

Digital Fast 2025: *Discerning the Thief*
John 10:10; Ephesians 5:15-16

This morning we will kick-off our much-anticipated *Digital Fast Series* where we will be addressing the profound and often difficult relationship we now have with the digital world. When I say “we,” I mean ALL of us. This series is not intended to single out anyone, nor do I claim to have all the answers or to somehow represent a shining example of getting it right. On the contrary, I’m in this boat with you. We are all fully aware that our relationship with the digital age has changed the way we think, the way we seek information, the way we engage socially, the way we spend our time, and countless other realities that our parents and grandparents did not face in the generations before us. And yes, the digital age also affects our souls...profoundly. In fact, I would suggest that many of us have an idolatrous relationship with our devices, and any expression of idolatry is a cause of great concern when it comes to our witness and integrity as Christians. This series is necessary, it is relevant, and it is unlike any series we have done in the 17 years I have been here at Colonial. We will not only be delivering a series of messages that we hope you will listen to. We are also asking you as individuals and as families to voluntarily participate in a 28 day fast from your digital engagement. To be clear, we are not asking you to set your phone down and not use it for four weeks. We are asking you to “dumb down” your device by deleting social media apps, games, and other apps that distract you from your people and from the present, real world that is all around you. We would ask you to fast from or at least greatly decrease the time you spend gaming, watching 24-hour news channels, or even surfing the web on your computer. We are NOT asking you to cut off communication with your friends or family who live in distant places, nor are we asking you to set aside your work responsibilities if your work requires you to spend a great deal of time on a screen. We get that there are notable and reasonable exceptions, and we trust that you will make those decisions as you are led by reason and the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

To be clear, you do not have to participate in the digital fast, and there will be no shaming from the pulpit or excommunication from the church if you decide to do your own thing. Your participation in the digital fast is strictly voluntary, so I will leave it up to you and your family to decide if and how you wish to participate. I do want to point out, however, that if you have ever felt that your relationship or your family’s relationship with devices seems to be out of balance, this would be the perfect opportunity to pilot a change for 28 days and then document how that change affects your relationships, your emotional well-being, your productivity, and even your relationship with God.

Now, this is Colonial, so in addition to bathing this series in prayer, we are also going to remain rooted to the truth of God’s Word. So, please stand as we read our scripture for the day that comes first from John 10:10, and then Ephesians 5:15-16.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) My Story; 2) The Facts; 3) Discerning the Thief; and 4) A Better Way.

I. My Story

To begin our time together, I would like to share a bit of my story. I was born in 1970 and raised in a small town in Wisconsin until the age of 14. My childhood was what I would consider typical for many people who are my age and older. By that I mean that a large part of my first 14 years of life was spent outside of my house. Why? Well, there wasn't a lot to do in my house! For the first 12 years of my life, we had only three channels on the television, maybe four on clear day. If I was home, I was likely doing chores, doing my homework, reading a book, or playing board games with my siblings. We did watch TV, but we were only allowed to watch one hour of TV on the weekdays and two hours on the weekends. So, for the most part, if I was not in school, I was on my bike, playing at the park, at a friend's house, or having a friend come over to my house.

A lot of that changed at the age of 13 when cable television entered into the homes of my friends. I say my friends, because my parents were late adapters! Cable TV provided hundreds of channels to choose from, including premium channels that would play movies without commercials...it was like heaven came down to earth! Cable TV led many of us to start watching a lot more TV than we had previously, but throughout the remainder of my childhood, I still spent a great deal of time on the driveway playing basketball or I was out with my friends.

As I think about my childhood up to the time that I got married, technology continued to advance at a steady pace with the advent of the Walkman, Blockbuster Video, CD's, DVD's and personal home computers that sent many a typewriter to the trash; but nothing quite compared to the arrival of the internet in our homes in the mid 90's. I was 24 years old when my new wife and I installed dial-up internet in our little apartment in Princeton, NJ. As you know, the internet changed everything, though in the early years it was incredibly slow and generally aggravating to work with.

I was 26 years old in 1996 when I got my first cell phone, which came attached to a bag (show pic of a bag phone¹), and I remember thinking that once again, heaven had come down. Now I could call people from my truck, and occasionally, I could even reach people when I was out on my boat. Cell phones were utilitarian in 1996, and to some extent, they made life safer because we could call for help if needed and we could check in with our loved ones when they were away from their homes. Texting in the late 90's was hardly a thing, and the phones did not yet connect to the internet.

