

Are You A Casualty of Distractions?

Chances are very likely that you have been distracted today, and that you might even become distracted while reading this article! The word “distraction,” as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a thing that prevents someone from concentrating on something else.” The word comes from the Latin verb *distrahere* which means “to draw, or to drag.” In other words, a distraction is something that drags us away from whoever, or whatever, we were focusing on at that moment. Potential distractions are everywhere. We may be distracted by our own thoughts, by others, or by the multitude of sensory experiences that flood into our minds, whether from visual or auditory sources. In fact, there is probably no time in history when distractions are more prevalent than the day in which we live.



My hope is that this article will help us all to think about the distractions we face and, being honest with ourselves, to confess that we are all probably more distracted than we ought to be, especially as Christians.

How then should we view distractions? As harmless realities of the human condition? As necessary to cope with a sinful world? As something to be embraced, or something to be resisted? What does the Bible have to say about distractions?

To answer these questions, we will look at three areas—the temptation to seek distractions, the danger of indulging in distractions, and the need to manage distractions.

The Temptation to Seek Distractions

All humans have three things in common—we are sinners, we live in a sinful world, and we have an enemy (the devil) who wants us to sin. Because we are sinners, our hearts drive us to seek distractions from what is good and replace it with “filler material” which is either outright sin, or simply a waste of our God-given time. The world then comes along and offers a constant stream of choices, ways in which we can numb our minds to the reality of our own sin and the needs of others. Given

these two sources of temptation, it is almost unnecessary for the devil to lift a finger to tempt us, but he does. The devil does not care what we think about, as long as we are wasting our time and not living for God.

Ultimately, we get distracted because we *want to* get distracted. We want to avoid reality. We want to replace engagement with God, and with others, with entertainment for ourselves. And in our technology-saturated world the entertainment we choose is often the type we can do alone (browsing the internet, watching streaming videos, watching the news, or lurking on Facebook). Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 that while there are activities which are *permissible*, not all permissible activities are *beneficial*, especially if they are activities that only seek to satisfy our own pleasures, and not the good of others. In other words, while these activities are not sinful in and of themselves, they are activities that, if not wisely managed, can become dangerous to our well-being, and even become sinful when used inappropriately.

The Danger of Indulging in Distractions

The danger of indulging in distractions is not new, but it is more prevalent in our modern society. We live in a brave new world where technology is growing at a rapid pace. Given this fact, most of the distractions we face today are technological in nature. Having spent 20 years in the technology industry, I am not against technology, but I do recognize its pervasive influence in our lives. Therefore, as we evaluate the dangers associated with distraction, much focus will be placed on what might be called *digital distractions*.

Digital distractions take a toll on our physical well-being. The National Highway and Transportation Safety Agency (NHTSA) reports that distracted driving is becoming a common cause of traffic related deaths, with some 3,450 deaths reported in 2016 alone. If you have driven on any major highway, and paid attention to other drivers, there is a good chance you have witnessed a fellow driver distracted by a device while driving.

Digital distractions also pose a danger to our mental well-being. Much of the use of technology, especially on smartphones, is geared to provide us with activity that involves little or no thinking. Our brains are not getting the exercise they need. By engaging in these activities, our brain receives little more of a workout than our physical body would receive by going to the gym and sitting on a treadmill without ever turning it on!

Digital distractions can also promote addictive behavior patterns. The designers of technology are not foolish—they deliberately add features to their apps that are intended to “drag” (remember the definition of distractions) you back to the screen, whether through notifications, daily log-in bonuses, or simply the need for a higher score. The addictive nature of these distractions can even negatively affect our ability to focus on school and work, in much the same way that addiction to alcohol and drugs will, although in a more socially acceptable manner. These distractions then condition us to seek instant gratification instead of developing the biblical discipline of patience.

Digital distractions also hinder our relationships with others. We are created to be relational beings—God created us to have fellowship with him and with one another. Researchers tell us that it takes seven minutes for a conversation to really begin. Before the seven-minute mark, the conversation is relatively superficial. We talk about the weather, about what we had for lunch, about what we are going to do this week, etc. But we fail to enter into a deeply personal, true, and life-sharing conversation until after seven minutes. The danger of distractions is that they keep us in the superficial seven-minute range of conversation, and we spend our lives talking *to* people without ever really talking *with* them. Even worse, when our heads are down, and our eyes fixated on the device, we never even begin the conversation at all!

These distractions are having a negative effect on families as well. Gone are the days that families would sit around the glow of the fireplace and share their lives together. Now individuals sit around the artificial glow of their devices and live separate existences. Children growing up today have to compete for their parents’ attention with a device, and parents often resort to using that device to divert their child’s attention. When I worked in the foster care environment I witnessed a mother who, when given one hour to spend with her toddler, spent much of that time glued to her phone. We are truly losing what it means to be human and to engage in the type of human interaction for which we are created!

But the greatest danger of distractions is to our spiritual growth. Jesus, in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:18-19), speaks of the seed that was sown among the thorns, but “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.” So also, distractions, which are nothing more than desires for something other than we have right now, will, if allowed, enter in and choke our spiritual growth, leaving us unfruitful in the things that really matter.

