

[Parks and Rec clip]

Where are my Parks and Rec fans? I know you love Chris Trager then. In the first few seasons he's on the show, Chris is obsessed with physical perfection. He uses science to hone his body to peak physical perfection - diet and exercise and a supplement regime that are... let's just say, extensive. They rule his life. Chris' regime actually gets in the way of his relationships, both personally and professionally, and eventually (spoiler) lead him to a nervous breakdown.

[this whole section might be good for a side-by-side] Chris Trager is a humorous example of the paradox of technology and progress. For instance, since the industrial revolution, global life-expectancy has doubled. Since the 1850s, life expectancy has been increasing world-wide, so that today people on average live twice as long as at any point in human history. Why?

Technology: antibiotics. Hospitals. Antiseptics. Surgical technology. Holistic health. Better childhood nutrition. And on and on and on.

And yet. Since the 1850s, more people have been killed by other people than ever before in human history. Why?

Technology: planes, tanks, machine guns. Gas, biological weapons, nuclear bombs, drones. And on and on and on.

Is technology good or bad? Is our progress actually progress? Yes and no.

The fundamental question of technology, of progress is whether it connects or disconnects us. [maybe a plug here? a 'connection'?] Does technology bring us closer to God and closer to each other, or does it divide us, make us more selfish, more inward focused?

This is the season of Lent - a period in the Church year we set aside to focus specifically on our sin. Lent isn't fun, but it's necessary. We face how we've walked away from God and turn back, leaving our sin and returning to our creator.

This year, our series is called American Gods. We're looking at various aspects of our American culture that replace God at the center of our lives. Good things that, when given the wrong weight become idols [gravity well graphic]. False gods that promise us life but only deliver us death.

What makes these things in our lives into idols is when we give them the wrong weight in our lives. When these things become idols, they cause us to question God's goodness and truth.

Last week we met the god of Work. We saw that the god of Work wants us to measure our lives based on how much we produce - in the biblical metaphor, how many bricks we can make.

Today, we meet the god of Technology [gravity well - cell phone]. Or we could call him the god of Progress. The lie this god tells us is that we are enough. That we can save ourselves through our own efforts and abilities. That we can build something with our bricks that can make us more than we are. That - like Chris Trager - we have it within us to conquer Death.

Believe it or not, the first warning about the dangers of technology come at the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 11. Turn there with me. [Scripture Reference Slide] If you grabbed one of our Bibles off the rack on the way in, or out of the pew in front of you, you can find Genesis 11 on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, we'd be honored if you'd keep that one as a gift from us.

As you turn to Genesis 11, let me set up this story for you. Genesis 1-11 serves as an introduction to the larger story of the Bible. As any good introduction, it introduces the main characters and the central conflict - the stakes of the story. So in the first couple of chapters, we're introduced to the creator God and to God's creations - us, humanity. God gives humanity a couple of clear instructions: we are to be fruitful, multiply and "fill the earth" and we're to cultivate the Earth. Fill and cultivate.

Then in chapter 3 the story falls apart. Instead of following God, we chose to listen to the voice of a false god who promised us false life. We chose to disobey God and the result was death. The next few chapters play out the consequences of that first choice - murder, tribalism and a catastrophic flood. Genesis 11 represents the end of this prologue to the rest of the Bible. It asks, "Have humans learned yet? Will they join God in forming and filling the world?"

Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

At one time all the people of the world spoke the same language and used the same words. As the people migrated to the east, they found a plain in the land of Babylonia and settled there. They began saying to each other, "Let's make bricks and harden them with fire." (In this region bricks were used instead of stone, and tar was used for mortar.) Then they said, "Come, let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous and keep us from being scattered all over the world."

But the Lord came down to look at the city and the tower the people were building. "Look!" he said. "The people are united, and they all speak the same language. After this, nothing they set out to do will be impossible for them! Come, let's go down and confuse the people with different languages. Then they won't be able to understand each other."

In that way, the Lord scattered them all over the world, and they stopped building the city. That is why the city was called Babel, because that is where the Lord confused the people with different languages. In this way he scattered them all over the world. -- Genesis 11:1-9

Any ancient reader would've recognized this as a story about technology - the first humans to invent brick-making, which allowed us to build much larger structures than ever before. Again, bricks become a symbol of human productivity, human ability. And so we have this story, about humans who decide to build a tower with their new-found technology. [maybe a tower to "heaven"?]