Four years later, in April of 2000, we had our first son, and by the time Levi was 4 years old, he was playing children's games on our home computer. Then, in 2008, shortly after moving to KC, we bought Levi and his little brothers a Nintendo Wii. By the time Levi was 10 in the year 2010, the I-phone was released, and everybody was going crazy to get one. By the time Levi

¹ <https://i.pinimg.com/474x/12/21/08/122108fe47758ed56237b6ad62e92c9e.jpg>

turned 12 in 2012, we noted that many of Levi's friends in Johnson County were getting I-Phones. By the time Levi was 14, he had his first cell phone, he was generally addicted to video games, and he was living out a childhood that looked nothing like my childhood growing up. Levi spent most of his time at home playing video games, he rarely if ever had friends over, and Christy and I were worried about his mental health. In the next several years, our second two sons, Jonah and Caleb, would be even more attached to screens, and as we all know, the COVID years only exacerbated the mental health crisis of our kids who were confined to hours and hours of "online learning".

Please know I'm not telling you this story to rat out my kids. I'm telling you this story to confess that Christy and I are exactly the parents who had no idea what we were doing when it came to the unprecedented advance of technology during the years that we were raising our children. As we get into this series, you'll see a lot of statistics about the deterioration in mental health of those who were adolescents in the year 2010 through the year 2020, and I'm admitting that those statistics are about OUR children and the children of our peers. I will be the first to say that even the best of parents from 2010-2020 faced unprecedented challenges, and I suspect that most of us would say that we would do things differently if we had the information that I'm about to share with you this morning. Please hear me say that the information we're going to look at is not intended to shame any parent or any teenager then or now. I also want you to hear me say that, though the statistics and research is daunting, there are many other considerations that factor into raising healthy kids. Gratefully, our kids have survived these years of 2010-2020 and turned out to be pretty amazing people, so I'm not suggesting that this generation of teens is forever corrupted or somehow indelibly screwed up! I do think that there is a lot for us to learn, and I am hopeful that those of you who are parents, grandparents, and future parents-to-be will give some serious consideration to the fact-based learning that is now available for us to consider after the first decade of the digital age.

II. The Facts

So, let's look at some facts. As of today, the average teenager reports spending 7 hours a day on his or her device. Given that the average person is only awake for 16-18 hours a day, you can do the math. That means that the average teen is on his or her device for nearly half his waking hours. A significant percentage of teens report that they basically check their phones all day unless they are sleeping, and many will check their phones if they wake up in the middle of the night. Sadly, we're not just talking about older, high school students. I read recently that 40% of American children under the age of 13 have created Instagram accounts, even though the "legal age" to open a social media account is 13. That means that 4 out of every 10 children in this country under the age of 13 are being exposed to adult content, adult conversations, and adult predators who are constantly on the hunt for pre-adolescent children.

But let's not pick on the kids. When children were asked what the most important thing they would ask of their parents if given a chance, the overwhelming response was their desire for their parents to put down their phones and give the children their undivided attention. I read recently that the average American checks her phone 205 times a day...and that includes adults.

I think it is safe to say that on the average, American teens and adults have become addicted to their phones. We all know it's a big problem. But just how big of a problem is it?

In his book entitled, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing and Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Jonathan Haidt reports the trends of internalizing disorders in young adolescents from 2008-2020. In addition to the alarming increase in anxiety and depression that shot straight up in 2012, there are other trends that are downright horrifying. For example, hospitalization for self-harm for adolescent girls went up 188% from 2010-2020. Suicide rates for younger adolescents shot up by 91% for boys from 2010-2020, and 167% for girls in the same time frame.² When you look at the suicide rate, you can see a profound spike in 2012, particularly for girls. Why 2012?

2012 was the year when the front facing camera was introduced with the I-phone and Facebook added the "Like" button to its website. As kids (and adults) started posting pictures of themselves for the world to see and comment on, the level of despair increased dramatically.

Whereas the trend line for boys taking their own lives seemed to taper off in 2020, the trendline for girls continued to spike right through 2020.³

By the way, these disturbing trends are not unique to America. Adolescents who had access to smartphones and the internet anywhere in the world in the same time period produced similar trends in the decline of adolescent mental health.

