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EQUIPPING THE TEENAGE BOYS OF FIRST BAPTIST
CHURCH IN HALEYVILLE, ALABAMA, TO PURSUE
HOLINESS IN THE FACE OF DIGITAL TEMPTATION

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For the glory of God among the next generation

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PREFACE

This project was completed through the encouragement of many people whom God has sovereignly placed in my life. First and foremost, I am grateful to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He has saved me and given me peace, joy, and purpose. The Holy Spirit indwells me and guides me each day. Serving His people has led me into a closer relationship with Him.

Second, I am grateful for a wonderful family. I am blessed with great parents, Greg and Lois LaMarque, who raised my brother, my sister, and me to love the Lord. They raised me with love, care, support, and discipline. They provided for me above and beyond in numerous ways. I cannot imagine where I would be today if it were not for my parents. Furthermore, my brother and sister, Brandon and Lindsey, have been a constant support system. I am blessed by God for being placed in such a great family.

Next, I am grateful for spiritual influences who taught me how to love and follow God. I thank God for my youth pastor, Roger Bell, who put up with me as a teenager, but then invested in me as I began my ministry calling. I am thankful for my college pastor, Tim Simpson, who showed me what a mature faith looks like and changed the trajectory of my life. I appreciate New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and my professors there who equipped me academically to be the student pastor I am today. I was blessed to continue my educational pursuits at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and was equipped even further through my doctoral pursuits.

Finally, I am grateful for the only two churches I have been a member at in my life, Coosada Baptist and First Baptist Haleyville. Coosada Baptist, which ordained me for gospel ministry, gave me a strong foundation as a teenager and opportunities to gain ministerial experience. First Baptist Haleyville took a risk to hire me as a young,

inexperienced minister and has continued to invest in my life for a decade. I truly love and care about all the former and current students of my youth ministry and continue to pray for them to this day. I am grateful for the church members who have become like a family to me. They have loved me well, and they will always have a lasting impact on my ministry career and life. My desire is that this project equips the next generation to follow the Lord. I pray it is used to make much of the gospel and the glory of God.

Jon LaMarque

Haleyville, Alabama

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The mission statement of the student ministry of First Baptist Church Haleyville (FBCH) is “to equip students to be fully devoted disciples.” The goal of the student ministry is for students to look more like Jesus by being obedient to the Bible. The recent technological advances in culture have made it more difficult for teenagers to remain obedient to God. Teenage boys, specifically, have a hard time pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation. For this reason, FBCH must seek to equip teenagers with the tools and resources they need to remain faithful to God in the digital age.

Context

FBCH began meeting in 1901. The church has been a steady and biblically sound church for the community throughout the decades. In many ways, FBCH has created an opportunity to make a substantial spiritual impact on the teenagers of the church and the town through the student ministry. First, members of the congregation show substantial support to the teenage students involved in the student ministry. They provide prayer, care, concern, and financial support to the student ministry. Because resources are rarely lacking, the student ministry is able to have quality discipleship activities, events, and trips because of the accessibility to these resources. Next, the student ministry is active. They worship together on Wednesday nights and participate in small group Bible study on Sunday mornings.

Because teenagers in Haleyville are attracted to the student ministry, the ministry is thriving and growing. In the past ten years, every grade has doubled in size from the time the students enter the ministry in the seventh grade to graduating from the

ministry in the twelfth grade. Wednesday worship services are highly attended by students that are members of FBCH and of other churches in the community. Almost every member of the youth group attends the summer missions camp. Yearly DiscipleNow weekend attendance is double the average weekly attendance. Because of these factors, the student ministry at FBCH has seen much fruit.

With the growing number of students, a significant challenge facing the student ministry is screen time on devices. In a digital age where many activities are completed online or through virtual mediums, screen time has become a noticeable problem in the lives of the students of FBCH. Parents have expressed frustration with the amount of time their student spends on his or her phone scrolling social media, playing video games, and sometimes looking at inappropriate content. At FBCH, the addiction to screens is even seen during worship times when students are distracted by their device instead of paying attention. Up to this point, the student ministry has not directly addressed the issues of the digital age by effectively equipping teenagers.

Specifically, teenage boys are affected by the dangers of the digital age, and they are becoming increasingly addicted to their screens. Social media apps are widely used among teenage boys at FBCH. Additionally, video games are a huge problem for teenage boys at FBCH. Technology is advancing, graphics are improving, and social media and video games have never been more popular. Instagram and Snapchat are downloaded and constantly used on many devices. *Rocket League*, *Fortnite*, *Madden* and other games consume a majority of their free time. It is common to hear boys in the student ministry talk about spending hours each night playing these games while also discussing being behind on schoolwork. Furthermore, the ease of access makes pornography a widespread problem for the teenage boys at FBCH. Steve Gerali, a cultural commentator stated, “At no other time in the history of our civilization has it

been easier for guys to secure pornographic material than it is today.”¹ With the common use of smart phones, laptops, tablets, and gaming consoles, teenage boys at FBCH have as much access to graphic sexual images as they desire at a young age. Many boys have discussed pornography temptation and addictions with church leaders at FBCH. Despite these challenges, FBCH desires that teenage boys pursue holiness and that all teenage boys are equipped to handle digital temptation.

While female teenagers were not the focus of the project, many struggle with the same issues as boys. Teenage girls spend an excessive amount of time on screens. Like boys, they utilize social media platforms and deal with the same issues. They play video games almost as much as boys. One study shows 94 percent of girls under 18 play videogames regularly.² They also struggle with pornography. According to one survey by Barna, 16 percent of girls report actively seeking pornography at least once per month.³ One study found that 13 million American women click on pornographic sites each month.⁴ Sexting is an even bigger problem for girls. Over 51 percent of girls have sent a nude image of themselves.⁵ Girls were left out of the project in order to narrow in on one specific demographic. It was also necessary to discuss certain issues with only one gender being present. However, female teenagers could have just as easily been a part of the project.

¹ Steve Gerali, *Teenage Guys: Exploring Issues Adolescent Guys Face and Strategies to Help Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 87.

² Jane McGonigal, “Video Games: An Hour a Day Is Key to Success in Life,” *Huff Post*, last modified July 28, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/video-games_b_823208.

³ The Barna Group, and Josh McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age* (Plano, TX: Josh McDowell Ministry, 2016), 100.

⁴ Trillia Newbell, “The Secret Women's Porn Problem,” *Christianity Today*, last modified October 23, 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/october-web-only/secret-womens-porn-problem.html>.

⁵ Barna Group and McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 27.

Rationale

The above-mentioned factors indicate FBCH has an opportunity to equip teenagers in the digital age. Because of technological advances, church members must be ready to respond to the new circumstances caused by screen time. A culture needs to be created among students of FBCH that is more conducive to transparency and emotional safety. Every teenager in the student ministry owns at least one device making the challenges and temptations of the digital age far more prevalent.

This problem is not specific to FBCH, and it affects teenagers throughout American society. Young people are getting phones and other devices at early ages. It is increasingly common for parents to give their elementary school-aged children a smartphone or tablet. Parents do not know how to effectively navigate this new frontier, and teenagers are left unequipped to avoid common pitfalls and obstacles. Many parents at FBCH are seemingly either unaware or apathetic toward screen time in their children allowing their teenagers to go unprepared through the digital age. They are also unaware of many of the dangers of the content on their children's devices. Church leaders need to partner with parents by helping teenagers biblically respond to the issues of the digital age.

Some of the biggest issues in digital temptation relate to social media, video games, and pornography. When it comes to social media, teenagers spend hours a day scrolling devices and watching online videos. On average, teenagers spend over seven hours on their screens each day.⁶ This time does not include schoolwork where a large amount of time is spent due to virtual classes. Social media also causes psychological effects and mental health problems.⁷ It causes teenagers to compare themselves to others

⁶ Michael Robb, "Tweens, Teens, and Phones: What Our 2019 Research Reveals," *Common Sense Media*, last modified October 29, 2019, <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/kids-action/articles/tweens-teens-and-phones-what-our-2019-research-reveals>.

⁷ Nicholas Kardaras, *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction is Hijacking Our Kids—And How to Break the Trance*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 133.

which often leads to anxiety and depression. It can also lead to eating disorders. Teenagers judge themselves on the number of interactions, likes, and comments their posts receive.⁸ This judgement creates an environment where everyone feels as if they must look and act a certain way. Jealousy can arise from seeing posts and videos from their friends and classmates. Many users report feeling lonely despite the seemingly increased connectivity.⁹ Additionally, cyberbullying has become a common problem among teenagers. Name-calling, gossip, rumors, and offensive remarks are all types of cyberbullying.

Video games are also a common problem in the teenage boys of FBCH and throughout American culture. Ninety seven percent of boys under 18 play videogames regularly.¹⁰ The average young person plays over 10,000 hours of video games by the age of 21.¹¹ A recent survey showed many teenage boys play video games an average of three hours per day.¹² Video games have become time consuming and addicting.

Also, it is common for teenagers to access inappropriate content on their devices. Throughout the years, many students at FBCH have confessed to addictions to viewing pornography. Some students have admitted to sexting. These problems affect teenagers outside of FBCH, as well. When it comes to pornography, 41 percent of Christian boys ages 13 to 24 view porn at least once a month¹³ and 90 percent of teens are

⁸ Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 75.

⁹ Jean M. Twenge, *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria, 2017), 103.

¹⁰ McGonigal, "Video Games."

¹¹ McGonigal, "Video Games."

¹² Ananya Mandal, "Kids Spending Too Much Time Gaming," *Medical News*, last modified January 20, 2020, <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20200120/Kids-spending-too-much-time-gaming.aspx>.

¹³ Barna Group and McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 33.

either encouraging, accepting or neutral when they talk about porn with their friends.¹⁴ These statistics show pornography is not just a problem, it is an epidemic. Teenagers are viewing almost all this explicitness on their screens. Among those who report having viewed porn, 85 percent of teens have done so using the internet.¹⁵ Social media apps enable this problem for teenagers. Sixty two percent of teens report receiving an explicit image from someone else through text messages, email, or social media.¹⁶

At FBCH, these statistics reflect reality among the students. In 2 Timothy 2:21-22, Paul writes, “If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”¹⁷ To have a pure heart, these teenage boys should learn the negative effects of digital temptation. They need to learn how to prevent addictions to the screen. It is necessary for them to know how to control and manage their screen time to be more productive with the time God has given them and be pure with what they set before their eyes. It is vital for them to have accountability with each other and with mentors in reaching these goals.

The problems of the digital age needed to be addressed. Because church leaders have earned the trust of the congregation to adapt methods to a changing culture, this curriculum was able to be taught at FBCH. Teenage boys were taught content through training sessions on how to handle addictions to the screen, psychological affects created by social media and video games, and immorality with pornography. The sessions

¹⁴ Barna Group and McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 12.

¹⁵ Barna Group and McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 22.

¹⁶ Barna Group and McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 28.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

equipped them to pursue holiness in the digital age. As a result, teenage boys learned how to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to equip the teenage boys of First Baptist Church in Haleyville, Alabama, to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation.

Goals

Equipping the teenage boys to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation was guided by three goals.

1. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of the dangers of digital temptation among teenage boys who attend First Baptist Church Haleyville.
2. The second goal was to develop a six-week curriculum that will equip teenage boys to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation.
3. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation among teenage boys through their participation in a six-week training.

A specific research methodology was created that measured the successful completion of these four goals.¹⁸ This methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project depended upon the completion of these three goals. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of the dangers of digital temptations among teenage boys who attend FBCH.

This goal was measured by administering a survey on the dangers of digital temptations to the teenage boys of FBCH.¹⁹ This goal was considered successfully met when at least

¹⁸ All of the research instruments used in this project was performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

¹⁹ See appendix 1.

15 teenage boys completed the Understanding Digital Temptations Survey yielding a clearer picture of the current understanding of digital temptations among First Baptist Haleyville attenders.

The second goal was to develop a six-week curriculum that equipped teenage boys to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptations. The curriculum consisted of six sessions that taught the teenagers about the pursuit of holiness, screen addiction, harmful effects of social media and video games, pornography, and purpose. This goal was measured by an expert panel of student pastors who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.²⁰ The goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation among teenage boys by using a six-week curriculum²¹ about digital temptations among social media, video games, and pornography. This goal was measured by administering a post-curriculum survey using the Understanding Digital Temptations Survey that assessed the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation. This survey was used to measure the change in knowledge. The goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-curriculum survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms was used in the ministry project:

Digital age. In 2007, Apple released the first iPhone. Since that time, there has been substantial growth of technological device usage and social media usage. The term

²⁰ See appendix 2.

²¹ See appendix 3.

refers to this time where most of the population owns a smartphone, tablet, or computer, and consequently, consuming a large amount of digital content.

Sexting. Sexting is defined as “sending sexually explicit messages, photos, or videos via cell phone, computer, or any digital device. Sexting includes photos and videos containing nudity or showing simulated sex acts. It also includes text messages that discuss or propose sex acts.”²²

There are two delimitations to this project. First, the project was limited to teenage boys of FBCH. While issues with digital devices affect everyone, specific focus was on teenage boys. Second, the training sessions of the project was limited to six weeks. In today’s society, schedules are full, and teenagers are very busy. Limiting the training sessions to six weeks allowed more boys to attend because there was not a significant time commitment.

Conclusion

In a digital society, God desires his children pursue holiness. Despite the challenges teenage boys face with digital temptation, holiness is possible. The following chapters show how teenage boys can pursue holiness. Chapter two focuses on the biblical commands to be holy, be transformed, and flee immorality. Chapter three focuses on the specific issues teenage boys encounter in the digital age such as addiction to the screen, psychological issues created by social media and video games, and immorality with pornographic materials. Chapter four details the implementation of the project. Chapter five evaluates the project. I pray the project equipped the teenage boys of FBCH to handle digital temptation while pursuing holiness.

²² Christy Matte, “Why Is Sexting a Problem for Teens?,” Verywell Family, last modified June 24, 2021, <https://www.verywellfamily.com/what-is-sexting-problem-1258921>.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT

Wayne Grudem, in his book *Bible Doctrine*, writes, “God’s holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.”¹ Holiness is a communicable attribute of God. He is holy, and He calls His people to holiness. In fact, God saved Christians so that they will be holy. Personal holiness must characterize the life of a believer. God desires their lives be marked by righteousness. The gospel saves and transforms. Those who are justified will be sanctified. Therefore, all Christians, no matter the age, have been commanded to not give in to temptation. Particularly, regarding the project, teenage boys are called to avoid digital temptation. Scripture provides a clear encouragement for believers to be holy, transform their minds, and flee immorality in the face of digital temptation.

At the moment of regeneration, Christ justifies the Christian and declares the believer to be positionally holy. He makes people holy and sanctifies them. Hebrews 2:11 reads, “For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.” Christ accomplished the holiness of His people through His sacrifice on the cross. He abolished the Old Testament sacrificial system through His obedience to the Father, and He fulfilled the Old Testament law. His death made a consecration of God’s people in a new way possible. In Hebrews 10:10, it states, “And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” This new sanctification no longer requires further sacrifices and rituals to keep Christians holy. Jesus accomplished holiness

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 92.

for His people permanently. They cannot make themselves holy; He makes them holy. Schreiner writes, “Old-covenant sacrifices were offered repeatedly, for they didn’t truly effect forgiveness. Christ’s sacrifice was offered once, for by his death he dealt with sin completely and definitively.”² Every Christian is sanctified positionally.

Conversion begins the process of outward holiness. When a person trusts Christ, he or she receives the Holy Spirit and is formed into a holy temple in the Lord. Christians are justified and given a new status and a new identity. Justification is defined as “the instantaneous, completed act in which God declares a believing sinner to be righteous.”³ The Holy Spirit will dwell in the people and transform their hearts and desires. Therefore, every person a part of the new covenant is regenerate and has new life. They are guaranteed holiness. Schreiner states, “All those who belong to Jesus are assured that they stand in the right before the Holy One of Israel.”⁴ The obedience required in the Old Covenant is realized in the New Covenant through the work of the Holy Spirit who indwells believers because of the finished work of Christ. Now, God’s people have a desire to be holy from their hearts. They have been declared holy because of the sacrifice of Jesus. They can draw near to God. David Peterson writes, “Only the cleansing provided by Christ can definitively free us to worship or serve the living God in a way that pleases him and truly honors him.”⁵

The objective of the Christian life is holiness. Although believers are sanctified through the New Covenant, they still express their sanctification through their lifestyles.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 96.

³ Andrew David Naselli, “Holiness,” in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible: Follow God’s Redemptive Plan as It Unfolds throughout Scripture*, ed. D.A. Carson, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 2365.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, 97.

⁵ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 47.

The New Testament uses three tenses of sanctification: past, present, and future. Believers are sanctified the moment they become a Christian. They have been sanctified in the past. Believers are being sanctified as they progressively live their lives in obedience to God. They are being sanctified in the present. Sanctification is defined as “the progressive, incomplete, lifelong maturing process in which a Christian is gradually made more holy.”⁶ Holiness is a journey. Because of the Christian’s standing with Christ, he or she obeys Christ and His commands. Their holy standing motivates them to holy action. One day, believers will be completely sanctified when they are glorified at the end of the age. They will be sanctified in the future.

The authors of the New Testament direct believers to live out their holiness. Christians demonstrate the reality of their holiness by continuing to obey the commands of God. They are called to obey God, but that does not affect their righteousness standing in Christ. Peterson writes, “Although God calls upon us to express the fact that we have been sanctified by the way we live, our standing with him does not depend on the degree to which we live up to his expectations.”⁷ However, obedience is the ongoing characteristic of those who are sanctified. William Greathouse states, “New Testament holiness is godlikeness, with all that this implies in one’s spirit and life.”⁸ While Christians are declared holy at the time of their conversion, they are still commanded to be holy in the way they live. Holiness is not optional for believers. Christians are called to pursue holiness above everything else because God is holy. Their status of holiness should be their motivation for obedience. God wants the holiness of his people to them set apart from an unbelieving world. Holiness affects every dimension of a believer’s life.

⁶ Andrew David Naselli, “Holiness,” 2365.

⁷ David Peterson, *Possessed by God*, 50.

⁸ William M. Greathouse, *Wholeness in Christ: Toward a Biblical Theology of Holiness*, (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1998), 131.

They are called to live a life of moral purity which is the authentic sign of those who know God.

God Commands Believers to Be Holy

While there are many texts throughout Scripture that command believers to be holy and pursue holiness, 1 Peter 1:13-16 makes it clearer. The aim of Peter's letter is to encourage sanctification. Peter Davids writes, "If eschatology is the underlying theme of the Epistle, holiness is the goal."⁹ Holiness is not optional for believers. Christians are called to pursue holiness above everything else because God is holy. The Epistle deals with three types of holiness. Personal holiness is about controlling one's sinful desires. Social holiness is about relating to non-Christians throughout society. Peter details how to obey the law of the land, submit to masters, and be in subjection to husbands. His goal is that Christians should not offend non-Christians. Communal holiness is the virtue that leads to unity in the church. Peter wants his readers to be loving, practice hospitality, and serve others humbly with their spiritual gifts. All of the virtues he mentions are community-preserving virtues that foster unity in the church. In 1 Peter 1:13-16, Peter exhorts Christians to be holy by refraining from worldly desires. The passage outlines the believer's call to holiness. To be holy, believers must hope in God, obey God, and imitate God.