And at first, the story seems really strange - God seems threatened by the people's initiative. They want to build a tower to the sky - the Hebrew reads "to the heavens", which of course for an ancient person was where God lived. Is God actually worried people are going to overthrow him or something?

And further, we began by claiming that technology is good when it connects us to God and to other people. And it seems here that *God* is the one doing the disconnecting. *God* is the one who doesn't want the tower to reach heaven. And *God* is the one who mixes up the languages, disconnecting people from each other and scattering them across the Earth.

So what's going on here?

We must read Genesis 11 in light of Genesis 1-10. This is the end of a story, not something that stands just on its own. God's initial purpose for humanity was to fill the Earth. But here at Babel, the people have decided *not* to fill the Earth. Instead, they're going to stay grouped together and build a tower to heaven. They explicitly expect the tower to "keep us from being scattered over the world."

But God specifically commanded them to spread all over the world. To *fill* the world, in fact. This proto-civilization at Babel is consciously ignoring God's command.

So it's not too surprising that they want to build a tower to Heaven. They want to take their bricks, their accomplishments and achievements, their effort and ability, and climb into Heaven. To become gods themselves.

They think their technology, their progress, can give them mastery over the world. They don't have to listen to God because their tech can save them. It can make into effective gods of the world.

And this is the same basic sin from the beginning of the story - when the serpent told the man and woman that if they took the fruit, "You will become like God".

This is the danger of technology, of progress: that it convinces us that we can do it on our own. That we can become lords of creation. That we don't need anyone outside of our own ability.

This is the true danger of progress: that we can become convinced that we can build a tower to heaven. That we can stack all our bricks into the sky and they will save us from Death.

All apologies to Chris Trager, but no amount of progress can save us from Death. And when we begin to trust our technology, our progress to deliver us, we end up disconnected from God. We end up chasing the wrong things. Instead of filling the Earth, we turn inward, becoming fearful and selfish.

So is God anti-technology? Is God some sort of primitive deity that hates cell-phones and wishes we still lived in caves and prayed for healing instead of taking aspirin?

Of course not. God is not anti-technology and neither should we be. Progress isn't bad in and of itself. After all, drones and smartphones aren't the only technology in our world.

The alphabet is a technology. So is a fork. So is the wheel. So is indoor plumbing. We can't realistically imagine a world devoid of all technology, nor should we try to.

So what's the deal? What's the difference between technology as a good and technology as a god?

The difference is in whether we allow technology to connect us or disconnect us. A few years ago, I heard a powerful quote that has guided how I interact with technology, that helped me reframe this discussion of whether technology is good or bad.

I can't for the life of me remember who said it, so whoever you are, I apologize for not crediting you. Please tell me so I can give you props. Anyway, the quote is,

### Technology does not create a lack of discipline. It reveals it. -- Someone Awesome

Your cell phone does not make you more distracted. It reveals that you are easily distractable. I found that out the hard way. I originally got a smart phone for the calendar feature - I was constantly double- and triple-booking myself, so I got a piece of technology that make carrying a calendar convenient for me. I got much better at keeping my appointments and not having to constantly reschedule.

But at the same time, my phone could suddenly check emails and facebook and twitter. So I found myself checking it mid-conversation, accidentally ignoring those who were speaking with me. I found myself checking it during TV shows, driving in the car, even during *sermons* (gasp!).

But is that my cell phone's fault? Is my cell phone relationally needy? Will it refuse to show my texts if I don't check it every 15 minutes? Of course not. My cell phone is a machine. Whether I check it incessantly or not is up to me.

What getting a smart phone revealed about me is that I'm not very intentional in giving my time and attention to other persons. That I allow my mind to run in a hundred directions instead of investing myself fully in the moment.

And during a TV show, who really cares? But when I'm in conversation with someone? I'm not showing them love when I'm staring at a screen.

That was a reality check for me. So I've had to take some precautions with my new technology - shutting my phone off during dinner or leaving it on the charger when I'm spending quality time with my wife Amanda. Shutting off push notifications so I don't get distracted every time a junk email pops into my inbox.

Because there's nothing happening on my phone that's more important than the person in front of me.

The same must be said of every technology, from language to splitting the atom. Do we use it to bring us together, connect us to God and to each other, or do we allow it to divide us? Are we masters of our technology or do we allow our technology to master us? Is it good or is it a god?