There are a myriad of other statistics and facts that you can read about in Jonathan Haidt's book, and you'll learn other facts throughout this series. The question we need to consider this morning is this: how are we to manage our relationship with the digital world? We all know there are some practical advantages to having smart phones when it comes to communication, access to information, GPS and maps that help us find any address in the world, and so on. I think it would be inaccurate to say that these phones are "EVIL" per se. At the same time, the statistics don't lie. The advent of the smartphone has dramatically changed our world, and in many ways, it has changed it for the worse...not the better. Such is why, as Christians, we must be discerning.

III. Discerning the Thief

Long before Facebook and Instagram, Jesus spoke to His disciples about the Enemy of our souls. Jesus referred to the Enemy as a Thief in John 10:10, and He said that the Thief comes only to do three things: to steal, to kill, and to destroy. In contrast, Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd who comes to give abundant life to those who hear His voice and follow Him.

Now, I want you to think about your relationship with your phone, gaming, social media, and even 24/7 news on the TV. Take a minute to evaluate the overall effect that screens are having on your life today. Given the facts that we now have from the social scientists, and given our own

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024) 30-31.

³ I did read recently that the rate of suicide among young teens declined by 4% in 2022, which was the first decline in that number in the past 10 years.

experiences as children and adults, can we discern the work of the Enemy in our digital obsessions?

I think we can.

First, Jesus says that the Thief comes to steal. I wonder if you could discern anything that your phone and social media “steals” from you?

How about your attention? How about your time? Paul writes in Ephesians 5:15-16:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

Paul understood that in this present evil age, TIME is our most precious commodity. How we spend our time determines and even reveals how we are ‘walking’ as those who belong to Christ. Spending 4-7 hours a day looking at our phones would likely not fall into the category of “wise” use of the precious hours God has given us on this earth. And yet, we all know a “quick” scroll through Instagram or Tik-Tok will eat up 30-60 minutes every time. Digital games, news feeds, Snapchat and Facebook steal our attention and swallow up huge amounts of our time that we will never get back. We must ask ourselves this important question WHO is not getting our attention during those 4-7 hours a day that we are looking at our phones? Would it be fair to say that the Thief is stealing our attention away from the ones we love the most? Would it be fair to say that the Thief is stealing our attention away from the LORD and His purposes for our lives?

How about sleep? One of the greatest issues associated with our use of phones is sleep deprivation. I imagine many of us even here in the Church spend our last waking moments looking at our phones, and then we wonder why we struggle to get good sleep. It is a well-documented fact that the blue light emitted from a phone screen tells your body that it’s time to wake up, not time to go to sleep. Many people report that when they wake up in the middle of the night, they check their phones, which then contributes to more sleeplessness. Sleep-deprivation is a serious problem that has huge implications regarding our physical and mental health; so yes, I think it is fair to say that the Thief is stealing our sleep through our undisciplined use of phones.

By the way, you should know that those who created the phones, and those who create the apps, and particularly those who create social media sites are 100% committed to stealing your time and attention. From your news feed to your YouTube channel to your Instagram feed, every app is designed to learn your preferences and interests, and then automatically present you with images, news stories, and videos that will grab and keep your attention. Why? Because the longer you are looking at their sites, the more exposure you get to their advertising, which is how these social media sites are funded. However, beyond the shameless ambitions of social media developers, I suspect we might discern the work of the Thief in the digital world who is successfully stealing our attention, our time, and our sleep.

Secondly, Jesus said that the Thief comes to kill. I want you to recall the suicide rate of young teens between 2010-2020. The suicide rate of boys increased by 91%, and the suicide rate of young girls increased by 167%. Those are staggering statistics. Thousands and even tens of thousands of souls are no longer on planet earth due to self-murder, and there is clearly a direct correlation of phone use to the increased percentage of suicide. So yes, the Thief is literally killing the image-bearers of God through the digital devices that we so casually provide to our children.

The third intent of the Thief is to destroy. Can we discern anything that the Thief is destroying through our use of digital devices and social media? How about your self-image? When we post pictures of ourselves and our families on social media, we are knowingly or unknowingly looking for social validation. That was the whole point of creating social-media sites in the first place, and the people who made those sites understood how addictive that social validation would become, especially for teens⁴. Why? Because when we get the social validation we are hoping for, we feel a boost of good feelings, so we want to do it more. However, when we don't get the validation or people make nasty comments about us, we are often crushed or we suffer from anger, anxiety, or self-doubt. Social media can quickly destroy our self-image.