Hope in God

First, believers are to hope in God. In verse 13, Peter writes, "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." The call for holiness begins with an appeal for hope. Peter uses an imperative for hope that indicates an

⁹ Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 17.

assured future hope. Karen Jobe explains, “First, the verb is in the domain of ‘hope, look forward to,’ defining its meaning as ‘to look forward with confidence to that which is good and beneficial.’ Second, it is in the domain meaning ‘to think concerning future contingencies,’ defining it as ‘to expect, with the implication of some benefit.’”¹⁰ The hope Peter calls believers to is not simply a vague wish for the future. It conveys confident expectation. Peter calls believers to hope in the assurance of God’s promises that will certainly come to pass. Believers are to put their full hope in the reward they will receive at the return of Christ. They should not place their hope on corrupt people and temporary rewards of this world. The hope for Christians is found in the “grace” that the “revelation of Jesus Christ” will bring to them.

Believers endure their current trials by focusing on the future joy when all the promises of Christ will be fulfilled. Christians should pray for and long for this day. Believers are to place their hope fully on this coming day with an undivided confidence. They should not place any confidence in the things that culture tells its people to put their hope in, such as status, money, and education. This hope not only encourages believers, but it reprioritizes their lives according to God’s agenda. This new agenda leads to behavioral changes where believers are mentally, emotionally, and physically striving for holiness. These changes help teenagers handle the false promises and temptations presented to them on their screens by reminding them of the pleasure and satisfaction that only Jesus offers.

The hope for a better tomorrow is not to remove believers from the urgency of today. Davids writes, “Peter is not suggesting a flight into dreams of the future, the use of eschatological speculation as an irrelevant opiate to dull the pain of today, but rather a

¹⁰ Karen Jobe, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 109.

careful evaluation of present behavior in the light of future goals and an unseen reality.”¹¹ Therefore, Peter includes two commands with the call to hope. First, he tells Christians to prepare their minds for action. The phrase literally means to “bind up the loins of one’s mind.” It serves as a word picture of preparing for action. In that period, men wore shirts that reached to knees or ankles. The shirt would be worn at ankle-length whenever men were relatively at rest or at ceremonial occasions. However, whenever men were active, such as work or war, the shirt was tucked into their belts so that their legs were free. “Girding the loins” might be a reference to Exodus 12:11. In the passage, God instructs the Israelites to prepare for their departure by eating their last meal in Egypt with their sandals on and their loins girded. The idiom was also used by Jesus in Luke 12:35-36 when teaching about being ready for the master to return. Also, Paul used the phrase in Ephesians 6:14. Peter’s imagery is a mind prepared for work. The invitation is to a mental resolve of preparation. The hope Christians have is a reality to be acted on now.

Peter commands his audience to be always ready as if they have girded up their loins. This command to prepare is in aorist participle form and precedes the main verb. It signifies action before the main verb of the verse. Peter commands believers to prepare their minds before he calls them to hope. Norman Hillyer writes that this preparation of the mind “does not mean engaging in some narrow or specialized intellectual activity. Peter is referring to a Christ-centered attitude of mind that shapes and directs personal conduct.”¹² Specifically, with the project, teenage boys must always be ready to face the obstacles to holiness that come with time spent on digital devices.

Next, Peter tells Christians that to be prepared, they are to be sober-minded. This term is defined as being well-balanced and self-controlled, and it is found

¹¹ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 66.

¹² Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Henderickson, 1992), 44.

exclusively in 1 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and 1 Peter. Often, the term is found in combination with watching. Originally, the term “sober-minded” meant to be sober and not intoxicated. However, in the New Testament, it shows clarity of mind that results in good decisions and good judgment. “Sober-minded” is an alertness needed because of the hostility of the devil. Believers can be easily distracted by the concerns of life and the persecution of the world. These distractions can be intoxicating and intrusive to their focus just as much as wine might be. They inhibit spiritual alertness because they lull the believer into sin through carelessness.

Therefore, Peter encourages believers to have a clear mind that will deflect anything that becomes an obstacle for hope. It is a determined single-minded commitment. He wants the readers of his letter to avoid any form of mental or spiritual intoxication that would distort the truth God has revealed to them and distract them from a life unwaveringly focused on the purposes of God. The same word is used in two other places in the epistle to encourage spiritual alertness in prayer and for resisting the devil. Peter is aware how easy it is for Christians to lose their concentration because of the things of this world and challenges his readers to avoid it. Wayne Grudem writes, “We today might well consider the dangers presented by such inherently good things as career, possessions, recreation, reputation, friendships, scholarship, or authority.”¹³

Obey God

Next, believers must obey God. Verse 14 states, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance.” The call for hope does not ignore or neglect believers’ current circumstances. The call for hope directly controls how they live in their present world. Jobe elaborates, “Because obedience to one’s father was what most characterized the father-child relationship in Greco-Roman society, Peter is

¹³ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 76.

pointing out that because of their new birth, obedience should also characterize the Christian's relationship with God."¹⁴ Peter commands them to live as obedient children. It is important to realize that all believers are a part of God's family and are His children. Because of that, God looks after and cares for them.

Additionally, his children obey Him. Obedience is a characteristic of how a Christian lives. Obedience is the evidence of faith. The gospel commands believers to submit to Jesus as Lord. His commands have authority. A commitment that does not produce obedience is not a real commitment. It misunderstands the message of the gospel, and it is not the Christian faith. Peter sees believers as a part of God's family. Their lives are marked by obedience to their spiritual father. Norman Hillyer writes that obedience to God is the motivation for every action. It is the motivation in the small, everyday issues in life. It is the motivation in the big issues of life.¹⁵ Time spent playing video games and scrolling social media may seem unimportant, but God desires obedience in those seemingly insignificant times.

Peter, then, describes how obedient children behave. The description is a negative command. He tells them to not return to their former pagan lifestyles. They should not be conformed to their former desires. The phrase is significant because it provides evidence that Peter and the Apostle Paul drew from early Christian teaching in their writings. In addition to Peter in 1 Peter 1:14, Paul writes "do not be conformed" in Romans 12. Davids states, "In the terms he uses in describing this phase of their life Peter draws on common Christian tradition, so he sounds very similar to Paul, although not verbally close enough for one to believe that he had read Paul's letters or even heard Paul discuss this topic."¹⁶ This use of the term by both men indicates that they were using

¹⁴ Jobe, *1 Peter*, 115.

¹⁵ Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 45.

¹⁶ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 67.

early Christian teaching to instruct new believers on forsaking their former way of life before coming to faith in Christ. It was not a new idea.

Believers become obedient children by not conforming to their former sinful passions or desires. Although the term “desire” is sometimes used in a positive way in the Bible such as Luke 22:15 or Philippians 1:23, it mostly has a negative connotation. The term normally indicates the unsanctified desires of fallen humans. It is often the drive and desire for the possessions of this world that corrupt mankind. Many times, the desires of the world take control of people. Often, the desires cause Christians to fall back into their old lifestyles they should have forsaken at conversion. Therefore, the call to obey God requires believers to not conform to the desires of this world. Grudem writes, “Obedience to God and holiness of life are radically different from a life that follows natural desires wherever they lead. Doing God’s will is the opposite of doing what remaining sin makes us feel like doing.”¹⁷

In 1 Peter 1:14, Peter calls the former sin and lifestyles of believers “former ignorance.” At one time, their lives were marked by sinful passions, but now, Peter commands them to no longer be influenced by the former ignorance. Their former unspiritual influence should no longer dominate their everyday thoughts and actions.

Imitate God

Lastly, believers are to imitate God. Peter writes in verses 15 and 16, “but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” Instead of conforming to the desires of the world around them, Christians are to conform to the character of God. Their new character is radically different from their pre-conversion days. He has called them out of darkness to be like

¹⁷ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 78.

Him. He is described as holy. God uses holiness to separate His people from the culture around them. He sets them apart for His service.

God is separated from sin, and Peter informs his readers that their holiness should correspond to God's holiness. Christians are considered holy when their thinking and behavior conform to God's character. The Bible first shows God's character through the covenant God made with the Israelites commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments. The moral aspect of the covenant is revealed in those commands. If one is to live in a right relationship with God, he or she should live in obedience to His commands. When Israel lived in covenant with God, they were set apart from the ways of the world. Peter writes that believers will be set apart from the world by being obedient to Christ. This call to holiness is a whole life holiness. It is not a call to practice religion differently; it is a call to live differently. The nature of the new birth produces a new identity of the people to whom Peter writes.

After commanding his readers to imitate God, Peter quotes Leviticus as an authoritative command for his audience. Believers should be holy because God is holy. Grudem argues, "The holiness of God is thus in both Testaments the ground of his requirement that his people should be holy."¹⁸ The command is found in Leviticus in four different variations in 11:44, 19:2, 20:7-8, and 20:26. The goal of the command was to set the worship of the Lord apart from the pagan worship of other nations. Peter commands Christians be holy in their whole way of life because God has told His people to be holy. This holiness includes time spent on technology, communication using social media, and recreation playing video games.

The Old Testament verse applies to Jews and Gentiles. Peter makes no differentiation. The principle is the same for believers as it was in the Old Testament. Through referencing the Book of Leviticus, Peter shows that the holiness Christians are

¹⁸ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 80.

called to is consistent with God's revealed character in His covenant with Israel. Israel's customs and values set them apart from the pagan nations surrounding them.

The readers of Peter's epistle will be set apart by their values as well. Just like ancient Israel, they will be foreigners and aliens in their society. God's people should be separate and set apart from the culture. Holiness is a separation in morality from the evil of the world around them. Holiness is being dedicated to a life of righteousness. God is calling His people to be holy by separating from evil and living a pure life. Believers are to live a pattern of holiness in their lives that transforms every moment, every action, and every thought. Wayne Grudem clarifies that imitating God's holiness "includes a full and pervading holiness that reaches to every aspect of our personalities. It involves not only avoiding outward sin but also maintaining an instinctive delight in God and his holiness as an undercurrent of heart and mind throughout the day."¹⁹

Conclusion

God commands believers to be holy in 1 Peter 1:13-16. The passage reveals that believers are to hope in God, obey God, and imitate God to be holy. The call to holiness begins with a call to hope in God. The hope is an assurance in the fulfilled promises of God. When believers have a hope of the world to come, they will not be led astray by the temptations of the world today. When teenage guys hope in the promises to come, they can overcome the dangers of digital temptation. They should be prepared for action and self-controlled. The call to holiness continues in obedience to God. As children of God, believers should obey the commands of God. They should not conform to the desires of the world around them. While smartphones and computers were not mentioned in the Bible, many commands deal with handling technology. Teenage boys must obey those commands to be holy. Finally, believers should imitate God to be holy. Just as He is

¹⁹ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 79.

holy, so should believers be holy and set apart from the culture around them. As they live holy lives, they become a witness to the world. The way teenagers interact with digital devices, and the way they communicate on social media communicates Christ to the people around them. Norman Hillyer concludes, “They are to express God’s nature in all their activities and relationships, for it is through the witness of Christian lives of moral integrity that God will make himself known to unbelievers in general.”²⁰

God Urges Believers to Transform Their Minds

The book of Romans was written by the apostle Paul to explain the gospel and teach doctrine. The gospel is the central theme of Romans, and Paul teaches doctrine, theology, and application that flows from a correct understanding of the gospel. Thomas Schreiner notes that, “Romans has traditionally been understood as an exposition and summary of Paul’s theology. Identifying Romans as a synopsis for Paul’s theology is attractive since the letter is more comprehensive than other Pauline letters.”²¹ However, the explanation of many theological doctrines is missing in the letter. It would be more satisfactory to say that Romans is an explanation of the gospel than a theological discourse. Much of the book is written to that end.

In the letter to Rome, justification by faith is clearly expounded by Paul. After spending eleven chapters on the theme of the gospel, sin, righteousness, holiness, and grace, Paul gives practical implications for believers beginning in chapter 12. F. F. Bruce continues, “In view of all that God has accomplished for his people in Christ, how should his people live? They should present themselves to God as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him.”²² The Bible not only calls believers to have head knowledge, but it also calls

²⁰ Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 46.

²¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 15.

²² F. F. Bruce, *Romans, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 212.

believers to allow that knowledge to transform their minds. Theology and doctrine are never taught in the Bible simply so they are known; they are taught so that they may be turned into practice. Believers are to pursue holiness by transformation. To be holy, believers should put to death the flesh, present their bodies as sacrifices, and not be conformed to the world but be transformed (Romans 12:1-2).

Put to Death the Flesh

First, believers should put to death the flesh. A major theme of Romans is the war between the flesh and Spirit. The flesh represents the believer's former life. It leads to death. To pursue holiness, believers cannot be influenced by the sinful flesh. The Spirit is the new life in Christ. When a person is saved, he or she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The person was dead in his or her sin but were made alive. Therefore, the Spirit leads to life.

The believer's sinful desires and the Spirit are in incessant warfare against one another. In Romans 7:5, Paul uses flesh to describe the former unregenerate state at war with and in opposition to the Spirit of God. However, he also uses it in other ways. Paul uses flesh to describe sinful humanity in Romans 8:3. He uses it to describe human nature which can be weak and unregenerate in Romans 8:8. While believers are given a new nature at conversion, they are constantly in battle with their old flesh. In his other letters, Paul commands believers to "put off their old nature" and "put on their new nature" (Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:9-10). First Corinthians 15:22 shows the "old nature" represents what believers were "in Adam," and the "new nature" represents what they are "in Christ."

In Romans 8:5, Paul invites children of God to live according to the Spirit and not to live according to the flesh. The flesh was corrupted by sin in the mind and the body. Believers have a new nature and are no longer "in the flesh." They live in the Spirit and not "according to the flesh" (Romans 8:12). They live in a new pattern of life and not

the pattern of their old sinful life. Now, believers belong to God. They traded their old lives and unregenerate outlook for a life that should live in obedience to God. The pursuit of holiness is about leaving the old life of sin behind and embracing the new life of the Spirit.

Paul describes embracing the new life as living according to the Spirit. Believers walk according to the Spirit and not the works of the flesh. The Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit who dwells inside of Christians. The power of Christ resides in them. Bruce writes, “The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ. So completely does the Spirit convey to believers the life and power of the risen and exalted Christ that in practice the two seem frequently to be identified.”²³ This indwelling of the power of Christ brings life. No longer are believers held down to the practices of the old unregenerate life. They are dead to sin and its power. The Spirit imparts life to those in Christ. Not only does the Spirit bring life, but He also bestows freedom. Believers have been set free from the bonding power of sin and death. The Spirit brings liberation.

Additionally, the Spirit guides God’s children. Romans 8:14 states, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Believers are guided in life and conduct by the Spirit. Lastly, the Spirit enables believers to be holy. Bruce writes that the “Spirit and flesh are in unremitting opposition, and wage perpetual warfare the one with the other. But, the Spirit is divinely powerful, and can put the flesh progressively out of action in those lives which are yielded to his control and enabling grace.”²⁴ Christians are guaranteed victory and final glory through the Spirit. They can be holy and sanctified because of the Spirit’s work within them. They do not have to be defeated by sin and temptation. Sinfulness through digital devices is common in today’s society. However, teenage boys do not have to be defeated by this sin. Through the Spirit’s power, they can

²³ Bruce, *Romans*, 47.

²⁴ Bruce, *Romans*, 48-49.

overcome any temptation. They can be holy and Christlike. Believers can become like Christ on this earth, and they will also be like Christ in the age to come.

In Romans 12, Paul makes the shift from doctrine to practice. Thomas Schreiner states, “The οὖν (therefore) commencing 12:1 reaches back all the way to 1:16–11:36. In light of the mercies of God and the fulfillment of his saving promises to Abraham, which are detailed in the preceding argument, the following exhortations are given.”²⁵ This passage is the final main section of the letter’s body. In it, Paul shifts his focus from instructing to exhorting. He gives his audience practical steps to live out the truths he just taught and to live out the principles of the gospel he just presented. Obeying these exhortations is important. The guidance to be transformed is not an optional step after believers embrace the gospel. The appeal is rooted in their initial response to the gospel.

Paul leaves his readers with practical steps that are important to implement in the Christians’ lives. They are to display their redeemed character. Doctrine and theology are expressed in everyday life. Paul provides instructions on how Christians should live. In the passage, Paul uses cultic language that would have been familiar with his readers. The language allowed the believers to put his exhortations into practice. James Dunn writes, “The obedience called for is taken out of cultic context and cannot be reduced to written formulae. The corporate identity of the eschatological people of God is transposed from the category of ethnic Israel to that of the body of Christ.”²⁶ Christians are not defined only by their actions; they are defined by their redeemed character.

²⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 608.

²⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 706.

Offer Bodies as Sacrifices

Next, believers are encouraged to offer their bodies as sacrifices. In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” This verse is one of the best-known passages in the New Testament. To begin, he uses the conjunction “therefore.” He wants the exhortations he presents at the end of Romans to be built firmly from the theology taught in the beginning of Romans.

Then, Paul makes an appeal. The Greek verb, *parakaleo*, Paul uses in verse 1 is a verb he often uses when introducing ethical exhortations. According to Douglas Moo, the verb’s “semantic range lies somewhere between ‘request’ and ‘command’: an exhortation comes with authority, but the authority of a preacher who is the mediator of God’s truth rather than the authority of a superior issuing a command.”²⁷ “Appeal” is not a strong enough word. The term emphasizes authority. Because of what God has done through Jesus Christ, believers are urged to obey the following instructions. In view of the gospel, Paul makes an appeal to his fellow Christians based upon the mercy of God. This appeal is personal for Paul. He is imploring his readers to follow his urging grounded in his own experience of God’s mercy.

Once again, Paul makes the connection from what he previously said to what he desires his readers to do now. When Paul writes about God’s mercy, he is connecting his appeal to what God has done. Everything he writes in Romans 12:1-2 can be summarized by labeling it the mercy of God in action. When believers consider God’s mercy, they should be moved to active effort. All that Paul encourages is an appropriate and expected response to experiencing God’s mercy. Once believers experience God’s mercy, they are moved into obedience. God’s mercy impels them toward the obedience that the gospel demands.

²⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 749.

After experiencing the mercy of God, the only response is an all-encompassing action of total surrender. God's grace reigns entirely over believers. Paul encourages them to present themselves as sacrifices in Romans 12:1. They present their entire bodies as a sacrifice for God. The sacrifice is the entire body and not just its individual part. There is some debate among scholars on how often this presentation needs to be made. Many scholars think that the aorist tense in this appeal indicates a "once-for-all" action. However, the aorist tense does not indicate this. Moo argues, "There is no reason in the context to think that Paul would view this presentation as an offering that we make only once."²⁸ Instead, Paul makes the appeal but does not distinguish how often it needs to be done. Translating the sacrifice as a one-time action is a misreading of the aorist tense.