We cannot fall for the lie that progress will save us. That the next new gadget will make our lives what we want. There's no technology, no tower, no device that can fix the human soul. This is the lie of technology: we think we can save ourselves, that we can somehow be enough, that through progress we'll become lords of creation. But not only is that not true, but what we're trying to achieve on our own is what God wants to *give* us if we will follow him!

In Ephesians 2, Paul describes what happens when we turn from our sin and follow Jesus. He says:

God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. -- Ephesians 2:4-6

The good news is that even though we can't save ourselves, God has rescued us. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God rescues us from ourselves. And there at the end, "God seated us with Jesus in the heavenly realms". This was the goal of those who built the Tower of Babel - to reach Heaven. And here God is *giving* us heaven. God is *happy* to give us life and seat us with him in heaven.

In other words, it was always God's intention to make us like him. From the beginning, humans have been called images of God. Pictures of God. And in Jesus' death and resurrection, we can have what we've desired since the beginning. Not through our progress, but through God's own love and mercy.

The point? That technology and progress have limits. They will never save us. In fact, if we give them the wrong weight in our lives, in our culture, they will fracture and fragment us. At the end of last year, *The Atlantic* magazine ran a cover story featuring the 50 greatest inventions since the wheel. It was a whole issue dedicated to celebrating technology and progress. And in the midst of the cover story, author James Fallows made this poignant observation:

Please stop and think about this: Outside of the sciences and technology, and apart from the legacies created in each family, humanity is struggling today for a sense of cumulative achievement. Are today's statesmen an improvement over those of our grandparents' era? Today's level of public debate? Music, architecture, literature, the fine arts - these and other manifestation of world culture continually change, without necessarily improving. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, versus whoever is the best-selling author in Moscow right now? The original, elegant Penn Station, versus its warehouse-like replacement?  
-- James Fallows, *The Atlantic*

No amount of progress can fix the human soul. We only find what our souls are truly longing for in a relationship with God.

Now. You're probably thinking, Okay JR. I have never once looked to my cell phone for salvation. I don't pray to my fork or my car or any other piece of technology. I get what you're saying, but this isn't a problem for me.

And I would agree with you - most of us don't think about our technology enough that we're actively seeking some sort of salvation in it.

But that's a deeper problem: that our use of technology is so mindless. We allow technology to shape us, to form bad habits in us. How many of us have buzzing leg syndrome - where you feel like your cell phone is vibrating in your pocket *even when your phone isn't in your pocket*? Technology has become such an integral part of our lives that the majority of us simply thoughtlessly implement them into our lives.

We end up casually disconnected from God and from each other. It becomes harder and harder to spend intentional, focused time with God because of all the information and distractions constantly at our fingertips. As much as technology can connect us with each other, we allow it to distract and disconnect us as well.

We end up giving way too much of our good time and energies and monies to the god of technology - and whether we're looking for some kind of salvation or we're just doing it mindlessly, it's still worship, and it's still idolatry.

So my challenge to all of us this week is to take our technology seriously. To face whether or not we really do have a worship problem.

The difference between a nuclear bomb and nuclear energy is the person pushing the button. So will you rule your tech or will your tech rule you? Will you look to progress to save you from death, or will you look to the God who has defeated death?

Start this week with a simple commitment: during your meals, shut off your phone. Give yourself fully to the meal and to the person you're sharing it with. It's a simple discipline that helps us to remember that the world won't end without our tech. That smartphones can't replace face-to-face relationships.

Will you take that simple step this week? Will you say No to the god of technology and say Yes to the God who created you for relationship with him and with others?

### **Communion Set Up**

Before we leave this place, before we sit around a dinner together and shut our phones off, we first respond by coming to Jesus' table. This table is a powerful reminder that technology cannot save us - after all, Jesus was killed by the most advanced civilization of his day. But progress didn't make Rome any more loving. It revealed their basic, brutal nature.

[Communion slide] So when we come today, when we receive the bread, we're receiving Jesus' body, which was broken by the most advanced technology of his day. We dip the wafer in the grape juice as a symbol of Jesus' blood, poured out to reconnect us to God and to each other.

You don't have to be a member here to receive communion. If you're a person who wants to follow Jesus, you're invited to the table today. If you want to be connected with God and others in your life who are on this same journey, you're welcome to come and share in Jesus' meal.

Let's pray together.