to try to live stream a service no go be a part of that church fight against the the tendency in our society to digitize everything and to escape the awkwardness and the vulnerability of embodied presence and lean into it because that is how God created us and any time we lean into the way God created us we will be glad we did because that's the way we're supposed to be that's a really good word that's really helpful let me end here with you Tony so let's get very practical let's talk about iPhone she wrote a book about how phones change us and talk about screens I think that probably me and my family are relatively normal I think there's some things that we do well with screens I think there's some things that I wish we did a lot better so I have nine kids our rule has been they get a they won't get a phone until they're 13 some people say I can't believe you do it that but that that's what we've done I think we do some things well like we know the passwords to our kids phones if they're on them or screens are supposed to be in a you know not locked away in their rooms hopefully but in a public sort of areas and we can they know that we can they charge their phones in a public area at night so they know we can get on there we could see what they were doing we could look at their text we can follow that if we so they just know that's that possibility is out there so I think there's some things that are basic safeguards that I feel like yeah we're doing okay and yet I'll just tell you that there's lots of times where kids or their parents are standing around scrolling on an infinite scroll and mindlessly looking at something and with little kids we are always trying to fight that I mean my two-year-old her her great I want to say her best friend but is green because we have one iPad that's wrapped in that green foam and so she's just always the same daddy where's green where's green daddy I love cocoa melon where's green and we know it it's a good way to get things done as parents grab this iPad and watch it and and I think my wife and I go back and forth sometimes thinking look I watch TV growing up you know get some iPad time it's not ruining you and yet we read lots of scary articles and we think oh your brain is mush you're ruined so speak into that because I have to think just a lot of Christian parents are feeling that same thing we're muddling through it there's some rules that work but boy I feel like it's way too much screen time overall give me or any of us your council it's a big topic I mean I would love to write a book at some point on parenting in the digital age because I've learned so many lessons from my failures the probably the biggest tip that I learned



as a parent is that when you have kids in the home and they're using a Wi-Fi so this is pretty smartphone they're using a tablet you can control screen limits you can control what they see how long they see it very easily when you graduate to a smartphone and they have mobile web access off of the family Wi-Fi at home you have now opened them up to influences that are way beyond probably what you even know you've given to them so you've got to use that time before they get a smartphone to train them and to show them what it means to have a limits and even enforce those limits and to see how they respond to those limits and what they do when they have the iPad what are they looking for what are they searching for do they have any sort of discipline you could train that in them before you give them a smartphone find things like the circle device is one that we use we're just limits you know our kids got 15 minutes YouTube and then is over you know for the day you're training them because at some point when you give them a mobile web and there are ways to make smartphones dumb I mean you find somebody in your church who is really good at that every church seems to have one guy or woman who's in the tech industry who can make a smartphone dumb and they can show you how to put on parental controls and things like that but once you make that step and give them a smartphone you really open them up to a whole new world and you have to make that decision very thoughtfully very carefully based on each of your kids and how disciplined they are so I would say that that that's the first thing that comes to mind but I think the things that you're putting in place kids do not have screens in their bedrooms at night that's super important and you've got that in place using using computers and things in public view of the home that's really important those things are important but at the end of the day if your kids are watching you and you're on a laptop for 10 hours a day you are teaching them something by your habits they don't necessarily know what you're doing but they're being taught like oh you sit down and you look at the screen you know there's like a New York Times cartoon whereas these two dogs looking at the owner and the owner is just sitting at a desk looking at a computer and the dog say yeah he was bred for this you know bred for just staring at his screen yes so weird a hundred years ago again people would have thought we're crazy to just sit in front of a screen but right we're habituating our kids to do this this dawned on me when we were on a family vacation and my 15 year old son we were up in northern Minnesota we found this waterfall this 25 foot waterfall is incredible and we were hiking and so we just said let's spend the day here at this waterfall so we're watching it and there's you know all sorts of boulders and things around this drop pool and we're just hanging out in the where is in the morning but it starts to get warmer and warmer by about 11 o'clock it's getting hot out my son says my 15 year old son at that point this is several years ago he says dad let me jump off the 25 foot waterfall into the drop pool and I said no way you're gonna break your neck the pond is black you can't see the rocks underneath or whatever so he says okay fine I won't jump jump off of the waterfall so he's just playing in the water about noon it's like a hundred degrees it's super hot and two road workers pull up to the top of the waterfall and they come out and they script down to shorts they're like scuffed with asphalt so they're road workers and they just hop off of the top of the waterfall and

plunge into the plunge pool and then they get back up do it again go back up put their clothes on and drive off and go back to work and so my son comes back to me says dad you you can see that this is safe I want to do it and I said to him okay this is a parenting moment and I knew this sermon illustration was being born in the moment it's the only time has ever happened to me but I knew a sermon illustration was being born in that moment I said we'll let you jump off the 25 foot waterfall under one condition and that is I'm not gonna film it mom's not gonna film it and we're not gonna film it on your phone but you can do it and you can experience the thrill and you know what he did he threw his arms up in the air and he said well then what's that what's the point what would be the point of doing if it wasn't filmed right and that led to a discussion when you're parenting teens it's all about concessions right and so we eventually said okay you can you can jump will film it but you can't share it for a week you have to give us your phone the rest of this family vacation you're gonna be offline and so it worked out great but he jumped we filmed it he survived he had a fun time but it just showed you like like that is so ingrained in him like if it's not filmed it's not what we're doing and it wasn't but a few moments later after that experience that I realized that I had had an iPhone camera in front of his face since the day he was born yeah first steps first words first baseball game first football game first recital first everything dad's there with his phone in front so I want to you know I want to make fun of my 15 year old son for being habituated to wanting to perform in front of a screen but it dawned on me pretty quickly that I had built that into him he had been an actor in front of dad's iPhone since the day he was born so I think you know when we look at these these issues of oh my kids have these tendencies online I think they're picking up a lot more from mom and dad than we may want to admit yeah that that is a that is a sermon illustration with a lot of application yeah so it's been well you feel that up a friend of mine one time son was I'm just glad there was at least a happy ending and he was okay yeah I want to thank you both for for being here and Tony once again check out his book on on the iPhone and most recently just came out last year God technology in the Christian life published by Crossway and of course listen to ask pastor John isn't there a book coming out compiling some of the APJs yeah I took our 750 most popular episodes and tried to synthesize them into one book by paraphrasing paraphrasing them and sort of showing you how John Piper's brain works when it comes to various questions like that and so it's a big one you know it's great and then Samuel James writes for a number of different outlets and is got his book coming out with Crossway in September on digital liturgies thank you both for being here on life and books and everything and until next time for all of us and our listeners glorify God enjoy him forever and read a good book and maybe a good book you can hold in your hand you [ Silence ]