How about your marriage? Internet pornography is one of the greatest marriage destroyers of our age, and it's no longer a problem isolated to men. The fastest growing group of porn users are young women. Even beyond the use of porn is the inevitable comparison that results from the use of social media. When we see couples taking wonderful vacations together, giving extravagant gifts, or writing cute little love songs, we can immediately become dissatisfied with our spouse who doesn't live up to the images we see on our phones, even though we objectively know that people only post the pretty moments of their lives, not the actual life they are living that is filled with challenges, hardships, and disappointments like the rest of us.

How about your relationship with friends? Social media has destroyed countless friendships through harsh criticisms, exploitation, and the feeling of being left out.

Church, following the advent of the smartphone, the number of people suffering from anxiety in our country and throughout the world shot through the roof. We are now the most anxious generation who has ever lived in this country. I'm not saying that devices and social media are the only contributors to that statistic, but we know that the numbers shot straight up in 2012 when 76% of teenagers had smartphones in their hands for the first time, and chronic anxiety continues to plague our nation like never before.

⁴ Haidt (p 134) features a screenshot of an internal Facebook presentation, brought out by Frances Haugen, which is accompanied by a caption which reads: *"Teens' decisions and behavior are mainly driven by emotion, the intrigue of novelty and reward. While these all seem positive, they make teens very vulnerable at the elevated levels they operate on. Especially in the absence of a mature frontal cortex to help impose limits on the indulgence in these."* This internal document was not expressing concern for vulnerable teens; it was presented as a means by which teens could be hooked and led to spend even more time on their social media site.

So, do the math. Let us be a discerning people. Do we see the tactics of the Thief at work through our careless, undisciplined use of devices and social media? Do we see evidence of our Enemy's intent to steal, kill, and destroy through our digital indulgence? Yes, we do. And we've only looked at the tip of the iceberg. Over the next few weeks, you will learn more about the facts, and you'll hear testimonies of both students and parents regarding the real-life consequences of our digital obsessions. However, you will also hear some encouragement from those who have sought to make some strategic changes in their lives, and you will be equipped with tools and ideas to walk wisely in this present age, making most of the time that you have been given. And that leads to my final subheading—

IV. A Better Way

Over the next 28 days, I want to challenge each of us to examine our lives and our relationships with our devices and particularly social media. To be specific, I want to challenge each of us to fast from our social media accounts, our digital games, and our overall screen time, including 24/7 news channels and Xbox time. I want to challenge each of us to reclaim the 4-7 hours that we typically devote to our devices and redirect that time toward loving God and loving one another. To that end, we are providing a 28-day devotional book for all who are willing to participate. The Digital Fast devotion book (show pic) will ask good and hard questions as well as providing Bible study and suggested activities to help you make the most of your 28-day fast. Many of our staff voluntarily did the 28-day digital fast this Spring, and every person who participated found value in the time away from their devices as well as value in working through the Digital Fast devotional.

If you are interested in learning more about the impact of our devices and social media, I encourage you to read Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Anxious Generation*, as well as *The Digital Fast* by Darren Whitehead. Even more importantly, I hope you will spend time in God's Word. Nothing recalibrates our hearts and minds like spending time in the Bible. And please, please, please...spend time with your people. Give your children and your grandchildren your undivided attention. Give your spouse your undivided attention. Give your parents and your friends your undivided attention. And most importantly, give your LORD and SAVIOR your undivided attention. The greatest gift that you have to give is your time, so invest your time wisely and strategically in these four weeks.

Make no mistake, a 28-day break from devices will help to reset our sleep cycles, reset our marriages, and reset our relationships with those we love. That said, you don't have to participate to be a member or attendee at Colonial. We are not adding law to grace, and no matter your relationship with your phone or social media, you are always welcome here! I do hope, however, that you will at least pray about joining us on this 28-day journey, that you might discover the truth of what Jesus said not only about the Enemy, but even more importantly, what He said about Himself.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd, and I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." The life you've always wanted is not to be found in that device; you will only find it through your Creator who made you, and your Savior who died for you! Use these four weeks

to invest in that relationship, and I promise you will find the path to the life you have always wanted.

Will you pray with me?