Paul uses Old Testament imagery for the proper response to God's mercy. He uses and applies the sacrificial language of the Old Testament. Christ fulfilled the Old Testament sacrificial system. Christians are no longer required to offer bloody sacrifices to the Lord. However, the importance of sacrifices in Jewish faith made it a natural and inevitable means for early Christians to express their own religious convictions. The sacrifice metaphor had significance for them, so Paul uses it to explain the proper response to the gospel. Dunn writes, "The thought of sacrifice has been transposed across a double line—from cultic ritual to everyday life, from a previous epoch characterized by daily offering of animals to one characterized by a whole-person commitment lived out in daily existence."²⁹

Believers do not just offer songs, service, or words; they offer their literal bodies. God does not demand what believers can give; He demands the giver. Paul is referring to the entire person in Romans 12:1. He is emphasizing that the sacrifice Christians are called to make requires a dedication to the service of God in this present

²⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to Romans*, 750.

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 710.

world. The sacrifice of body does not refer to just the physical body. It refers to the entire being. The appeal is to sacrifice the whole body, not just some of it. A true believer cannot offer some of his or her life to God and neglect other parts. Thomas Schreiner writes in his commentary, “Genuine commitment to God embraces every area of life and includes the body in all of its particularity and concreteness.”³⁰ Those who are now alive in Christ are called to give their bodies as a sacrifice.

Three words are used to describe the sacrifice Christians should make in Romans 12:1. First, the sacrifice is living. According to Douglas Moo, some translations incorrectly give the adjective prominence that Paul does not by putting it before the noun. The sacrifice believers make is a living sacrifice. Moo writes that it is “one that does not die as it is offered but goes on living and therefore continues in its efficacy until the person who is offered dies.”³¹ The sacrifice is also holy and pleasing to God. Paul describes the sacrifice as pleasing to God because it is set apart from the profane, and it is dedicated to His service.

Romans 12:1 ends by calling the response an act of worship in a phrase that is in apposition to the previous statements. Paul is making the point that offering one’s entire self to God is equivalent to worship. Because of God’s mercy, believers offer their bodies as a sacrifice. Not only is this sacrifice living, holy, and pleasing, it is an act of worship to God.

The sacrifice is described as “spiritual worship” in Romans 12:1. The word “spiritual” is the Greek word “logiken.” The exact meaning of “logiken” is difficult to solve. The word only appears elsewhere in the New Testament once in 1 Peter 2:2. The word has some use in Greek and Hellenistic Jewish writing to describe a mental and spiritual attitude. Based on the context, Douglas Moo presents four possible meanings of

³⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 613.

³¹ Moo, *The Epistle to Romans*, 752.

the word. The type of worship could be an inner worship that involves the mind and heart. It could be a spiritual worship that gives God what He truly desires. Next, it may be a worship that is acceptable to human reason. Lastly, it could be a worship for those who have understood the truth revealed in Christ. The best definition seems to be a combination between an inner worship and a spiritual worship. Moo writes, “In light of this, and recognizing that each of the usual translations ‘spiritual’ and ‘reasonable’ misses an important part of the meaning, it would be best to translate ‘true worship.’”³²

True worship is when believers offer the Lord their bodies day by day. It is rational and reasonable. Since God is so merciful, if a believer does not offer his body to God, it is irrational and foolish. Schreiner writes, “Paul is not merely saying that sacrifices are spiritual in nature. His point is that it is eminently reasonable, given the mercies of God, for believers to dedicate themselves wholly to God.”³³ The worship described in the passage does not relate to public services. It relates to the giving of a believer’s entire life to God in the genuine reality of everyday existence. Paul’s idea of worship is not simply offered by the mind, but it is a worship expressed in the reality of everyday living. As a response of God’s mercy, teenage guys offer their bodies as sacrifices. This sacrifice encompasses every area of their lives including social media, video games, and the internet.

Not Conformed but Transformed

Finally, believers should not be conformed to the world but be transformed. Paul continues explaining true worship in the next verse. Verse two shows readers what it means to give themselves fully to God. In Romans 12:2, he states, “Do not be conformed

³² Moo, *The Epistle to Romans*, 753.

³³ Schreiner, *Romans*, 614.

to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Some commentators debate whether verse one and verse two are two separate appeals. However, it seems that verse two is subordinate to verse one. Verse two gives the way Christians can obey the exhortation of verse one. Living sacrifices are those that do not conform to the world and are transformed by renewing their minds. The verse continues Paul’s theme of flesh and spirit. In this present world, believers naturally belong to a sin-dominated and death-producing realm. However, Christ has saved them from that old domain of sin and death to a new domain of righteousness and life. This new domain does not remove the influence of the old domain. Christians belong to the new realm but must continue to live in the old realm. Paul’s appeal that they “not conform to this world” is based on the theology of Romans 5-8. He urges believers to resist the pressure to look like this world and to avoid the pattern of behavior that embodies it.

Paul encourages believers to not be conformed to the present world. The verb “conformed” is in the present tense, but the voice of the verb is uncertain. It could be passive or middle voice. James Dunn believes the verb is in passive voice. He writes, “The passive form indicates recognition of a power or force which molds character and conduct and which ‘this age’ exercises; Paul in effect recognizes the power of social groups, cultural norms, institutions, and traditions to mold patterns of individual behavior.”³⁴ While the verb is in passive voice, the present imperative of the verb indicates human responsibility is involved. Believers actively resist behavioral conformity with the world’s patterns. Although the verb is passive, the significance of the verb is not. It has an active meaning. Believers should not conform to the world around them.

³⁴ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 712.

Additionally, “transformed” is in the passive voice. It means “be transformed.” Paul urges a transformation at the deepest level. It is significant and goes beyond behavioral change. It grows out of necessity from an inward change. The passive voice demonstrates that the source of the believer’s transformation is fully God. God does the transforming, but Christians should willingly place themselves at His disposal for it to happen. The work of ongoing sanctification happens when believers submit to God’s will.

Older commentators saw a distinguished difference between “conformed” and “transformed.” The belief was that “conformed” referred to outward behavior and “transformed” referred to inner and genuine transformation. The verb “conformed” has a superficial meaning, and the verb “transformed” has a deeper inward and genuine meaning. However, Paul is not only concerned that believers will outwardly conform to the world. He is also worried that their conformity to this world will negatively shape them in every area of their lives. When Paul writes that believers who are conformed to this age cannot have a renewed mind, he is showing that conformity is more than behavior, it is also thoughts.

Additionally, the usage of *συσχηματίζεσθε* (be conformed) and *μεταμορφοῦσθε* (be transformed) in other New Testament passages show that they do not always mean external and internal conformity. For example, Philippians 3:21 uses the related verb *μετασχηματίσει* (he will change). Paul uses the verb to say that Jesus will change a Christian’s present body to be “conformed” (*σύμμορφον*) to the body of Christ. The Greek terms “*μετασχηματίσει*” (he will change) and “*σύμμορφον*” (conformed) are nearly synonymous. There is not a difference in depth of “conformed” and “transformed.” Both verbs indicate a whole-body experience.

Believers are transformed by renewing their minds. The “body” referenced in verse one and the “mind” referenced in verse two are not separate. Christians are holistic beings. There is a link between what a Christian thinks and what a Christian does. So, Paul urges believers to not only sacrifice their body, but he also encourages them to

renew their minds. Moo gives a description of the mind when he writes, “‘Mind’ translates a word that Paul uses especially to connote a person's ‘practical reason,’ or ‘moral consciousness.’ Christians are to adjust their way of thinking about everything in accordance with the ‘new-ness’ of their life in the Spirit.”³⁵ Real change that lasts comes from within. Many thoughts and ideas contrary to God’s truth exist on screens today. It is easy for teenagers to be deceived by these false truths. Additionally, technology influences one’s thoughts. Teenage guys should renew their minds to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation.

Mind renewal is a life-long process. It does not happen overnight, and it is not instantaneous. It is the work of the Spirit that transforms minds. It requires inserting a new attitude into an evil age. Schreiner writes, “Transformation by the renewal of the mind involves the penetration of the coming age into the present evil age.”³⁶ Believers’ thoughts will continually be transformed to God’s thoughts and thinking patterns. They resist the pressure of conformity to this world by renewing their minds. When their thoughts are changed, they are able to approve the will of God. A renewed mind leads to discerning God’s will. It is the ability to understand and agree with what God wants and has an understanding of putting it into practice. A transformed mind allows believers to discern God’s will and live it out well. His will is described as good, acceptable, and perfect in Romans 12:2.

Conclusion

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul urges believers to have transformed minds. For them to pursue holiness, they should have a transformed mind. To do this, believers put to death the flesh (Romans 8:13). A major theme of Romans is living by the Spirit and not

³⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to Romans*, 756.

³⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 616.

by the flesh. Paul explains that believers are controlled by the Spirit in Romans 8:5. Teenage guys can be controlled by the Spirit when they interact with digital devices. To pursue holiness, believers should also offer themselves as a sacrifice. The supernatural response to God's mercy is offering their bodies as a sacrifice. Teenage guys should offer their entire person to the Lord. God wants authority over their screen time. Finally, to pursue holiness, believers are encouraged to allow their minds to be transformed. Paul urges Christians to not be conformed to the world they live in but be transformed by renewing their minds. God's perfect will is for believers to be holy. Christians overcome the temptation to conform to the present evil age by renewing their minds. As their thinking is altered, so they are transformed. Teenage guys should have renewed minds to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation.

God Commands Believers to Flee Immorality

Lastly, to pursue holiness, believers must flee immorality. While 1 Corinthians was a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in the first century, much can be applied to the church in the United States in the twenty first century. Immorality was rampant in Corinth. The city was known for its immorality. Paul Gardner writes, "Yet Corinth had a worse name than most. The name of the town even became a byword for sexual promiscuity, and to be a 'Corinthiastes' was to be a profligate."³⁷

Corinth, much like the United States today, was a city that needed to pursue holiness by fleeing immorality. Many problems in the church were caused by their lack of holiness. Thomas Schreiner writes, "The best explanation for the problems in Corinth is that the church was affected by the secular world, by the paganism and worldliness that was endemic in Corinth."³⁸ Believers fall into such sins when they conform to the world

³⁷ Paul D. Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 27.

³⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 14.

around them. When believers allow the beliefs of the culture around them to infiltrate the church and influence them, holiness is often elusive.

However, Paul writes that Christians are new creatures and should be holy. In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses several issues that were causing the church to identify with their cultural surroundings. Many of these problems still affect the church today. The Book of 1 Corinthians speaks to Christians today because the problems Paul addressed still affect them. Often, the beliefs of Christians are adapted to accommodate the culture they live. When church practices and church theology are changed by the culture, it becomes apparent that the errors of the Corinthians are still around today.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul is concluding a section about the dangers of tolerating sin and not pursuing holiness. The section starts in 1 Corinthians 5:1 and deals with a case of incest and a case of bringing a fellow Christian to court. He concludes this section by imploring the church to pursue holiness. He is concerned with the church's toleration of sin. Paul wants the church to pursue holiness. To pursue holiness, believers must avoid idolatry, recognize they are one with Christ, and flee sexual immorality.

Avoid Idolatry

First, to be holy, Christians should avoid idolatry. Paul is writing to a primarily Gentile audience. Gordon Fee writes, "Although there were some Jewish believers in the community, very little in the letter points to a Jewish background. . . . They were former idolaters and therefore chiefly Gentiles."³⁹ The readers would be trying to overcome their past attitudes, behaviors, and temptations, including idolatry.

In verse 12, Paul writes, "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything." Paul opens the passage by stating all things are lawful. This exact phrase is also mentioned in

³⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 4.

1 Corinthians 10:23 when Paul is discussing meat offered to idols. The Bible often associates immorality and idolatry as two sides of the same coin. In this passage, Paul follows suit by suggesting that this connection is shown in the behavior tolerated by this church. Both sins have similar commands. Believers must flee immorality, and they need to flee idolatry.

Verse 12 answers the questions regarding the boundaries for Christian freedom. Believers are free in Christ, but they are not free to indulge in idolatry. Holiness in the church will only exist if individual Christians prioritize the benefit of the community. They are to build up one another. Therefore, believers should be mindful of their actions, even if the actions are permissible. Paul uses a quotation in verse 12, “All things are lawful for me.” It seems the Corinthians regarded this quotation as false. While it is not known where the phrase originated, many believe it could have been taken from society or from a distortion of Paul’s teaching. Schreiner believes it was taken from Corinthian society. He writes, “Most scholars think that the words I have the right to do anything, quoted twice in the verse, reflect a Corinthian slogan. The slogan was probably particularly used to justify doing whatever they wished sexually with their bodies.”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the quote, “all things are lawful for me,” details the marks of a true Christian. First, Paul makes an argument that the church should remember that wisdom does not validate or mark out their membership in the church. Next, he explains that true wisdom is determining what builds up, and that is a mark of a true Christian. The Greek word, συμφέρω, used for “benefit,” implies bringing together, but, within the context, its meaning is “what builds up.” While all things are lawful, not all things build up. Only things that build up the church should be promoted.

Last, Paul communicates that it is easy to become enslaved by something. Even though it sounds liberating that all things are lawful, believers can become addicted

⁴⁰ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 126.

to certain ways of life and behaviors. People easily become enslaved by their sins. The verb translated as “enslaved” deals with a person’s legal right to do something. Gardner explains, “Perhaps translating this as ‘all things are lawful for me, but I will not be fettered by anything’ is a way of capturing the idea that Paul will refuse to be shackled by anything, even if it might of itself be something that in some circumstances could be useful.”⁴¹ Believers may find themselves enslaved by something that is not necessarily wrong in and of itself, but becomes sinful as it becomes an idol. Today, screen addiction is common. Teenage guys spend hours a day on their digital devices. Screens have enslaved them. Paul’s warning is for them to avoid becoming addicted to their screens. Believers have a freedom in Christ, but that freedom should direct them toward behaviors that are beneficial and away from behaviors that can enslave them and dominate their lives.

The theme of fleeing idolatry continues throughout the passage. First, in verses 16-17, Paul writes that sex with a prostitute equates to being one in body with her. He argues that the union formed by having sex with a prostitute is sinful. Christians are joined to the Lord, and the Lord cannot be joined with immorality. Gardner states that his “anticipates the same basic argument for not becoming involved in idolatry since they are part of one body, the body of Christ.”⁴² Sexual immorality and idolatry work together because they belong to the same evilness that distorts God’s character, disrupts life, and causes chaos in society.

Additionally, in verse 19, Paul calls the body the temple of the Holy Spirit. Gardner emphasizes that this reference anticipates a discussion on idolatry. Christians are God’s holy temple because they are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Anything sinful that enters the temple is an idol. Idolatry ruins a Christian’s ability to become what they were

⁴¹ Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 278.

⁴² Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 274.

created to be: the true image of God. Thus, Paul makes it clear in the passage that Christians must pursue holiness by avoiding idolatry in their lives.

Recognize Unity with Christ

Paul, then, uses another quotation to explain that believers need to recognize they are one with Christ to pursue holiness. Gordon Fee labels this passage as “one of the more important theological passages in the New Testament about the human body.”⁴³ In verses 13-14, Paul states, “‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food’—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.” Paul quotes the Corinthians to clarify that sexual immorality is not consistent with God’s design for the body. The body was designed for union with Jesus.

The quotation shows that the stomach is insignificant when it comes to what is important to God. Food and the stomach work together for a specific purpose. In the same way, the body works for a specific purpose and that is “for the Lord.” The body was created for the Lord just as food was created for the stomach. Leon Morris writes that just as food is necessary for the stomach to function, the Lord is necessary for the body to function.⁴⁴ The body was not created for sexual immorality; it was created to please the Lord. The church in Corinth were arguing that all bodily functions were equal, and that sex was not a big deal. They believed both sex and the body were unrelated to the life of the future. In fact, Paul places the quotes in verses 12 and 13 together to show that the believers were justifying their sin in this way. They thought were free to do whatever they please in the body. Paul writes that God will destroy them both in the end.

⁴³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 277.

⁴⁴ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 7 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 96.

Paul is clarifying that the relationship between sexual immorality and the body is not the same as the relationship between food and the stomach. The issue of food is not the main issue. The purpose is to set up the issue of the body and sexual immorality. It seems some in the church in Corinth believed what they did with their bodies was inconsequential. They thought they could eat whatever they liked and have sex with whomever they liked because neither had anything to do with their salvation. Their worldview had been influenced and tainted by Hellenistic dualism. Fee states, “Because they were ‘spiritual,’ they took a dim view of continuing existence in the material world, including the body.”⁴⁵ Therefore, they believed the body was insignificant and, they could do whatever they wanted with their bodies because their bodies will one day perish. Schreiner writes about their rationalization when he states, “If our bodies are destined to perish and only our souls matter, we are free to indulge our desires sexually in the same way that we satisfy our desires for food and drink.”⁴⁶

However, the body was not designed for sexual immorality. The body was designed to be united with Christ. Furthermore, just as Christ was raised, the body will be raised in the coming age. The bodies of believers will live forever. The permanence of the body shows that what they do with the body is significant. The body was not created for sexual immorality; it was created for the Lord. The body is not destined for destruction; it is destined for resurrection.

Many theologians and commentators debate what the Greek word for “body,” σῶμα, means in this passage. It could refer to the physical, earthly body. Also, it could mean the resurrected spiritual body. Another meaning is that it could refer to the church. This meaning is metaphorical. The best meaning is that the word refers to the physical body. Gardner concludes, “In these verses, it does seem most natural to read the word

⁴⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 12.

⁴⁶ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 36.

‘body’ as simply denoting the physical body of a person which, unsurprisingly, Paul sees as being under Christ’s lordship.”⁴⁷ Christians’ physical bodies matter. What they do with their physical bodies indicates what they believe about the lordship of Christ. Holiness in the body matters because immorality is outside of God’s design for the body. Paul shows the significance of the body and the union of Christians with God. Christians’ bodies will be resurrected from the dead, just like Jesus. Therefore, their bodies have eternal significance.

Paul continues the importance of the union of Christ with the body by mentioning a specific example. In verses 15-16, he writes, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, ‘The two will become one flesh.’” Paul highlights those believers are members of Christ. Therefore, prostitution is intolerable, unthinkable, and outrageous. This sexual action is abhorrent. Therefore, Paul expresses the significance of the body by showing the incompatibility of uniting members of Christ with a prostitute.

Some in the church in Corinth were engaged in prostitution. Fee writes, “Apparently some men within the Christian community were going to prostitutes and arguing for the right to do so. . . . So Paul proceeds from the prior concluding affirmation to a frontal attack on this theological justification of theirs.”⁴⁸ This sin was repulsive to Paul because Christians should glorify God with their bodies. When members of the Corinthian church had sex with prostitutes, they were bringing Christ into the action because the believer’s body is an organ of the body of Christ. Paul informs them that Christ, who lives in them, is to have authority over how His members are used. So, Paul’s

⁴⁷ Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 280.

⁴⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 276.

answer to the question of joining Christ to a prostitute is an emphatic never. It is a strong rejection of the question that has been asked. Christians should have nothing to do with prostitution.

Paul uses a quotation of Genesis 2:24 to show that believers are joined as one body when they have sex. Genesis 2:24 is about a man leaving his parents and clinging to his wife. In creation, there was one man, Adam, from which the woman, Eve, was made. During sex, there is a closeness of bodies between two people that is more profound than any other activity. While members of the church believed the union with a prostitute was inconsequential, Paul makes the point that it is not. Sexual union makes two people become one flesh. Because the union with Christ is even deeper, it is unimaginable that the church members would be joined together with a prostitute. The idea that a sexual encounter is casual and insignificant is contrary to what is taught about sex in the Old Testament. There is a profound physical union in sexual activity. However, being joined with Christ has an even deeper significance.