If all this is true, that we face daily temptations to succumb to distractions and that distractions are dangerous to our physical, mental, relational and spiritual well-being, how can we avoid becoming a casualty of distractions?

The Need to Manage Distractions

In order to avoid becoming a casualty of distractions, we need to practice the four “R’s” – Resolve, Redeem, Rest and Replace.

First, we need to *resolve* to live distraction-free lives. King Solomon, writing to his son in Proverbs chapter 4:23-27, gives him (and all God’s children) instruction on how to live:

“Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.
Put away from you a deceitful mouth and put perverse lips far from you.
Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you.
Ponder the path of your feet and let all your ways be established.
Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil.”

Notice the instruction to “look straight ahead,” (v. 25) “ponder the path of your feet,” (v. 26) and “do not turn to the right or the left” (v. 27). We might rightly say that this describes the opposite of a distracted person. The distracted person is one who is always looking to the side, not paying attention to the path of his feet, and continually turning to the right or the left.

Second, we need to *redeem* the time from distractions. Psalm 90:12 tells us to “number our days” and that our days “are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years.” Time is a precious commodity, and every one of us only has so much to spare. No matter who we are, we only have 24 hours in every day, 60 minutes in every hour, and 60 seconds in every minute. Perhaps a little exercise will help us to understand this reality. I want you to hold up all five fingers on one hand. Each finger represents 15 years of your life. Now, put down the fingers which represent how much of your life on this earth has already past. The remaining fingers represent the amount of time you have left on the earth. The question is, how are you going to use it?

The Bible gives us instruction on how we are to use our time while on the earth. In Ephesians 5:16, we are told to “redeem the time, for the days are evil.” The Greek word translated “redeem” literally means to “buy-back.” We are therefore to buy-back every moment we have and use it as an opportunity to do the things God has

called us to do, not as an opportunity to spend the time on ourselves. We are called to set our “mind on the things above, not on the things of this world” (Col. 3:2). We are to let the dead bury their own dead and set our hand to the plow, not looking back, for doing so makes us unfit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:60-62). God knows what is good for us, but we often fill our time with things that don’t really satisfy. The author of Ecclesiastes demonstrates this, showing that even when we do not withhold any good pleasure (or distraction) from ourselves, ultimately it is all vanity, like trying to grab and hold the wind (Eccl. 2:10-11). The world is set on these distractions, whose “god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18-19). But not so the Christian. We live in the world, but we are not of the world. The great preacher and leader in the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, understood this reality. He wrote seventy resolutions for his life, and his fifth resolution reads, “Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.” May that be our resolution as we seek to spend our time in the most God-honoring ways.

Third, we need a pattern of *resting* regularly from distractions. Andy Crouch, in the book *The Tech-Wise Family*, writes, “If there is one thing that sums up the difference between human beings and our technological devices it is this: we need sleep. Lots of sleep.” Most distractions, and especially digital distractions, do not need to rest. Yes, they need to recharge, but even while recharging they can and do actively work. But we are humans, not machines. And as humans, we need rest.

God, in his wisdom, has given us a pattern of rest by providing for us, in creation, a daily cycle of bodily rest (Gen. 1:5) and a weekly cycle of Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:2-3; Exodus 20:4-6). Although the day for observing the Sabbath has moved from Saturday in the old Covenant to Sunday (the Lord’s Day) in the new, it is still given to us as a day of rest and worship. Sadly, few of us in our day take advantage of God’s great gift of rest. Instead of getting a solid eight hours of sleep at night, we stay up late, distracted by activities that are probably not necessary. Even worse, we allow ourselves to become distracted by (or even enslaved to) the things of this world so much that we cannot even spend one day, the Lord’s Day, apart from them, the very day which should provide the most freedom from worldly distractions.

We need this regular rest, but our flesh does not want it. Therefore, we must fight for this rest against all the distractions of this world if we are going to experience it. One way to do this is to set aside one hour per day (perhaps during the dinner hour, when the family can gather without distraction for a meal and devotion), and one day per week, in order to rest from distractions. During this time, you commit to power down the phone, turn off the television, close the laptop lid, and rest from the

world's distractions. Could you go an entire day without looking at your phone, turning on the television, checking the score of your favorite sports team, playing a video game, or reading the news? If not, this is a sure sign that the world, and its distractions, have a grip upon your heart.

Finally, we need to *replace* distractions with discipleship. Recall that in Ephesians 5:16 we are instructed to redeem the time, but when we continue reading in verse 17 we are told to do so, not as those who are unwise, but as those who “understand what the will of the Lord is.” We do not redeem the time, or rid ourselves of distractions, so that we can have more time for ourselves, but so we can have more time to do the will of God. There will never be a shortage of distractions in this sinful world, but the question is, are we going to choose to entangle ourselves in these distractions, or, are we, like Mary, going to choose the better part? (Luke 10:42)

There is no better example of an undistracted person than the example set by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He was a man of singular focus, who came to the earth with a singular purpose, to seek and to save the lost. The devil could not distract him with all the pleasures of this world, the rulers in Judea could not dissuade him with all the persecution they could muster. He came to do the will of his Father, and he accomplished that will perfectly for his people. And we, as God's people—chosen by the Father from eternity, redeemed by the Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit—must now strive to live undistracted lives for him, even in the midst of this present evil age.

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