Bodies are members of Christ, and Christ cannot be joined with a prostitute because He cannot be joined with evil. Gardner writes, “The issue at stake is the relationship between the Christian and Christ and the nature of that union. It is a union in which the body that God created serves a purpose.”⁴⁹ By using Genesis 2:24, Paul shows the creation narrative teaches that during sex, two bodies become one. This is how a man becomes a “member” of the prostitute’s body. Then, Paul contrasts the union with Christ’s “body.”

In verse 17, Paul writes, “But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” Paul changes his wording from “body” to “spirit.” The point is the same. Although the concern is still with the physical body, the union in this verse is a different union. Paul expresses this union in terms of the Spirit. He explains that Christians are

⁴⁹ Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 281.

joined as one spirit with Christ. Paul uses the imagery of sexual relations to prove this truth.

When believers commit sexual immorality, such as prostitution, they are breaking their union with Christ. The believer's body is commanded to be fully committed to God. It should be continually offered for the Lord's service. This commitment and service includes obeying God in sexual activity. Believers should realize they are one with Christ to pursue holiness. They cannot join Christ with immorality. David Garland writes, "Christ's Spirit becomes the command center for the body, which would rule out all contact with prostitutes, because the body is to be given over in service only to its Lord."⁵⁰ Christians are one with the Lord because they have been joined together by a spiritual tie. They are one spirit with Him. Today, pornography is rampant, and it is sexual immorality. God has called teenage guys away from pornography because they are one with Christ and should be committed to God.

Flee Immorality

Lastly, believers must flee immorality to walk in holiness. Paul concludes the passage in verses 18-20. He writes in verse 18, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." The section's main point is found in this verse. Members of the church have to flee sexual immorality. Just as Joseph fled Potiphar's wife's sexual advance, so Christians should flee sexual immorality. Paul emphatically commands believers to flee. It is a present imperative which indicates habitual action. Morris elaborates, "It cannot be satisfactorily dealt with by any less drastic measures. The believer must not temporize

⁵⁰ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 235.

with it, but flee the very thought.”⁵¹ Paul writes that sexual sin is a sin against one’s body. It goes against God’s created design of the body and God’s design of sex.

Additionally, Paul states in verse 18 that every other sin is committed outside of the body but not sexual sin. He is making the point that sexual sin is worse than other sins because it is a sin committed with one’s own body. While several different meanings of this clause have been offered throughout Christian history, this meaning, that sexual sin is worse than other sins, seems most viable. Fee explains, “In fornicating with a prostitute a man removes his body (which is a temple of the Spirit, purchased by God and destined for resurrection) from union with Christ and makes it a member of her body, thereby putting it under her ‘mastery.’”⁵² Other sins are committed outside one’s body, but sexual sin is more egregious. Other sins involve the use of that which comes from outside the body. Sexual sin is from within. It also involves another person. Sexual sin is committed physically with another person, which makes it worse. Because of the complex union formed with another person, sexual sin shapes believers in profound ways.

Not only should Christians flee sexual immorality because it is a sin against their bodies, but their bodies are home to the Holy Spirit. In verses 19-20, Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit resided in the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:10-11). The Most Holy place was protected, and certain regulations were in place to keep it holy. Only the high priests could enter The Most Holy Place one day a year on the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:7). Special care was used to not defile the Holy Spirit’s residence (Leviticus 16:6-34). Now, the Holy Spirit resides in the body. God’s

⁵¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 98.

⁵² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 290.

presence is no longer limited to the temple. He indwells the bodies of individual Christians. Every place where God dwells is holy. Therefore, believers cannot desecrate God's temple, their bodies, with sexual immorality. Believers' bodies are not their own. They belong to the Lord. They do not have authority over what they do with their bodies because the Holy Spirit lives in the body. Christians should honor and glorify God with their bodies because they are temples of the Holy Spirit. Believers live under God's authority because He indwells their bodies.

Paul uses imagery from Corinth slave auctions to show Christians were purchased by God. Through the atonement of Christ, they were brought from death to life. The word "bought" shows the ransoming effect of the atonement. Because of Christ's sacrificial death, Christians can be bought by God. Therefore, Paul declares that all activity with the body should bring glory to God. When Paul writes that Christians were bought with a price, has in mind a transfer of ownership. Everything about them belongs to the Lord, including their bodies. It is God's rightful possession.

Many in Corinth were concerned about their status and had a desire for a higher social status. The competitive individualism in that society spilled over into the church. In verses 18-20, Paul argues for a different approach. Christians are to live and work for God no matter what their status is at the time. The Corinthians were drawn to the rich, to the upper class, and to those who exercised power in society. Additionally, the church wanted to keep the social barriers of class and status that permeated the Corinthian culture. However, the barriers were abolished by the cross of Christ. Yet, for some Christians, the church had become another area to compete for status. Paul is making the point that whether a Christian is free or enslaved, rich or poor, he or she belongs to the Lord. In the beginning of the passage in verse 12, Paul writes that nothing should enslave them. In the last verse, he explains that Christians are only slaves to the Lord. Believers are to be used only in Christ's service. This service includes the body which God has ownership rights.

Because of this, Christians are to glorify God with their bodies. Glorifying God means drawing attention to God. This is the prime motive for believers. Paul's words indicate great urgency. Morris writes, "The use of the aorist rather than the present imperative agrees with this. There is urgency about it. Let there be no delay."⁵³ Christians cannot glorify God with their bodies if they are participating in sexual sin. Christians should use their bodies in the service of the Lord who bought them with a price, not to participate in sin. If the glory of God is the goal for all the body's activity, the church would have been prevented from tolerating any form of immorality. The body is for the Lord. Therefore, the body cannot tolerate sexual immorality. It is a direct affront to the call to covenantal obedience. For Christians to pursue holiness, they must flee from immorality at all costs. This includes sexting in digital communication and pornography on digital devices. When teenage guys are tempted to view pornography, they should flee from it.

Conclusion

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul makes the point that Christians must flee immorality. To pursue holiness, believers should avoid idolatry. Permissible actions are not always beneficial if they do not build up believers and if they enslave believers. It is easy for people, especially teenage guys, to become addicted to screens. To pursue holiness, believers need to realize they are one with Christ. They are one in spirit with Jesus and cannot join Him with sin. Teenage guys should not join Christ with sexual immorality like pornography. Fee writes, "Our individual bodies do not belong to us alone in a selfish, self-centered way; rather they belong to Christ, purchased by him through redemption and now indwelt by the Spirit so as to be God's own sanctuary."⁵⁴

⁵³ Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 101.

⁵⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 277.

Finally, to pursue holiness, believers are to flee sexual immorality. They should glorify God with their bodies by not tolerating sexual sin. Teenage guys need to run from all sexual immorality. Pornography cannot be tolerated.

Conclusion

God is holy, and He commands His children to be holy. Believers should pursue sanctification in every area of their lives. They are to be holy. Teenage guys should pursue holiness in every area of their lives including their interaction with digital devices. In 1 Peter 1:13-16, Peter tells his readers that they should hope in God, obey God, and imitate God to be holy. To be holy, they must be transformed. Spiritual transformation is the only hope for teenage guys to be holy with their digital devices. Romans 12:1-2 shows believers should put to death the flesh, present their bodies as sacrifices, and not be conformed to the world but be transformed. To be holy, they need to also flee immorality. Teenage guys must avoid sexual immorality such as pornography. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul tells the church in Corinth, and believers today, they should avoid idolatry, realize they are one with Christ, and flee sexual immorality.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED TO THE PROJECT

Generation Z are those born between 1995 and 2010. In 2022, they are between the ages of 12 years old and 27 years old. In this pivotal time, Generation Z Christians have significant opportunities and obstacles. James Emery White states, “As the first truly post-Christian generation, and numerically the largest, Generation Z will be the most influential religious force in the West and the heart of the missional challenge facing the Christian church.”¹ Generation Z constitutes almost 26 percent of the United States population, which makes it the largest generation.² They will not simply influence the culture, they will be the culture. Therefore, the church must capture the attention of Generation Z so Generation Z can transform the culture. In order for Christians in Generation Z to impact the culture, they should be different than their culture. They need to be distinct and set apart; they must pursue holiness.

A defining characteristic of Generation Z is that they are Wi-Fi enabled. Most members of the developed world had access to the internet by 2000. Generation Z is not familiar with a world without constant, convenient, and immediate access to the internet. Teenagers today have constant access to the internet. It is with them everywhere. They spend approximately nine hours a day absorbing media.³ Because of this, digital temptation is a huge issue that affects the holiness of teenagers. There are many issues

¹ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 11.

² White, *Meet Generation Z*, 35.

³ Jonathan McKee, *Parenting Generation Screen: Guiding Your Kids to Be Wise in a Digital World* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2021), 111.

with technology that affect the pursuit of holiness for teenage boys. Social media, video games, and pornography are significant obstacles and challenges for teenage boys. To pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation, teenage boys need to overcome addiction issues with screen time, overcome psychological issues created by social media and video games, and overcome sexual immorality issues with pornographic material.

Addiction Issues

Teenagers are addicted to their screens. Whether it is tablets, smartphones, laptops, or television, teenagers have issues with screen time. The average teenager spends more than seven hours on their digital devices.⁴ This time does not include other forms of media like music. Video games are so compulsive that, according to the manufacturer, gamers have played the Call of Duty game series for over 25 billion hours.⁵ Gamers have played this game for over 2.85 million years. That is just one game series among many. Yet, many adults and mental health experts are unaware of the growing issue with screen time. Nicolas Kardaras writes, “The damaging virtual epidemic is spreading due to a lack of awareness among people and the media—even among health professionals. As a society, we are simply unaware of the research indicating that too-early tech use and excessive screen exposure can be damaging.”⁶ Currently, experts are debating whether screen addiction should be considered and treated as a stand-alone mental disorder.

For teenage boys, screens have become just as addictive as drugs.⁷ Actions completed on screens, whether it is playing a video game or sending a text message,

⁴ Jonathan McKee, *Parenting Generation Screen*, 87.

⁵ Nicholas Kardaras, *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction Is Hijacking Our Kids—And How to Break the Trance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 14.

⁶ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 244.

⁷ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 14.

release dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is the brain's feel-good reward response. It is often referred to as a pleasure chemical. When playing video games, dopamine levels in the brain increases by 100 percent.⁸ Therefore, screen addictions can damage teenage boys' brains the same way a cocaine addiction can. Video games and social media can be as addictive as heroin is to a drug abuser.⁹ Kardaras, an addiction expert, concludes, "Surprisingly, digital drugs may be even more insidious and problematic than illicit drugs because we don't have our guard up about them; meanwhile, they're ubiquitous, continuously reinforced and more socially accepted than their reviled powdered counterparts, making them so much more accessible."¹⁰ To pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation, teenage boys should overcome addiction issues with screen time by understanding the addictive design of platforms, realizing the negative consequences of screen time, and knowing how to control addictive behavior.

Addictive Design of Platforms

First, platforms were intentionally created to be addictive by their designers. Video games, social media, and pornography are all designed to keep the user engaged for a long duration of time. Mark Ellingsen writes, "One needs to be aware that the major tech companies have developed technology to addict us to use of social media. The 'likes' of Facebook and other platforms are deliberately addictive."¹¹ They are intentionally designed to demand users' attentions and keep them engaged. Designers use highly sophisticated methods that take advantage of behavioral psychology, neuroscience, and

⁸ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 61.

⁹ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 14.

¹⁰ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 63.

¹¹ Mark Ellingsen, "Social Media and the Costs of Distraction: Neurobiological Perspectives on the Quality of Life," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (2021): 54.

artificial intelligence to promote behavioral reinforcement and addiction.¹² The developers created the apps to stimulate the brains of its users and reward them occasionally to keep them engrossed. Because of this, many users, including teenagers, spend a large amount of time on their digital devices.

Developers use many design tactics to keep the users engaged. Recommendations of similar content at the end of videos or posts are used to keep people endlessly scrolling and streaming. Another tactic is read receipts. Some apps allow senders to be notified when a recipient reads a message. This pressures recipients to send a fast response to keep them engaged. Some social media sites use algorithms to gauge a user's interests. They present interesting information for the user in their feed to prevent the user from becoming bored. Notifications are sent to users when they remain idle. It entices the user to get on the app. Social media platforms desire to keep users invested in the virtual world. Every time people visit the platform, it gets harder for them to detach from their devices.

Screens produce reactions in the brain.¹³ Developers take advantage of the addictive adrenaline and dopamine effects to design their systems. Kardaras writes, "This addictive adrenal arousal is no accident. The video game business is a sophisticated, multibillion-dollar industry devoted entirely to creating addictive products aimed at defenseless kids and young people—like shooting fish in a barrel."¹⁴ The research and development departments of the gaming industry are focused on making games as stimulating and arousing to young people as possible. The most addictive games are the ones that sell the best. In fact, developers will connect gamers to electrodes and hire

¹² Elia Abi-Jaoude, Karline Treurnicht Naylor, and Antonio Pignatiello, "Smart Phones, Social Media Use, and Youth Mental Health," CMAJ Group, last modified February 10, 2020, <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/6/E136>.

¹³ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 3.

¹⁴ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 22.

neuroscientists to study them. If the gamers' blood pressure is not elevated and their body not producing sweat, the game is sent back to development.¹⁵

Negative Consequences

Being addicted to screens can lead to several negative consequences for teenagers. To pursue holiness, they need to be aware of the effects. The addiction to screens has led to introducing children to adult topics. Although the internet has made knowledge accessible, it has also exposed and sexualized young people. The internet has accelerated their development into adulthood. Any child with access to the internet can see almost anything they desire. They can stumble across violence and pornography. Childhood innocence is often stolen, and the notion of childhood is often blurred. Paradoxically, screen addiction lengthens adolescence. Drew Kizer observes, "Teenagers are getting their driver's licenses later, working less to earn money, moving out later, and getting married and having families at an older age."¹⁶ This phenomenon is often labeled "delayed social adulthood." In the technology area, adolescence is extended to young adults that are no longer teenagers. If a boy gets addicted, he may be addicted for life in a state of perpetual pleasure-seeking adolescence.¹⁷ Screen time causes emotionally stunted and apathetic boys to not mature into manhood. Kardaras asks, "How have we become a society of sexualized kids-as-adults but also, paradoxically, 30-year-old quasi-teenagers?"¹⁸

¹⁵ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 22.

¹⁶ Drew Kizer, *Dangerous Playground: The Christian and Social Media* (Florence, AL: Riddle Creek, 2019), 11.

¹⁷ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 39.

¹⁸ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 40.

Physical body effects. Screen addiction also negatively affects the physical body. Compulsive texting has created a condition called “text neck.”¹⁹ This condition is back, neck, and arm pain caused by excessive phone usage and bad posture. Other affects include eye strain, headaches, and hypertension.²⁰ In addition, screen time correlates to less exercise. Obesity rates in young people are rising at an alarming rate. They have doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the last thirty years.²¹ The more time teenage guys spend on their devices, the less time they remain physically active.

Aggression. Additionally, aggression increases the longer a person plays a violent game or watches violent content. In July 2000, before most screens were invented, the Congressional Public Health Summit, which was comprised of the six leading public health groups in the United States, all signed a statement linking entertainment and violence in children. In the same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released a report connecting school shootings with media violence. In 2007, the Federal Communications Commission showed there was strong evidence between violent programming and aggression in young people.²² Aggression is behavior that is intended to harm. Repetition has a significant effect on aggression, and the risk of violence strengthens as the gamer spends more time playing the game or the viewer spends more time watching the content. Leonard Sax, a psychologist and family physician writes, “Playing violent video games over a period of months and years appears to cause more aggressive behavior and more aggressive thoughts and feelings as well as decreased empathy.”²³

¹⁹ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 89.

²⁰ Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 200.

²¹ Anya Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2018), 24.

²² Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 138-9.

²³ Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated*

Behavioral problems. Other negative consequences of screen addiction are behavioral problems. Addiction can lead to poor academic performance, laziness, and impatience. Many teenagers do not know how to handle losing in real life because in video games, they can just turn off the console. It also leads to impulse control problems. Kardaras notes the danger of impulse control when he states, “People who have a harder time controlling their impulses also naturally tend to be more impulsive in other areas of their lives: trying drugs, drinking excessively, having sex.”²⁴ Increased exposure to screens also affects the attention span of young people.²⁵ The rapid changes and attention-grabbing nature of screens compromises their ability to sustain focus on tasks that are not attention-grabbing. Reading comprehension is better when reading from a physical copy of a book as opposed to a screen.²⁶ Attentional, behavioral, emotional, and developmental problems have all been caused by screen time.

Relational problems. Addiction to screens cause relational problems. Teenagers from Generation Z will experience less face-to-face interactions throughout their lifetimes. Because of screens, they do not know how to interact with others. They have a diminished ability to recognize facial expressions. They also have a lack of empathy for others because they are self-absorbed. They do not easily see the needs of others. Furthermore, it is estimated that an adult now makes eye contact between only 30 and 60 percent of the time in an average conversation. However, emotional connection is built when eye contact is made during 60 to 70 percent of the conversation.²⁷ The less eye

Boys and Underachieving Young Men (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 82-83.

²⁴ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 90.

²⁵ Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time*, 114.

²⁶ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 116.

²⁷ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 219.

contact people have, the less a connection is made between them. The effects of screens have been seen in adults, and it will certainly be seen in young people.

Addiction Control

It is important for teenage guys to know how to control their addictive behavior when it comes to screens. Many teenagers are predisposed to addiction through genetics. This predisposition makes it even harder for them to break free from their addiction to devices. Teenage guys need to be aware of any addictive behaviors. There are many indications such as staying up later in the night on a device. Another sign is if a teenage guy is anxious and angry when he is away from his device. Tech usage that impacts schoolwork, social life, and other activities is indicative of a problem. Other signs of addiction are hiding device usage from authority figures, being apathetic and bored easily, and experiencing fatigue and tiredness throughout the day. It is important to understand that addiction is not defined solely by time spent on digital devices. It is also defined as a lack of interest in other activities, anxiety caused by being away from devices, and practical problems at school or at home.

The initial step for many may be a total digital detox. It will be a fast from screens for an extended time of up to six weeks. A hyper aroused nervous system takes that long to reset itself.²⁸ This digital fast must be implanted slowly and not all at once. During the fast, it is important for teenagers to stay busy and avoid idleness. It is also important for them to connect to others. Addiction is isolating and genuine human connection is important. They should experience emotions like empathy, happiness, and understanding from others. Finally, during the fast, teenagers can immerse themselves in nature and the world around them. Engaging in real experiences and not virtual experiences is healing.

²⁸ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 238.

After the digital detox, teenagers can slowly implement devices back into their lives with restrictions. Teenagers should limit the time they spend on their devices. Andy Crouch states, “The biggest problem with most screen-based activities is that because they are designed to keep us engaged, we can learn them far too quickly.”²⁹ Often, this leisure activity keeps teenagers engaged for hours. Therefore, a set time limit for recreational screen time, like video games and social media, is important. One expert recommends no more than two hours.³⁰ After the limit has been reached, it should not be exceeded. Teenagers must also guard their sleep. They should stay away from screens before going to bed at night and after waking up in the morning. Consequently, it is recommended that phones be kept out of bedrooms. Additionally, consider keeping a digital sabbath. Have time each week where devices are turned off.

Devices can keep teenagers preoccupied and prevent almost any conversation from happening. Notifications and distractions keep any conversation from getting deeper. Therefore, to break addiction, human connection should be nurtured. Believers should value genuine relationships and spend time with others. In a world of Zoom and Skype, a commitment to be present must be made. People can only feel the full weight of joy and vulnerability only by showing up in person. In the greatest moments and the most difficult moments, human presence is beneficial. Life is meant to be lived together in genuine community, not isolated from others on digital devices. Crouch writes, “We need people who know us and the complexities and difficulties of our lives really well—so well that we can’t hide the complexity and difficulty from them. And we need people who love us—who are unreservedly and unconditionally committed to us, our flourishing and our growth.”³¹

²⁹ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 106.

³⁰ Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time*, 113.

³¹ Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 42.

Another step in breaking addiction is allowing teenagers to be bored. Creativity occurs and talents are discovered when young people are forced to entertain themselves. Increased screen time increases boredom. While technology promises to entertain and prevent boredom, it actually makes it worse. Technology causes people to be more prone to seeking out empty distractions. The more parents entertain their children with technology, the more bored they will get. Video games, social media, and videos are designed to be fast-moving and eye-appealing. They require little concentration and contemplation. Therefore, devices do not develop abilities to wait, explore, and think. Teenage guys need healthy hobbies.

Other steps in breaking device addictions are simple but hard to implement. Teenagers should be aware of device habits. They should maintain boundaries, turn off nonessential push notifications on devices to prevent them from interrupting the day, not immediately pick up a device when there are spare moments on a schedule. They should also delete time-wasting apps, use a real alarm clock, mute their phones during events and interactions. Teenagers should listen to their parents' guidance when it comes to screen time. Parents are aware that young people are spending too much time on their devices. According to a Pew Survey from 2015, almost half of parents of school-aged children stated that their children spend too much time on their devices.³² God has placed the parents in a life of teenage boys to shepherd them and guard their hearts. Parents should step up to this responsibility, and their children should obey their instructions.

Conclusion

For teenage boys in Generation Z, screen time is a significant issue. They are constantly connected to their devices. Ninety-two percent of them report going online daily. A quarter of those say they go online "almost constantly." Ninety-one percent of

³² Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time*, 5.

them go to bed with their devices.³³ Screen time can be an obstacle for holiness. To pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation, teenage boys need to overcome addiction issues with screen time by understanding the addictive design of platforms. Developers designed video games and social media to intentionally hook their users. They must also realize the negative consequences of screen time to pursue holiness. Screens may cause negative consequences such as unintentional exposure to immorality, prolonged adolescence, aggression, and obesity. Addiction to devices also causes behavioral and social problems. To pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation, teenage guys should know how to control addictive behavior. Digital fasts may be necessary, but guidelines and boundaries should be setup in a boy's life. While addiction to screens and devices is a real problem, it can be overcome. Scripture encourages believers to avoid addiction and not be enslaved or mastered by anything.

Psychological Issues

Almost every teenager is connected virtually. Social media is widely used. Almost 89 percent of Generation Z uses some type of social media.³⁴ The Generation Z percentage is expected to grow as the population gets older. One study states, "In the US, the proportion of young people between the ages of 13 and 17 years who have a smartphone has reached 89%, more than doubling over a 6-year period; moreover, 70% of teenagers use social media multiple times per day."³⁵ Also, video games are popular in Generation Z. Ninety seven percent of Americans between the ages of 2 and 17 play

³³ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 43.

³⁴ Jonathan McKee, *The Teen's Guide to Social Media: 21 Tips to Wise Posting in an Insecure World* (Uhrichsville, OH: Shiloh Run Press, 2017), 27.

³⁵ Abi-Jaoude, Naylor, and Pignatiello, "Smart Phones, Social Media Use, and Youth Mental Health."

video games, which is 64 million kids.³⁶ The numbers playing video games are rising each year.

There are many benefits of social media and video games. Teenagers enjoy social media and video games because of the connectedness they feel. They provide greater access to their friends, creates a feeling of inclusion, entertains them, allows for competition, and even enhances romantic relationships. For many, they create a sense of belonging even with people that live far away from each other. During the global pandemic that began in 2020, social media complemented education by fostering a community to learn together and creating an avenue for academic instruction.

However, there are many disadvantages and obstacles for holiness with social media and video games. Many issues are arising with the access to devices and the popularity of social media and video games. Many mental health experts believe that smartphones are destroying a generation of teenagers.³⁷ Social media and video games are creating a bad environment for teenagers, and their mental health is paying the price. To pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation, teenage boys must overcome psychological issues created by social media and video games. They need to understand approval seeking, mental health problems, and the challenge for adventure.

Approval Seeking

First, teenage boys overcome digital temptation by understanding that many teenagers use social media to find approval from others. Teenagers seek admiration from one another, and they cultivate an inordinate desire for approval through social media platforms. They judge themselves on the number of interactions, likes, and comments their posts receive. This judgement creates an environment where everyone feels as if

³⁶ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 11.

³⁷ McKee, *Parenting Generation Screen*, 7.

they must look and act a certain way. Teenagers want to fit in. In that search of that conformity, they try to stand out. They attempt to fit a mold to meet the approval of others because their search for individuality in the world is a pursuit for conformity with the world. Yet, the Bible calls believers not to conform to the world around them. Tony Reinke states, “What we think others think of us profoundly shapes our sense of identity and our search for belonging.”³⁸ Social media has become a barometer of self-worth because it tells teenagers exactly how popular and well-liked they are.

It also creates a celebrity culture where everyone wants to be popular and known. Many teenagers want glory, praise, and approval. Unfortunately, many people are addicted to their devices because they crave immediate affirmation and approval. To garner more interaction, some social media users are highly selective in representing themselves. “Content-creators continually objectify themselves through photo-manipulation, or ‘how much skin they show,’ in order to gain enough ‘likes’ to satisfy their longing for social acceptance, while experiencing some level of frustration in presenting a false or falsified reality.”³⁹ Many users only post successes on social media. The better the content, the more interactions. So, they make a post, and then watch an immediate response of statistics. They find approval in the responses of family members, friends, and strangers. Teenage boys want to fit in to find their identities. The amount of likes and interactions determine if they belong.

Christ warns his followers of seeking approval from others. Believers should avoid posting online with the motivation of being praised by others. Seeking the approval of others can be like a drug in that likes and retweets produce a dopamine response in the brain. In a study by UCLA, they discovered that “every time a teen’s picture, post, or

³⁸ Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 110.

³⁹ Taylor J. Bradman and David M. Gustafsonm, “Who Are We? Identity in a Social Media Age,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (2021): 108.

comment was ‘liked,’ their brain lit up in the area that produces oxytocin.”⁴⁰ The more responses users get, the more they seek it. They constantly must get another fix, and they are enslaved to it. The thrill of social approval has conditioned users to feed on validation given by every like, retweet, or comment. Lives have become more dependent on the approval of others because of this new physiological conditioning.

Teenage boys have to deprogram themselves from this online hunger. Reinke urges, “If you want to become an ‘Instagram celebrity,’ if you crave fame and seek it through self-promotion, I plead with you to stop. The urgency that you feel and that drives you online is caused by your fear of being unreplicated, unseen, and unloved.”⁴¹ Teenagers should be taught that validation does not come through delivering crowd-pleasing content. They should be encouraged to stop trying to impress the virtual world with their bodies or their intellect. Vain glory will not satisfy the human heart, but it will intensify the craving for human praise. Users who find themselves checking social media statistics each day to seek validation should reevaluate their social media presence altogether.

Although social media tempts teenagers into achieving worldly significance with immediate statistics like likes, views, and comments, the Bible instructs social media users to avoid prideful tendencies and pursue humility. Teenagers must not be more concerned with the applause of man than the affirmation of Jesus. They should avoid the temptation to forsake justification in the gospel for seeking to be right in their followers' eyes. Having friends, followers, likes, and comments does not make a person better or more accomplished. Teenagers should seek their worth in Jesus and not the prideful feedback of social media.

⁴⁰ McKee, *The Teen's Guide to Social Media*, 93.

⁴¹ Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 77.

Mental Health Problems

Anxiety and depression. Next, social media creates many mental health problems. It increases anxiety and depression among its users. A recent study among young adults showed that those who checked social media most often were more than twice as likely to show signs of depression compared to those who checked social media in moderate amounts.⁴² Another study showed that teenagers who spent less time on social media were happier than the ones who spent more time on social media. In fact, all screen activities were connected to less happiness.⁴³ Teenagers who spend the most time on social media are the most in danger of being depressed. Depression is dangerous. It is not just feeling sad and could lead to self-harm and suicide.

With the invention and popularity of the smartphone, depression in teenagers has skyrocketed. The sharp rise in symptoms of depression occurred at the same time smartphones became popular. This correlation shows that spending more time on digital devices and social media and less time with others correlates with depression. Nicholas Kardaras agrees when he states, “The more time spent on social media and the more texting a person does, the higher likelihood of not just depression but tech addiction as well.”⁴⁴ Social media use and long bouts of video games are associated with anxiety, depression, and narcissism.

Fear of Missing Out. The Fear of Missing Out is a real experience for many social media users today. Social media serves as a tool for comparison. People measure their lives against the lives of others, and it constantly feeds their “fear of missing out.” The Fear of Missing Out and social media are linked together. Teenagers constantly

⁴² McKee, *The Teen’s Guide to Social Media*, 99.

⁴³ Jean M. Twenge, *IGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria, 2017), 99.

⁴⁴ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 94.

check their phones to make sure they are not missing anything. They have status anxiety and disconnection identity. Teenagers do not want to miss out on the latest event or possession. The fear is others will get to experience pleasure from which they are absent. Jealousy can arise from seeing posts and videos from their friends and classmates. They may not want what others have, but they want it because they cannot have it. They also do not want to miss out on experiencing the newest trend or cultural event.

Another stress of the fear of missing out in social media and digital communication is the delayed response. After sending a message, it takes time to receive a reply. Many teenagers feel anxious after sending a text message and the receiver does not immediately respond. They question whether the other person is mad at them, did not like what they sent, or is offended. Not getting a reply to your text message has a high potential to cause anxiety. Social media is similar. Teenagers wait on others to like their post. If the likes come too slowly or not at all, they get anxious.

Loneliness. Additionally, social media leads to loneliness. The promise of social media platforms is that they will make you feel less alone. However, that is not reality. Ellingsen explains, “Contrary to the contention of those who believe that social media can broaden community, enhance friendships, and that it might even offer a sense of transcendence, in fact, neurobiology suggests that just the opposite is likely to happen with heavy reliance on social media.”⁴⁵ Teenagers who spend more time on social media feel more alone than those who do not. So often, teenage boys feel the agony of loneliness amid online connectedness.

The use of technology leads to isolation, and isolation leads to being lonely. Twenge writes, “The results are clear: screen activities are linked to more loneliness, and

⁴⁵ Ellingsen, “Social Media and the Costs of Distraction,” 51.

nonscreen activities are linked to less loneliness.”⁴⁶ Teenagers are lonelier today than ever before. This loneliness leads to a vicious cycle. Lonely teenagers spend more time on social media exactly because they do not have real-life friends. While social media apps may temporarily relieve their loneliness, it does not address the root need for real, in-depth connections with others. It does not satisfy the need for true human contact. Social media is an illusion of social connection.

Teenagers are no longer interacting with others. One study shows that the number of teens who spend time with their friends every day has been cut in half in just fifteen years. Recently, there have been especially steep declines.⁴⁷ Generation Z spends less time with their peers than any other generation. Time spent with friends in person has been replaced with spending time on devices. Teenagers who spend more time online find themselves lonelier. Teenage boys should be encouraged to put down their phones and controllers and seek out male companionship. God created people to live in relationships. Michael Foster and Dominic Bnonn Tennant argue, “There is a deep nonerotic intimacy that can and should exist among same-sex friendships. This intimacy is of a kind that cannot and will not exist among opposite sex friendships. . . . Sexual polarity is what forms the strong bonds of marriage—but sexual homogeneity is what forms the strong bonds of friendship.”⁴⁸ Men need friendships with other men.

Cyberbullying. To pursue holiness, boys also should understand the effects of cyberbullying, which is a significant problem with social media. In fact, it has surpassed bullying as the most experienced type of harassment for teenagers. Almost 70 percent of teenagers who say they are online almost all the time have experienced some form of

⁴⁶ Twenge, *IGen*, 103.

⁴⁷ Twenge, *IGen*, 91.

⁴⁸ Michael Foster and Dominic Bnonn Tennant, *It's Good to Be a Man: A Handbook for Godly Masculinity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2021), 145.

cyberbullying.⁴⁹ It is easy for teenagers to hide behind a keyboard and type comments they would not say in person. Name-calling, gossip, rumors, and offensive remarks are all common types of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is ruthless because it can anonymously occur at any time during the day or night. This fact makes it more relentless and crueler than typical bullying. Unless they give up their phones entirely, it is difficult to get away from online tormentors.

Humiliation, anger, isolation, and powerlessness are common emotional responses to cyberbullying. Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, academic issues, and physical effects are also common responses to cyberbullying. Bullying has been a huge risk factor in teenage suicide. However, cyberbullying is even worse. Sixty six percent of cyberbullied teens have at least one suicide risk factor, which is nine percent more than those who were bullied in person.⁵⁰

Teenage guys need to be aware of the power of words. Words can build someone up or they can destroy someone. Reinke writes, “In an age when anyone with a smartphone can publish dirt on anyone else, we must know that spreading antagonistic messages online, with the intent of provoking hostility without any desire for resolution, is what the world calls ‘trolling’ and what the New Testament calls ‘slander.’”⁵¹ Believers should not use social media to provoke and bully others. They should not spread false information, rumors, criticisms, and insults of others. Christians should not harm, belittle, mock, hurt, or destroy others in their words. This requires teenagers to be careful with what they post and send on social media. They should restrain words and not respond in anger, damage another’s reputation, gossip, and attack anyone. Believers must have

⁴⁹ Sherri Gordon, “Cyberbullying Surpasses Bullying as Most Common Type of Harassment,” VeryWell Family, last modified June 11, 2020, <https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-common-is-cyberbullying-4570942>.

⁵⁰ Twenge, *IGen*, 108.

⁵¹ Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 166.

graceful interactions and speech on social media. In the age of digital communication, they must conduct themselves honorably among those who are unbelievers. What they say in messages, what they post on Facebook, what they show on Instagram, and what they send on Snapchat communicates to a lost world. Christians need to resist the temptation to join in the griping, complaining, and bashing that so often appears in online communication. They need to avoid fighting, arguing, and spreading conspiracies and lies.

Sleep disruption. Teenage boys need to understand the sleep disruption caused by digital devices. In the book *Wild Things*, the authors write, “There’s clear evidence that the more visual media a boy takes in, the worse off his sleep, learning, and memory will be. The results of a study . . . discovered that television and computer-game exposure affects a child’s sleep and deteriorates his verbal cognitive performance.”⁵² When teenagers take their phones into their bedrooms, it leads to longer sleep latency, more sleep disturbance, worse sleep quality, and more daytime dysfunction. A study from England revealed that one out of five young people wake up regularly during the night to check social media.⁵³ Additionally, the blue light emitted from screens deceives the brain into thinking it is still daytime. This light makes it harder to fall asleep. Screens delay and interrupt teenagers’ sleep schedules, and teenagers today in Generation Z are more likely to have trouble sleeping than ever before.

Smartphones are the main cause of the recent increase in sleep deprivation. Teenagers should get approximately nine hours of sleep a night. Yet, the majority of teenagers in the United States are averaging fewer than seven hours each night.⁵⁴ A lack of sleep can lead to depression, compromised thinking and reasoning, poor academic

⁵² Stephen James and David Thomas, *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009) 132.

⁵³ McKee, *The Teen’s Guide to Social Media*, 173.

⁵⁴ McKee, *The Teen’s Guide to Social Media*, 172.

performance, susceptibility to illness, behavioral problems, limited exercise, and increased weight gain.⁵⁵ Phones and good sleep do not mix. Poor-quality sleep worsens every negative symptom tied to screen time.

To avoid sleep disturbances, teenage boys should be encouraged to turn off their devices before bed and leave it out of the bedroom. Limiting screen time in the evening is a necessity to avoid sleep disruption. Social media can cause teenagers to distract themselves and lose sense of time. They open their apps, scroll through content, and mindlessly consume posts hours on end. It is easy for them to get lost in the virtual world and forget about the real world.

Psychosis. Finally, teenage boys need to understand that excessive time spent playing video games could lead to psychosis and other psychological effects. Kardaras writes, “There is other clinical research pointing toward screens and video games as contributors to psychiatric disorders that present as schizophrenia and/or psychosis.”⁵⁶ Video games can lead to hallucinations, delusions, and psychosis. A condition called Game Transfer Phenomena can plague those who play games excessively. This condition causes gamers to see the shapes and patterns of their games intrusively in their thoughts and dreams. It also causes sufferers to hear sound effects, characters’ voices, and other noises from the game. Video games can also cause issues in brain development. Researchers found the more video games teenagers played, the more it affected development of microstructures in the brain.⁵⁷ Teenage boys should be made aware of these disturbing realities in obsessive video game play.

⁵⁵ Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time*, 23.

⁵⁶ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 17.

⁵⁷ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 18.

Challenge for Adventure

To pursue holiness, teenage boys should be challenged to step out of the virtual world. An underlying issue for digital consumption is the longing for adventure. Every day they are trapped in a land of make-believe, fighting a fake war, or battling a fake opponent as they stare mindlessly and endlessly into a screen. Men are wired for adventure. The craving for adventure is seen in boys at an early age. They do not just want to ride their bikes; they want to ride their bikes with no hands. They do not just want to play with their toy guns; they want to fight an entire war. They do not just want to throw the ball; they want to see who can throw the ball the hardest. Secular psychologists even affirm this idea. Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell both wrote extensively about the need for myth.⁵⁸ On a very deep and human level, people need myths. They need creation stories, hero's journeys, exciting parables, and adventurous tales.

Unfortunately, this hunt for exploration and competition is often corrupted and distorted as boys mature. Somewhere along the way, the desire for adventure that was once fulfilled through imaginative games is traded for addiction to a screen. Teenage boys find themselves preoccupied with social media, video games, and pornography. This reality has created a generation of men looking to satisfy their desire for excitement in fake women, fake romance, fake interactions, fake realities, fake games, and fake battles. They seek to fill their craving for exploration with computer screens and computer-generated images. They find a sense of purpose through a digital fantasy realm of adventure. Nicholas Kardaras explains, "As I worked with hundreds of gamers, it became apparent to me that many of these kids were looking for some sort of deeper connect and a sense of purpose."⁵⁹ The digital world has usurped the real world. For many teenage boys, it is preferred to the real world. One article in the *Pediatric Reports* states, "Virtual

⁵⁸ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 11.

⁵⁹ Kardaras, *Glow Kids*, 12.

reality becomes more attractive than the real one and can become the ‘non-place’ to escape from the complexity of everyday life.”⁶⁰

In the digital age, the divide between the real and the virtual is blurring. In a world of virtual school, virtual church, and virtual reality, the solution to one of the main problems for teenage guys is the opposite: Put down the phone, turn off the screen, and seek to be a part of a bigger story. Instead of suppressing masculinity, may they redirect it to something noble. Instead of mastering things of little value or no importance, may they master spiritual disciplines. Instead of seeking adventure in fantasy land, may they seek it in Godly ambitions. Instead of occupying themselves with fake people and fake fights, may they invest themselves into a real battle. It is a cosmic battle waging for the real souls of real people.

The church should open its doors to teenage boys, equip them, and send them to announce the gospel boldly and live for the gospel courageously. The church should encourage them to stop wasting time staring at a screen, but instead, chase worthy, meaningful, eternal pursuits. The church should be compelled to give them more responsibility, challenge them, and stretch them. A bored man is a dangerous man. Successful teenage boys need to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Men were created for adventure, the church can invite teenage boys to be a part of the greatest adventure.

Conclusion

The call to holiness is a call to step away from the negative psychological effects of social media and video games. Teenage boys can pursue sanctification by understanding that many people use social media for approval. They try to conform to the

⁶⁰ Daniela Smirni et al., “The Playing Brain. The Impact of Video Games on Cognition and Behavior in Pediatric Age at the Time of Lockdown: A Systematic Review,” *Pediatric Reports* 13, no. 3 (2021): 410.

world around them, but Jesus commands his followers not to conform. Teenage boys can pursue sanctification by understanding the mental health effects of social media and video games. They can lead to anxiety and depression, loneliness, cyberbullying, sleep disruption, and psychosis. Jesus urges his followers to transform their minds. Lastly, teenage boys can pursue sanctification by understanding the challenge for adventure. They must step out of the virtual world and into the real world. Jesus calls his followers to live for an eternal purpose.

Immorality Issues

Viewing pornography is rampant in the culture and has become a huge problem for today's society. The ease of access makes pornography a widespread problem for teenage boys. It has never been easier for teenage boys to view pornographic material than it is today. Not only is it easily accessible, but it is inexhaustible. Tim Challies writes, "A guy needs only to turn on his computer, and within two or three clicks of the mouse, he can have unlimited access to unlimited amounts of pornography."⁶¹ With the common use of smart phones, laptops, tablets, and gaming consoles, teenage boys have as much access to graphic sexual images as they desire at a young age. The average age of first internet exposure to pornography is nine years old.⁶² For teenage boys, it seems it is more difficult to avoid seeing pornography than it is to find it.

The church should know how to address the issue of pornography in teenage boys. A distorted view of sexuality of an entire generation is being shaped and formed by professional pornography creators who prey on them. Pornography mocks God's design for sex. Every message of pornography goes directly against God's intentions. It is vital for Christian parents and church leaders to confront the issues of viewing pornography

⁶¹ Tim Challies, *Sexual Detox: A Guide for Guys Who Are Sick of Porn* (Hudson, OH: Cruciform Press, 2010), 7.

⁶² Kamenetz, *The Art of Screen Time*, 73.

directly to help teenage boys understand how to deal with the problem. To pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation, teenage boys must overcome issues with sexual immorality caused by pornography. They need to understand the definition of sexual immorality, the damaging effects of pornography usage, and the strategies to avoid viewing pornography.

Definition of Sexual Immorality

First, teenage boys need to understand the definition of sexual immorality. Sex was created by God, and it is good. Every consideration of sexuality should begin there. God created men and women capable of sexual intimacy. God made humans sexual beings and gave them sex as a gift to enjoy. Sexual attractions and sexual desires are good, not sinful. Consensual sexual acts between a married couple are never a reason for shame. It should be honored, cherished, and enjoyed as the good gift that it is.

Although sex is a good gift from God, sex apart from marriage is sinful. God designed sex for the confines of a marriage covenant. The only proper place for sex is within the context of a lifelong commitment of marriage. This design can be seen in the creation account in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 2:24, it states, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Many believe this verse is a reference to marriage and sex. Scott Rae writes, “Most scholars believe Genesis 2:24 to be the first reference to the institution of marriage. . . . The concept of one flesh clearly involves a sexual unity, and throughout Scripture it is evident that sexual relations are restricted to the setting of marriage.”⁶³ Genesis 2:24 is quoted again in the New Testament in Matthew 19:5 and Ephesians 5:31. In both New Testament contexts, married couples are in view. From the beginning of time, God makes it clear that sex is reserved for marriage.

⁶³ Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 272.

Therefore, all sexual activity outside of marriage is sinful. David Platt states, “There is not one instance in all of God’s Word where God advocates or celebrates sex outside of a marriage relationship between a husband and a wife. Not one.”⁶⁴ There are numerous other biblical passages that appeal to the believer to avoid sexual immorality. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” Colossians 3:5 shows sexual immorality is part of the believer’s former life when it states, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Romans 13:13 implores believers to walk properly by avoiding sexual immorality. Paul calls sexual immorality a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:19. In Ephesians 5:3, he writes that sexual immorality should not be named among the saints.

Sexual immorality includes all sexual activity outside of marriage. God forbids sexual activity between two people who are not married to each other. The Bible calls this activity adultery. According to God, sexual activity outside of the confines of marriage is sin. However, sexual immorality encompasses more. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus states, “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Sexual immorality also includes sexual lust. To protect believers from desires that lead to sin, the Bible also prohibits sexual looking and sexual fantasy outside of marriage. It is sinful for a person to entertain sexual thoughts about another person who is not his or her spouse.

Lust is sinful when there is a mental desire for sexual sin. Therefore, pornography is sinful because it involves sexual thoughts, fantasies, and lusts. God commands believers to run away from them in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20. Platt concludes, “To the church in our culture, God says, ‘Flee from sexual immorality—any and all sexual thinking, looking, desiring, touching, speaking, and acting outside of marriage

⁶⁴ David Platt, *Counter Culture* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), 161.

between a man and a woman. Don't rationalize it, and don't reason with it—run from it. Flee it as fast as you can.”⁶⁵

Damaging Effects of Pornography

Next, teenage boys should understand the damaging effect of pornography. There are many damaging effects of viewing pornography. William Struthers, associate professor of psychology at Wheaton College, writes, “‘Is pornography bad, damaging or dangerous to our society?’ One need only look at the major cultural, technological, psychological, biological, and spiritual factors converging in our world today to see how pornography has become one of the trademark corruptions of humanity.”⁶⁶ Teenage boys should be taught the negative effects to them when they look at pornography. These effects can be persistent and can cause harm long after cessation of involvement.

Definition of pornography. This process begins with teaching an adequate definition of what pornography is. Pornography is not just pictures or videos of people performing sexual actions, but it is anything intended to cause sexual excitement or arousal. Therefore, pornography can include pictures and any other material, such as writings. It can include video game graphics. It can also include images sent through Snapchat and other sexting mediums. Pornography can be something as serious as a picture or video of people performing sexual activity or a simple advertisement on social media. Josh McDowell concludes, “While nearly everyone agrees that ‘an image of sexual intercourse’ is definitely porn, the issue of function seems to be at the center of most people’s thinking. If you use it for masturbation or personal arousal, it’s porn. Simple as that.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Platt, *Counter Culture*, 165.

⁶⁶ William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 43.

⁶⁷ The Barna Group and Josh McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of*

Many teenage boys believe pornography is just explicit images of girls, and they do not realize how simply pornography can be defined. This incomplete definition introduces boys to more explicit content. The porn industry intentionally uses “soft-core” pornographic images to desensitize young boys to porn. The images create a desire and curiosity for more explicit images. Since culture has attempted to define pornography as something worse than it actually is, sexually enticed materials have easily bombarded society and its entertainment. Television shows, movies, music, and other forms of entertainment are subtly filled with pornographic ideas and images. The perpetual barrage of sexual content has caused teenagers to become increasingly desensitized to its explicitness. John Feinberg writes, “Seldom do we encounter media without some appeal to sex. So common is this experience that we are hardly aware of it. The constant bombardment of depersonalized, seductive sex seems normal.”⁶⁸ Both men and women have to constantly be mindful to be on guard for sexual images.

Additionally, many voices in American culture have deceived teenage boys, and society as a whole, that pornography is not wrong nor is it a problem. In the past, certain sexual entertainment was taboo. Today’s society has been anesthetized to the idea that pornography might not be wrong. Every day these innocent boys are being sold the subtle lie that pornography is a harmless pleasure. These sexual graphics and content have a soul-numbing effect. With each exposure, pornography becomes normative and somehow a little more acceptable. As a result, many teenage boys do not see the destructive effects it can have on their lives. They are growing up with sex-saturated minds exposed to much sexual content, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to teach

Pornography in the Digital Age (Plano, TX: Josh McDowell Ministry, 2016), 16.

⁶⁸ John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 270.

them to accept a biblical theology of sex. They buy into the lie of the sexual fulfillment it promises while not realizing the damage it causes.

Addiction. Because of the pervasive nature of pornography, addictions are likely. Gary Collins explains, “An addiction is any thinking or behavior that is habitual, repetitious, and very difficult or impossible to control regardless of the consequences. Usually, the addiction brings short-term pleasure, but long-term consequences in terms of one’s health, relationships, psychological well-being, and spirituality.”⁶⁹ Addictions are progressive conditions that slowly exercise more and more control and power over the addicted person. As a teenage boy continues to view pornography, it begins to have more and more control over him. Many become addicted to viewing pornography.

Once addicted, the teenager might realize that the condition is harmful but stopping seems impossible to him. In fact, pornography rewires the brain in the same way drugs do. Human ejaculation compares with the euphoric states that are seen in heroin and cocaine use. Struthers argues that pornography addiction is caused by the brain storing a reinforced neurological pattern because “it involves the visual system, the motor system, the sensory system and neurological effects of orgasm.”⁷⁰

Addictions affect one’s life substantially. While there are many physical causes of addiction for substance abuse, there are no clear physical causes of behavior-based addictions like pornography. Instead, they are behaviors that gain prominence in one’s life. The behaviors slowly become more influential and more difficult to control. The more a person becomes addicted to pornography, the more the brain requires more stimuli to get the same excitement. Eventually, people will seek out more graphic or more

⁶⁹ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 682.

⁷⁰ Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy*, 99.

deviant porn to meet the needs of their addiction. Pornography leads to more pornography.

Behavior-based addictions have a foundation in social, psychological, and spiritual problems. These addictions may grow because a need is not being met in a beneficial way. Like other behavior addictions, sexual thinking and the increasing viewing of pornography grow because some need is not being met in a more effective, healthy, and less compulsive way. Steve Gerali explains the unmet needs of teenage boys when he writes, “Some adolescents may have sex when the real needs they seek to satisfy may be to increase self-esteem, alleviate a sense of loneliness, meet societal expectations of what it means to be ‘masculine,’ express anger or escape boredom.”⁷¹ Teenagers are viewing pornography and having sex as a way of expressing and satisfying nonsexual needs.

Although the term “pornography addiction” is not a clinical term, many counselors regularly treat people who are suffering from some sort of habitual pornography use. When writing about pornographic sexual addiction, Al Cooper, from Stanford University, stated, “This is a hidden public health hazard exploding, in part, because very few are recognizing it as such or taking it seriously.”⁷² People become addicted to pornography when they habitually and repeatedly view any content intended to cause sexual excitement or arousal. Unfortunately, many teenage boys have become addicted to pornography which may lead to acting out the behaviors seen in pornography. Addiction drives him to seek release through pornography and to also seek release by acting out the behaviors that now arouse him.

⁷¹ Steve Gerali, *Teenage Guys: Exploring Issues Adolescent Guys Face and Strategies to Help Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 87.

⁷² Jane Brody, “Cybersex Gives Birth to a Psychological Disorder,” *New York Times*, last modified May 16, 2000, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/science/health/051600hth-behavior-cybersex.html>.

Objectification. Another damaging effect of pornography is it causes teenage boys to objectify girls. Pornography affects the male mind and causes him to objectify women, to see them and think of them as a mental sexual partner. This objectification is degrading to women, and it violates the image of God in them. Eventually, their future sexual partners become nothing more than an object to be used for selfish desires and personal pleasure.

This effect will make real intimacy hard for teenage boys with a pornography problem. He will be selfishly focused on meeting his desires. His sexual excitement will become linked to isolation from others and a focus on self. Consequently, a man can have relations with his wife while having mental images in his head of women he has seen in pornography. In this situation, the man is using his wife to have an experience that relationally has nothing to do with her. Pornography is not relational and violates God's principle for sex. It incites lustful thoughts and sexual actions toward objects, pictures, and images rather than individuals. Andrew David Naselli writes, "You lust after the bodies of women, then you will think about women as sex objects to satisfy your sinful lusts rather than as fellow image-bearers."⁷³ God designed a man's mind to emotionally and relationally bond to his wife during sex. Pornography disrupts this natural bonding created by God. Seeking pleasure through pornography leads to hormonal and neurological consequences, which are designed to bind a man to the object he is focusing.⁷⁴

Desensitized and oversexualized mind. Furthermore, pornography desensitizes and oversexualizes teenagers' minds. Eventually, they will need more and

⁷³ Andrew David Naselli, "Seven Reasons You Should Not Indulge in Pornography," *Themelios* 41, no. 3 (2016): 482.

⁷⁴ Joe Carter, "Why Pornography Use Becomes a Habit," *Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission*, last modified June 29, 2015, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-pornography-use-becomes-a-habit/>.

more pornography to increase sexual arousal because excitement diminishes with repeated exposure to sexual scenes. Collins writes, “An internet image that might have been stimulating sexually at the beginning no longer stimulates after a while, and more explicit pornography is needed to achieve the same arousal.”⁷⁵ Teenage boys increase the likelihood of sexual dysfunction as they view pornography. In addition, pornography shapes views on sexual behavior and what actions are appropriate. Pornography addicts exaggerate the prevalence of most sexual practices. They become desensitized to violence and trivialize rape as a criminal offense. They also become increasingly insensitive toward female sexuality and concerns. A desensitized mind can lead to behaviors that are unacceptable. It often destroys intimacy between spouses. Additionally, communication becomes self-centered, and often expresses a desire to manipulate and control another person.

Unrealistic expectations. Additionally, pornography causes unrealistic expectations. Boys who view pornography often have unrealistic expectations of their partners’ appearance and behavior. A 2013 study by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner in England analyzed the effects of pornography. They concluded that pornography had a negative impact on teenagers because it created unrealistic beliefs about sex.⁷⁶ As a result of viewing content of digitally enhanced women, teenage boys will have a hard time seeing women as they truly are.

It also creates unrealistic expectations of performance. Pornography causes people to create expectations for sex that cannot be met in reality. Real sex is not similar to pornographic movies. Durations, positions, and moves of these materials are hard to duplicate or equal in the bedroom. Struthers explains, “Men believe they should make

⁷⁵ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 695.

⁷⁶ Barna Group and McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 90.

love like a porn star to a woman who should look like a porn star. Rather than being who he is with the woman he is with, he measures his performance against the performance he has seen.”⁷⁷

Steps to Avoid Pornography

Because of the sinfulness of pornography and its damaging effects, it is vital that teenage boys avoid viewing pornography. Although it is prevalent and pervasive, it is possible for teenagers to not indulge in looking at pornography.

Heart change. First, there must be a heart change. Lust is sinful. It is trying to satisfy a God-given desire through a medium that God did not intend for one to use. To lust after someone to whom one is not married is sinful. Immorality and sin are heart issues. Heath Lambert, the former executive director of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, claims viewing pornography is the last stop on a long road of sexual sins. He writes, “A dozen other things have gone wrong in your heart and mind by the time you look at porn. Foundationally, the battle begins in the heart.”⁷⁸ Pornography continually seeks to corrupt the heart. It works its way into their hearts and then seeks to grow as large as possible and take over as much of the boy as it can. Fighting a pornography issue is a spiritual issue, and there must be a heart change for a teenage boy to conquer his temptation. Pornography is a spiritual battle, and its temptations engage the mind and body.

The first step in a heart change is brokenness. Teenage boys have to be broken over their sin. Challies writes, “Porn is created to arouse the hardened heart, not the tender heart.”⁷⁹ When the damaging effects of pornography are revealed, it may produce

⁷⁷ Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy*, 60.

⁷⁸ Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 63.

⁷⁹ Challies, *Sexual Detox*, 34.

sorrow in a teenager's heart. However, the Holy Spirit must produce godly sorrow and not just worldly sorrow. Godly sorrow leads to repentance. It leads away from the self-centeredness of pornography. Godly sorrow produces a heart that desires to please God and not self. Biblical counselor Alasdair Groves states, "Looking at porn is just one of many ways that escapism, or excitement, or anger, or self-pity plays out. A man has to be committed to putting sin to death at a heart level—the underlying messages—not only at the level of behavior."⁸⁰

The next step is humility. Lambert states, "The root problem in men who look at porn is not neediness—it is arrogance."⁸¹ The cause of sexual sin in the heart is selfish ambition. The arrogance of desiring to see sexually explicit women in sinful ways, defying God's commands, and discarding God's design for sex must be rejected. When teenagers are broken and humble, they will begin to see a heart change that will help them avoid viewing pornography.

Healthy Alternative. Next, teenage boys need a healthy alternative to avoid viewing pornography. They are wired for adventure and competition. They are also sexually wired, and idleness breeds immorality. Those dominant masculine needs are gratified through pornography. Teenagers often find themselves watching pornography because of boredom and an undisciplined mind. Gerali believes, "We need to help guys find adventure, break the boredom, and discipline their minds by actively replacing porn with healthy pursuits."⁸² When teenagers are involved in healthy alternatives, their hunt for exploration is satisfied and their boredom is broken. Additionally, they should be encouraged to challenge themselves in different areas of life. They can be challenged

⁸⁰ Alasdair Groves, "Exposing the Lies of Pornography and Counseling the Men Who Believe Them," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27, no. 1 (2013): 22.

⁸¹ Lambert, *Finally Free*, 110.

⁸² Gerali, *Teenage Guys*, 89.

with a sport, craft, service project, or other worthwhile adventures. Talents and time can be spent engaged in worthy areas of obeying God and serving Him instead of looking at pornography. Their involvement with porn can decrease dramatically when they replace it with another alternative—one of real value.

Accountability. Finally, accountability is needed. Accountability is a necessary ingredient in the fight for freedom from pornography. Teenage boys need the help of others to avoid viewing pornography, especially since pornography is everywhere and targeted at them. Viewing pornography often happens while men are alone and isolated. Struthers remarks how accountability and confession bring sin into light when he states, “By confessing to another person, the isolating effect that porn has on a man will be reduced.”⁸³

Teenage boys need to set up an accountability structure with peers and mentors. James 5:16 states, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” When addressing sexual sin, Collins says, “Especially valuable is having an accountability relationship with some other Christian or group where there is prayer together and regular accountability reports.”⁸⁴ Sexual sin is a problem that is handled best by Christians meeting together to give support and accountability. There are many software programs that can help accountability partners and parents keep track of what the teenage boy is viewing on their devices. There are also internet filters that can block sexual content. Many boys may want to utilize this software.

Teenage boys should make conscious decisions to avoid any hint of sexually stimulating media, and accountability with the right people will help ensure it happens.

⁸³ Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy*, 180.

⁸⁴ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 354.

This accountability will require a trustworthy friend to whom permission is given to ask difficult questions about what is happening in one's sexual life. In a society that views deep male friendships as unmasculine, men have too few intimate male friends.

Teenagers should be encouraged to have friendships that go deep where the need for intimacy can be met in nonsexual ways. Tony Reinke writes about these friendships when he states, "We need something more powerful: accountability, transparency, and visibility, all in the context of relationship."⁸⁵

Teenagers should also be encouraged to choose a wise mentor that can be trusted with their private problems and sinful actions on the road to sanctification. Struthers explains, "The need for another human being to hear your sin and speak the forgiveness of Christ to you is part of being human and becoming sanctified. . . . Often men look for accountability with their peers, but a man needs a mentor to give wisdom that his peers cannot."⁸⁶ Choosing someone who is older and wiser will help the teenager fight the temptation to view pornography. Real accountability needs someone who has the biblical knowledge and practical wisdom to guide the teenage boy toward purity and a biblical sex ethic.

Conclusion

To pursue holiness, teenage boys must flee immorality. Challies writes, "Every single act of sexual sin reduces their ability to be an effective leader and an effective lover."⁸⁷ Teenage boys need to understand that pornography is sexual immorality, and it is sinful. It is so important to counsel teenage boys on pornography use because eternity hangs in the balance. Lambert concludes, "You cannot look at Jesus and look at porn at

⁸⁵ Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 146.

⁸⁶ Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy*, 181.

⁸⁷ Challies, *Sexual Detox*, 42.

the same time. You have to stop doing one to do the other.”⁸⁸ Teenage boys should understand the damaging effects of pornography. It rewires and changes their minds. Lastly, teenage boys can understand the strategies to avoid pornography. A heart change, healthy alternatives, and accountability is needed. Jesus commands his followers to flee sexual immorality. The digital landscape of today makes this avoidance difficult for teenage boys, but it is possible.

Conclusion

Teenagers in Generation Z are digitally connected to the internet. They constantly interact with social media and video games. Pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation is extremely difficult for teenage boys. To be holy, teenage boys should overcome addiction issues with screen time. They should understand the addictive design of platforms, realize the negative consequences of screen time, and know how to control addictive behavior. Additionally, to pursue holiness, boys need to overcome psychological issues created by social media and video games. They need to understand approval seeking, mental health problems, and the challenge for adventure. Finally, boys must overcome sexual immorality issues with pornographic material to pursue holiness. They should understand the definition of sexual immorality, the damaging effects of pornography usage, and the strategies to avoid viewing pornography.

⁸⁸ Lambert, *Finally Free*, 144.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of the project was to equip the teenage boys of First Baptist Church in Haleyville, Alabama to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. Teenage boys have many kinds of temptations on the technological devices they own. Social media, video games, and pornography lead them into addiction, behavioral problems, mental health issues, and immorality. The aim of the project was to help the boys identify these problems and provide ways to overcome these issues in their pursuit of sanctification. The focus of the project was a six-week curriculum designed for teenage boys. It was taught on six Sunday mornings between March 27, 2022, and May 8, 2022.

There were three goals to accomplish the purpose of the project. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of the dangers of digital temptation among teenage boys who attend FBCH. The second goal was to develop a six-week curriculum that would equip teenage boys to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation among teenage boys through their participation in a six-week training.

The impetus of the project stemmed from observing the struggles of the teenage boys in the student ministry at FBCH. Almost all the boys involved in the ministry had phones, tablets, and video game consoles while being unaware to the dangers of their devices. Some of the boys knew of the dangers but did not know how to handle the dangers. For most, the devices were obstacles in their pursuit of holiness. Some were addicted to their phone or their video games. Some were struggling with

mental issues like the Fear of Missing Out. Some were dealing with temptations to look at pornography. Since the issues were affecting their spiritual life, it seemed prudent to develop a curriculum to equip them to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. The curriculum consisted of six lessons that covered many of the issues they were dealing with in their lives. The objective of each lesson was to present a particular issue, specify the problems with the issue, and equip them with a biblical passage on the issue.

Development Stage

The development stage required assessing the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation among the teenage boys at FBCH, developing a six-week curriculum, and evaluating the curriculum.

Assessing the Current Understanding

The first step in the project was to develop a survey that would assess the current understanding of pursuing holiness among the teenage boys at FBCH.¹ The survey was a mixed-methods survey designed to be taken before and after the training sessions. This survey would determine their understanding before learning the curriculum and how they increased their knowledge after learning the curriculum. The survey had three sections. The first section obtained some demographic information about the teenage boys taking the survey. The second section gathered information about the participant's use of digital devices. The questions in this section were multiple choice. The third section gathered information on the participant's views about digital devices. It used a Likert scale and asked the participant if he agreed with certain statements about the use of devices, screen addiction, mental health issues, and pornography.

The SBTS Ethics Committee reviewed the survey and approved its use. Due to the students being under the age of 18, several requirements had to be met for approval.

¹ See appendix 1.

First, parents had to give agreement to participate. A consent form was created, and it outlined the protocols of the survey for their teenager. Also, the survey had to be anonymous. The boys selected a four-digit code to use on the pre-survey and the post-survey. The code allowed responses to be compared. They were encouraged to write down their code to ensure they would remember. In early March 2022, the project was explained to the teenage boys of FBCH. The consent form was given to the boys. The boys' parents were also sent a link to the consent form. The survey was an online survey on Google forms. After the agreement to participate, the boys were sent a link to the survey. There were 15 boys who returned the survey.

After the teenagers took the survey, the surveys were assessed, and the boys' responses influenced the curriculum. The survey revealed insight into their use of devices. The majority of the boys received a digital device when they turned 10 years old. As a group, they have access to six different devices. All of them were on social media. There were 11 different social media platforms the boys were using. All of them were using Instagram and Snapchat. Eighty percent of them played video games. The surveys also revealed many of the struggles the boys were facing in their pursuit of holiness. Based on their surveys, 80 percent of them believed they spend too much time on their devices. Most of them spent over five hours a day on their devices. Sixty percent had viewed pornography.

The curriculum² was written in six sessions that lasted six weeks. Each session had a main idea that established the objective of the lesson. Each session had a few teaching points that supported the main idea. Lastly, each session had questions for the boys to discuss. The hope of the questions was to reinforce the lesson and cultivate community and accountability among the teenage boys.

² See appendix 3.

Writing Session 1

The first session was titled “God’s Call to Holiness.” The main idea of the session was to prove that Christians are called to pursue holiness. The purpose of the session was to provide a foundation on the importance of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation. The lesson used the biblical passages that formed the biblical and theological basis of the project. The lesson had four points.

The first point was that holiness is being set apart. In this point, the definition of personal holiness was taught. Holiness is a major theme in the Bible. It is separation from evil. It is living a pure life. It is being free of sin and obeying God’s law. Holiness is being separated from sin. In fact, the root meaning of the Hebrew word for holiness is “separation.” Through Ephesians 4:22-24, the participants learned that holiness is the goal for Christians and should be pursued.

The second point was that we pursue holiness by pursuing God. Using 1 Peter 1:13-16, the participants learned God saved Christians to be holy, and He commands them to be holy. Pursuing God always leads to holiness. God’s promises are true. Believers can overcome the temptations around them because they know the joy of the future is incomparable. Therefore, Christians must prepare their minds and be ready for action. Holiness is not passive but active. It is being alert for the temptations around Christians and self-controlled with the distractions within Christians. They are to be obedient to Jesus in every area of their lives.

The third point was that we pursue holiness by transforming our minds. Using Romans 12:1-2, the participants learned they should not conform to the culture around them, but they should be transformed. While Christians live in a sinful world, they cannot be squeezed into its mold. They should avoid letting the world around them tempt them to stop pursuing holiness. They are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices. Additionally, they are to renew their minds. They should adjust their way of thinking and change their sinful thought patterns. Paul writes that a renewed mind leads to discerning God’s will.

The fourth point was that we pursue holiness by fleeing immorality. By studying 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, the participants learned they should flee idolatry and sexual immorality. Although Christians are free in Christ, they are not free to worship idols. It is easy to become enslaved to activities, people, or sins. Christians should not let anything control or dominate them. Also, because of their union with Christ, they cannot participate in any immorality. Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit. So, Paul commands them to flee sexual immorality. Sexual immorality can be defined as any activity outside of God's design for sex.

Writing Session 2

The second session was titled "Screen Time." The main idea of the session was to show that pursuing holiness is redeeming the time by overcoming screen addiction. The purpose of the lesson was to show the negative consequences of being addicted to digital devices and encourage the participants to avoid being addicted to their screens. The lesson was introduced by relating the villain in *Incredibles 2* to screen addiction. The lesson had four points.

The first point was that teenagers of Generation Z are addicted to their devices. Generation Z is the first generation who have known the internet their entire lives, and they are constantly connected to it. It is with them everywhere in their pockets, in their classrooms, and in their homes. The point also taught signs of a person experiencing screen addiction. Those include staying up later in the night on a device, being anxious and angry when away from a device, hiding device usage from authority figures, being apathetic and bored easily, and experiencing fatigue and tiredness throughout the day. Technology usage that impacts schoolwork, social life, and other activities is indicative of a problem.

The second point was that technology was intentionally created to keep us engaged. The lesson taught that research and development departments design social

media platforms and video games to keep the user engaged as much and as long as possible. They keep users addicted by manipulating dopamine responses in the brain. Additionally, the lesson taught tactics companies use to keep users engaged. Auto play, similar content suggestions, read receipts, and random notifications are employed to keep users on their devices.

The third point was that screen addiction can lead to negative consequences. Addiction is harmful to the physical body because of conditions like neck pain and obesity. Addiction is harmful to mental health because it can cause violent thoughts, violent behavior, less empathy for others, and depression. Addiction is harmful to behavioral health because it leads to laziness, poor academic performance, and lower attention span.

The fourth point was to redeem the time. Using Ephesians 5:15-17, the participants were challenged to make the most of every opportunity and every moment they are given. Time is a valuable resource that cannot be replaced. It should be used wisely. Pursuing holiness with screens requires Christians to not be enslaved to their screens and using their time wisely. Furthermore, participants were taught how to end screen addiction. Several recommendations were given on how to break habits.

Writing Session 3

The third session was titled “Approval and Fame.” The main idea of the session was to show that pursuing holiness is not seeking approval and identity through social media but finding it in Jesus. The purpose of the lesson was to show that it is easy to seek approval and find identity in social media accounts. Instead of searching for approval and identity in worldly affairs, be secure in Jesus. The lesson was introduced by detailing the story of William Burgess Powell who suffered from amnesia and forgot his identity. The lesson had three points.

The first point was that many are tempted to use social media to find approval. Due to the instant feedback of social media platforms, it is easy for people to look for approval and validation through it. Because of that, a desire for affirmation through social media platforms is cultivated. Approval is found in the responses of family members, friends, and strangers. It is found in the number of likes, retweets, and comments a post gets. However, having numerous friends, followers, likes, and comments does not make someone a better or more accomplished person. Unfortunately, social media has become a barometer of self-worth for many teenagers who have accounts.

The second point was that people are tempted to use social media to find identity. Due to the access of social media platforms, it is easy for teenagers to look for popularity and fame. Social media creates a celebrity culture where everyone wants to be known. As a result, it is used for self-promotion. This behavior causes teenagers to be fake, wear masks, or glamorize their lives to make them seem better or more interesting than they really are. To garner more interaction, some teenagers are highly selective in representing themselves and only post successes on social media. Teenagers want to fit in but in that search of that conformity, they try to stand out from others.

The third point was that believers need to find security in Jesus. Through reading John 1:12, the participants were taught they are children of God. He designed them and created them. He purchased them and redeemed them. They should be secure in who He says they are. As Christians, identity is found in Jesus, not in this world and not in social media accounts. Every person has a desire and a longing to be loved, to be accepted, to be wanted, and to belong, but he will not find that on the internet. Christians are totally known and deeply loved by Christ. Therefore, teenagers have to deprogram themselves from seeking to be liked and seeking to be known on social media. Validation does not come through delivering crowd-pleasing content. Believers should seek to find worth in Jesus and not the prideful feedback of social media.

Writing Session 4

The fourth session was titled “Mental Awareness.” The purpose of the lesson was to teach participants the various mental health problems social media causes and to encourage them to gain control over their minds. The lesson was introduced by explaining how many businesses unethically use the bait-and-switch tactic. Social media and video games promise connectivity but delivers mental health issues. The lesson had six points.

The first two points taught students that social media causes anxiety, depression, and loneliness. The more time a person spends on social media, the more depressed he becomes. Teenagers who spend the most time on social media are the most in danger of being depressed. The fear of missing out on activities and events has become an issue of teenagers. They do not want to miss out on experiencing the newest trend, cultural event, or latest gadget. They also compare themselves to others which causes depression and anxiety. Additionally, just like with depression, the more time spent on social media, the lonelier the teenager becomes. The use of technology leads to isolation, and isolation leads to being lonely.

The third and fourth points taught students that social media leads to cyberbullying and losing sleep. Name-calling, gossip, rumors, and offensive remarks are all common types of cyberbullying because it is easy to hide behind the anonymity of a screen. It is easy for people to say things online they would not say in person. The effects of cyberbullying are humiliation, anger, isolation, powerlessness, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, and academic issues. The participants were challenged to recognize the power of their words and to use them wisely on social media. Moreover, social media and video games cause sleep deprivation. The majority of teenagers in the United States are averaging fewer than seven hours each night because of their devices. A lack of sleep can lead to depression, compromised thinking and reasoning, poor academic

performance, susceptibility to illness, behavioral problems, limited exercise, and increased weight gain. The participants were challenged to protect their sleep.

The fifth point was that video games can lead to psychosis. Excessive time spent playing video games can lead to psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia and psychosis, hallucinations and delusions, and Game Transfer Phenomena. Video games can also cause issues in brain development. The participants were encouraged to be aware of the disturbing realities in obsessive video game play.

The final point was to take captive their thoughts. Using 2 Corinthians 10:5, the participants were taught to control their thoughts. It is easy to be passive and allow social media content to warp their thoughts. However, Paul tells Christians to take captive every thought. What the mind is fed controls what thoughts it has. The participants were challenged to put their phones down and feed their minds with holy thoughts.

Writing Session 5

The fifth session was titled “Pornography.” The main idea of the session was to show that pursuing holiness is running from the dangers of pornography. The purpose of the session was to teach the participants the consequences of viewing pornography and encourage them to flee from it. The lesson was introduced by explaining the problem of asbestos. It was commonly used before people realized the dangers it caused. Many do not realize the dangers of pornography. The lesson had four points.

The first point was that pornography is anything that elicits lust. Pornography is not just pictures or videos of people performing sexual actions, but it is anything intended to cause sexual excitement or arousal. It can be something as serious as a video or a simple advertisement on social media. If it causes someone to lust, it is porn.³ Because many teenagers believe pornography is more than that simple definition, they

³ The Barna Group and Josh McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age* (Plano, TX: Josh McDowell Ministry, 2016), 16.

are introduced to more explicit content without realizing it. Since culture has defined pornography as something worse than it is, sexually enticed materials have easily bombarded society and its entertainment. The perpetual barrage of sexual content has caused teenagers to become increasingly desensitized to its explicitness. The participants were encouraged to be on guard constantly.

The second point was that pornography is addictive. The more a person views pornography, the more it controls him. Pornography literally rewires the brain because it involves the visual, motor, and sensory systems and stores a reinforced neurological pattern. This pattern leads to searching out more graphic or weirder porn to get the same thrill. Porn leads to more porn.

The third point was that pornography has damaging effects. It is not a harmless pleasure. It leads to objectifying girls, a more difficult time with intimacy, a desensitized and oversexualized mind, and unrealistic expectations. Pornography is not relational and violates God's principle for sex. It destroys intimacy and communication because it is self-centered, and often expresses a desire to manipulate, control, or hurt another person.

The fourth point was to flee immorality. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 that God's will for sanctification is abstaining from sexual immorality. To be holy, Christians cannot participate in sexual sin. Using Job 31:1, the participants were encouraged to make a covenant not to lust and to flee sexual immorality. Teenage boys should set up guardrails in life to keep it free from the prevalence of pornography. They should pray for a heart change. A person cannot look at Jesus and porn at the same time. The gospel transforms hearts, minds, and attitudes. Believers should also avoid situations where it is tempting to look at porn.

Writing Session 6

The sixth session was titled "Adventure Seeking." The main idea of the session was to show that pursuing holiness is pursuing God's will. The purpose of the session

was to teach the boys that God has designed them for a purpose. The virtual world of video games, social media, and pornography has caused them to abdicate their responsibility to serve God. The lesson was the concluding lesson of the curriculum, and its goal was to give the participants a challenge to live for a purpose bigger than themselves. The lesson had three points.

The first point was to leave the virtual world. Ephesians 2:10 showed the boys that God created them for good works. Men were wired to seek adventure. They want to explore and discover. They want their lives to matter. Unfortunately, this hunt for exploration and competition is often corrupted and distorted as boys mature. Somewhere along the way, the desire for adventure is traded for addiction to a screen. The digital world has usurped the real world. In a world of virtual school, virtual church, and virtual reality, the solution to one of the main problems for teenage boys is the opposite: Put down the phone, turn off the screen, and seek to be a part of a bigger story.

The second point was to pursue human connection. Screens hurt authentic human connection. With the huge rise of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, genuine relationships are needed. God created humans for community. John 15:12-13 challenged the participants to sacrificially love the people around them and to pursue deep relationships.

The third point was to pursue God's will. Acts 20:24 implored the participants to use their lives to expand God's Kingdom. God designed believers for the purpose of making Him known. Jesus has offered men a real, not a virtual, life of adventure in which they can experience the challenge, thrill, and joy of being part of a purpose greater than themselves. God created men to be a part of the greatest adventure of all; it is the adventure of living a missional life.

Implementation Stage

After developing the curriculum, it was sent to an expert panel of six student pastors that serve throughout the state of Alabama. The panel gave feedback through the utilization of a rubric.⁴ Each student pastor gave positive feedback. The theology, applicability, and relevance were all commended. While they graded the curriculum as exemplary in almost every area, they still suggested some edits and corrections. The biggest suggestion given by multiple student pastors was to have the main idea of every lesson include the phrase “pursuing holiness.” Other recommendations were to add more about cyberbullying and incidental pornography exposure for younger teenagers. Upon applying the recommendations, the project was ready for implementation.

In March 2022, the project was promoted to the teenage boys of FBCH. It was promoted through announcements in church services, messages sent directly to parents, and social media posts on Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, teenage boys were personally invited and encouraged to come. A text message group was setup to communicate with the participants throughout the course. Through the group message, announcements and reminders were sent each week.

The curriculum was taught during the Sunday school time on Sunday mornings starting March 27, 2022. The sessions lasted 60 minutes. The boys met in one large room, and breakfast was provided each week. On average, there were twelve boys in attendance each week of the training sessions. After the curriculum was taught each week, the boys discussed the wrap-up questions. The study concluded on May 8, 2022, and the post-curriculum survey was administered after session six.

Evaluation Stage

After teaching the curriculum, the pre-curriculum and post-curriculum survey results were compiled and studied to see if the project achieved the goal of

⁴ See appendix 2.

increasing knowledge. Using a t-test for dependent samples, the survey showed a statistically positive increase in the thirteen participants who took both surveys. Table 1 shows the scores of each student. The survey results show that every student increased his knowledge because of the training sessions.

Table 1. Paired respondent survey scores

Respondent	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
2222	59	66
7877	59	67
2231	68	71
1234	48	67
8219	63	68
2982	54	68
0440	54	65
2580	42	67
4123	53	54
3333	36	65
4343	50	67
5678	52	68
6655	48	63

Conclusion

The implementation of this project trained the teenage boys of FBCH to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. Through the six-week curriculum, the boys were able to learn how to overcome common temptations on digital devices. They

learned about screen addiction, psychological effects, and pornography. The goals of this project were successfully met, and expectations were exceeded.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter is an evaluation of the effectiveness of the project to equip the teenage boys of FBCH to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. Based off the project's purpose, it sought to teach the boys the importance of holiness and how to handle screen addiction, psychological issues, and pornography on digital devices. Many teenage boys are on their own when it comes to digital devices. The project's aim was to equip the boys to handle the temptations thrown at them using technology. The project's success was determined by evaluating the project's purpose and the goals outlined in chapter 1. Additionally, reflecting on the entire process of the project and determining what worked and what should be improved offered further value to the project.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of the project was to equip the teenage boys of First Baptist Church in Haleyville, Alabama, to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. To accomplish this purpose, a survey was given to assess the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation. After analyzing the results, a six-week curriculum was developed, evaluated, and taught to the teenage boys of FBCH. The intent of the project was successfully accomplished through the curriculum. While there were some inconsistencies with attendance, the attendance was great during the implementation of the project. The project successfully achieved its stated purpose.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The project had three goals that guided the work. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of pursuing holiness in the face of the dangers of digital

temptation among teenage boys who attend FBCH. This goal was measured by administering a survey on the dangers of digital temptations to the teenage boys of FBCH. Proper permission was received from the survey participants, and the Understanding Digital Temptations Survey was administered to the teenage boys using Google Forms. Fifteen boys completed the survey which was the goal. The results of the survey provided beneficial information and needed insight into the boys' current understanding of digital temptations. Therefore, the project successfully accomplished the first goal.

The second goal was to develop a six-week curriculum that equipped teenage boys to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptations. The curriculum consisted of six sessions that taught the teenagers about the pursuit of holiness, screen addiction, harmful effects of social media and video games, pornography, and purpose. After the curriculum was written, it was submitted to an expert panel of student pastors for evaluation. The panel consisted of six student pastors serving throughout the state of Alabama. They utilized a rubric to evaluate the curriculum's faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability. The goal was successfully met when a minimum of 90% of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level. The project successfully achieved the second goal.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation among teenage boys by using a six-week curriculum about digital temptations among social media, video games, and pornography. The teenage boys who completed the initial survey also completed the training sessions. After teaching the curriculum, the same survey taken before the sessions was taken again. Then, the results were compared using a t-test for dependent samples. The survey used a Likert scale and assessed the boys' knowledge and opinions. The pre- and post-curriculum survey questions were identical. The results were revealing. The t-test was set up with the value of $p=.05$. This p-value indicates that it is more than a 95 percent chance that variations in

answers were not due to chance but were due to changes in knowledge about pursuing holiness following the training sessions. The results of the t-test demonstrated a statistically significant difference resulting in the change in knowledge. As a result, the goal was successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-curriculum survey scores: ($t_{(12)} = -5.639, p < .0001$). Additionally, there was a statistical improvement among every individual teenage boy who participated in the class. The project fulfilled the third goal.

Strengths of the Project

The biggest strength of the project was the relevant content. When I introduced the study, parents expressed excitement because of the need to teach the content about digital devices. Several talked to me about problems they encountered with their son and his screen time. Many parents of younger sons who were not teenagers asked if their son could participate in the class. When I sent the curriculum to the expert panel of student pastors, every one of them mentioned that the content was relevant and needed with the students in their ministry. Several said it was timely and applicable. Additionally, the boys who went through the class were craving information on how to handle temptation on their digital devices. From the pre-survey, I saw that the boys struggled with many of the issues we would discuss in the curriculum. Each week, they were eager to learn more and apply what they learned. For many, it was their first-time hearing about many of the topics. It was good seeing them engaged, asking quality questions, and authentically interested in what I was teaching them each Sunday. I enjoyed the discussion we had every Sunday and looked forward to it each week. The content was relevant to them and applicable for them. It dealt with everyday issues they faced.

Another strength of the project was the reproducibility. I wanted to create a curriculum that could be utilized by other student ministries. Digital temptation is a struggle for most teenage boys, and I wanted to write a valuable resource other student

pastors could use in their ministry context. The six-session curriculum with discussion questions are all easily transferable and customizable to any ministry and any church. As student pastors and other church leaders grasp the reality of the struggles teenagers face with their technological devices, I hope many will find the curriculum for this project helpful.

Also, I believe the first lesson was a strength for the entire curriculum. The lesson gave a foundation of what holiness was and how to pursue it. It did not talk much about digital temptation. Because of that, one of the panelists on the expert panel stated that the lesson was “odd.” However, after teaching the curriculum, the lesson gave an excellent foundation for the entire six weeks. In each lesson, the first lesson was referenced. Throughout the curriculum, the passages in the first lesson became more and more relevant and practical for the students.

The fourth strength of the project was the relationships it built among the boys. At the beginning of the curriculum, the group had a wide range of boys. There were middle schoolers and high schoolers. There were consistent FBCH members who attend every Sunday morning and boys who rarely attend FBCH on Sunday mornings. At the start, many of the boys were uncomfortable around each other. However, by the end of the training sessions, the boys had developed a good rapport with each other. They realized they had much in common. They also realized that they were together in their pursuit of holiness. One of the main points of the curriculum is that we need community. It was very encouraging to see that community emerge through our six-week course. I pray the boys will continue to develop the friendships that the class initiated. I also pray the boys will encourage and challenge one another in their pursuit of holiness.

Weaknesses of the Project

The biggest weakness of the project was inconsistent participation. While each session was well-attended, many of the boys missed some of the weeks. The first lesson

was taught on the Sunday following the school's spring break. Many were absent on this Sunday due to trips and vacations. Additionally, there were a few students who missed weeks because of parental custody. They had to stay with their other parent a few weekends and were unable to attend FBCH. Also, spring sports were occurring and caused some boys to miss because of practices and games. Some had to be away for baseball, golf, track, and basketball. While inconsistent participation was a weakness, I cannot think of a solution to solve it. There will be boys who miss because of parental custody and sports no matter what time of year the class is offered. If the class was held on a different day of the week, practices and games would still be occurring. However, participation in the class was higher than I anticipated. We had a few students attend the class that had never attended FBCH on a Sunday morning. The average attendance of the class was higher than the average attendance on a typical Sunday.

Another weakness of the project was the age gap in the boys. There were seventh graders through twelfth graders participating in the class. At times, it was difficult to teach on a level seventh graders would understand while still engaging the older boys. Additionally, the younger boys and the older boys had different levels of temptation. I wanted to maintain the innocence of the younger boys while also speaking to the concerns of the older boys. Furthermore, different subjects were more applicable to each age group. For example, the middle schoolers really resonated with cyberbullying. The high schoolers were really interested in learning more about the damaging effects of pornography.

Lastly, time became an issue with many of the sessions. The class met at the normal small group time on Sunday mornings at 9:00. The worship service begins at 10:00 which leaves an hour for the curriculum to be taught each week. During many of the weeks, the class had to end before discussion was over because of the schedule. The curriculum was thoroughly taught, but the participants had many questions and thoughtful responses during the discussion questions. I believe having to end each week

without answering all the questions became a weakness for the project. More time needed to be allotted for the sessions.

What Should Be Done Differently

Parents are vital in discipleship. They should be the primary disciple-makers of their children. In addition, it seems parents are unaware of many of the dangers of digital devices. Therefore, I would design the training sessions where parents are involved in the project. It is important for them to learn the content presented as well. If I had to do the project over, I would write a curriculum that parents and their sons could go through together. I would also design a follow-up plan that assisted parents in the discipleship of their son. Parents will guide and set rules for their sons with technology use, so it is important for parents to understand the subject material.

Additionally, I would offer two separate classes for middle school and high school boys. As stated in the weakness section, the age gap in the boys caused a few issues. Creating two separate classes would solve those issues. I would be able to teach on a level of the age group and speak about concerns that each group had in their season of life. While this separation would have required more time and creative scheduling, I believe it would have been valuable for everyone involved.

After researching the project and implementing the project, I realized that the issues with digital devices are not affecting only teenage boys. Teenage girls are struggling with the same issues, even with pornography. I chose to focus on teenage boys because the issues could be better addressed by separating genders, but if I had to do it over, I would teach the curriculum to both genders. Then, I would separate them for the discussion questions.

Theological Reflections

When I was in college, I read *The Pursuit of Holiness* by Jerry Bridges that transformed my view on sanctification. I realized the importance of being holy because

God is holy. I understood that God called His people to be holy. While that is a great insight to have, it is increasingly hard to teach teenagers to pursue holiness in their lives. So often, they pursue worldly ambitions and not the eternal ambition of sanctification. When it comes to smartphones, videogames, and other digital devices, it seems that teenagers do not even think about holiness.

I have served in student ministry for over a decade and have noticed that there was a huge disconnect when it came to holiness and digital devices. Teenagers are constantly looking at a screen, especially in today's world of pandemic protocols and increased technology. This behavior will only get worse when virtual reality headsets are more affordable. Early in my ministry, I longed to teach students the theological concept of holiness and apply it to digital devices. While I have attempted to do that through Wednesday night messages, nothing substantial was ever developed. This project challenged me to teach teenage boys how to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation in a biblical way. Although the Bible was written thousands of years ago, it is encouraging to me that its principles still guide us in today's world. The Bible has much to say about digital temptation even though the technology could not have been imagined when the Bible was written.

Additionally, the exegetical work required for the project was intense and, at times, overwhelming. While I complete exegetical work for my weekly messages, the requirements for the project made me dig deeper than I have before in my study times. I have never looked at a passage through so many academic commentaries. Because of that, I was able to understand the passages better. My ability and confidence to accurately interpret the Bible has been refined and sharpened through completing this research project.

I studied three passages in particular for the project, 1 Peter 1:13-16, Romans 12:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. I was amazed at the consistency and similarity in the three passages when it came to pursuing holiness. First, God's call in 1 Peter is that His

people set their alert and sober minds on the hope to come. In Romans 12, Paul calls us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Next, in 1 Peter, we are commanded not to be conformed to our past sinful desires. Paul tells us in Romans to not be conformed to the pattern of the world. In 1 Corinthians 6, we see the pattern of this world is immorality. Additionally, Romans 12 compels us to offer our bodies to be living sacrifices. First Corinthians compels us to honor God with our bodies. Lastly, I thought it was interesting that Paul writes about avoiding enslavement in the same passage he talks about sexual immorality. Sexual sin is deeply enslaving. All three of the passages were highly applicable to pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation.

Personal Reflections

After researching and reading many books on technology, it was alarming to me to see the effects it is having on teenagers. Social media, video games, and pornography are causing a mental health epidemic in our country. Seeing the statistics on the rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness in teenagers was frightening. Seeing the statistics on pornography usage among teenage boys was even more distressing. Teenagers have access to anything and everything in the palm of their hands, and that is worrisome. The research motivated me to present the information in the curriculum well. I wanted to get the dangers of technology across to the teenage boys. I believe the culture they live in does not accurately relay the alarming details. I hope my work in this project can be used in other ministries to impact the next generation in positive ways. I also hope my work will help parents as they raise their students. I pray it will equip the church and Christian families to assist teenage boys in pursuing holiness.

Additionally, while I am not a member of Generation Z, upon researching and studying to write the third chapter of my project, I discovered I have many of the same issues with my technological devices. Specifically, I believe I spend too much time on my phone. Many times, I find myself drawn to my phone when there is any sort of down

time. Whenever I go somewhere, I feel as if I need to have my phone. I also believe technology causes sleep disruption in my life. Often, I think I need to keep my phone turned on because of the nature of my job which leads to notifications waking me. It was convicting to read about these issues and see them reflected in my own personal life. The material helped me overcome the problems in my life. Jay Adams wrote, “The pastor must not think of the phone as his master, but rather as his servant.”¹ I need to remember this very practical truth as I use my phone for ministry.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to equip the teenage boys of First Baptist Church in Haleyville, Alabama to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. Through the work of this project, much prayer, and help from the Holy Spirit, I was able to develop and implement a biblical curriculum that led to meaningful life change in the lives of the teenage boys of FBCH. The Bible study, conversations, and discussions we had in the class was phenomenal. The statistical improvements among every participant were encouraging and fulfilling. The difference the class made in the lives of the students and how they handle their digital devices was fulfilling to me.

Even after the six-week class, I am still seeing its results in my ministry. Attendance is still high on Sunday mornings. The boys seem to be more open and transparent with one another in their small groups. Furthermore, they earnestly desire to pursue holiness with their digital devices. Parents have told me that their sons have implemented many of the application points from the curriculum in their everyday lives. They keep up with their screen time, they turn off their devices at night, they pursue real-life connection, and other practical steps taught in the curriculum. Ultimately, the project cultivated a strong desire to prevent the problems caused by technology in the teenagers

¹ Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 48.

who participated in the class. For this reality, I will forever be grateful to God. It is my sincere desire that the project will continue to impact lives for the glory of God among the next generation!

APPENDIX 1¹

UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL TEMPTATION

The following instrument is a survey to yield a picture of the current understanding pursuing holiness in the face of digital temptation among teenage boys at FBCH.

¹ This rubric was adapted from Timothy Paul Ateek, "Choosing Reality: Empowering College Students to Pursue Freedom from Pornography at Breakaway Ministries in College Station, Texas" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 89-95.

UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL TEMPTATION

Agreement to Participate

You are being requested to give permission for a minor or member of a vulnerable population under your legal supervision to participate in a study designed to equip teenage boys to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. This research is being conducted by Jon LaMarque for purposes of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, your teenager will answer these questions before the project to assess his current understanding. He will answer the questions in Section 3 again after completion of the project to measure the change in knowledge. Any information provided will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will a person's name be reported, or a person's name identified with his responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and the person you are giving approval to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a vulnerable population to participate in this research if he desires.

Participant Name _____

Parent/Guardian Name _____

Parent/Guardian Signature _____

Date _____

Section I

The first section will obtain some demographic information about the individuals taking this survey.

Directions: Answer the following questions by filling in the blank space provided.

1. Create a four-digit number that will serve as your ID: _____
(Please remember this number)

2. What is your current age? _____

3. Would you consider yourself to be a Christian? _____

Section II

The second section will gather information about the participant's use of digital devices.

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

1. Do you own a digital device?

_____ A. Yes

_____ B. No

2. At what age did you first own a digital device?

_____ A. 0-3 years old

_____ B. 4-6 years old

_____ C. 7-9 years old

_____ D. 10-12 years old

_____ E. 13-15 years old

_____ F. 16-18 years old

_____ G. Never owned one

3. What types of devices do you own or have access to? (Check all that apply)

_____ A. Smartphone

_____ B. Tablet

_____ C. Laptop

_____ D. Desktop Computer

_____ E. Television

_____ F. Electronic Reader

_____ G. Smart Watch

_____ H. Never owned one

4. Do you currently have a social media account?

_____ A. Yes

_____ B. No

5. What social media platform have you used? (Check all that apply)

- A. Instagram
- B. Facebook
- C. TikTok
- D. Twitter
- E. Snapchat
- F. YouTube
- G. Pinterest
- H. Discord
- I. Twitch
- J. Reddit
- H. N/A

6. Look at the screen time data on your phone, how much is your time?

- A. Less than one hour
- B. Between one hour and two hours
- C. Between two hours and three hours
- D. Between three hours and four hours
- E. Between four hours and five hours
- F. Between five hours and six hours
- G. Between six hours and seven hours
- H. Seven hours or more
- I. N/A

7. Which social media platform do you spend the majority of your time?

- A. Instagram
- B. Facebook
- C. TikTok
- D. Twitter
- E. Snapchat
- F. YouTube
- G. Pinterest
- H. Discord
- I. Twitch
- J. Reddit
- K. Other: _____
- L. N/A

8. Do you play video games?

- A. Yes
- B. No

9. What type of gaming console do you own? (Check all that apply)

- A. PlayStation
- B. Xbox
- C. Wii

- D. Nintendo DS
- E. Nintendo Switch
- F. Virtual Reality System
- G. N/A

10. Have you ever viewed pornography?

- A. Yes
- B. No

11. What devices have you used to access pornography? (Check all that apply)

- A. Smartphone
- B. Tablet
- C. Laptop/Desktop
- D. TV
- E. Gaming Console
- F. Virtual Reality System
- G. Other: _____
- H. N/A

12. What application have you used to access pornography? (Check all that apply)

- A. Social Media Apps
- B. Pornographic Websites
- C. Streaming Services
- D. Video Games
- E. Other: _____
- F. N/A

Section III

The third section will gather information about the participant's views about digital devices.

Directions: Based on the following scale, circle the option that best represents your agreement with the statement:

SD = Strongly Disagree

D = Disagree

DS = Disagree Somewhat

AS = Agree Somewhat

A = Agree

SA = Strongly Agree

1. I understand what holiness means.

SD D DS AS A SA

2. I understand how to pursue holiness with my digital devices.

SD D DS AS A SA

3. I spend too much time on digital devices.
SD D DS AS A SA
4. Spending too much time on digital devices leads to harmful effects.
SD D DS AS A SA
5. I am tempted to seek approval and find identity through my social media accounts.
SD D DS AS A SA
6. I know what it means to find my identity in Jesus.
SD D DS AS A SA
7. More time spent on social media leads to being more depressed, anxious, and lonely.
SD D DS AS A SA
8. Spending too much time playing video games leads to harmful effects.
SD D DS AS A SA
9. Pornography is considered anything that makes me lust.
SD D DS AS A SA
10. I know how to fight pornography.
SD D DS AS A SA
11. Screens hurt authentic human connection.
SD D DS AS A SA
12. Screens are an obstacle to fulfill my life's purpose.
SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 2¹

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following evaluation will be sent to an expert panel of three local church pastors. This panel will evaluate the curriculum to ensure it is biblically faithful, culturally relevant, and practically applicable.

¹ This rubric was adapted from Thomas Sugimura, “Equipping Members of New Life Church in Woodland Hills, California to Counsel Biblically” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 88.

Name of Evaluator: _____

Date: _____

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Each lesson was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Each lesson was faithful to the theology of the Bible.					
Each lesson is clearly relevant to teenage boys and their struggle to pursue holiness with their technological devices.					
Each lesson was clear, containing a big idea.					
Each lesson contained points that supported the big idea.					
Each lesson provides points of practical application.					
The curriculum clearly details how to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation.					
At the end of the course, participants will be able to pursue holiness on their technological devices.					

Other Comments:

APPENDIX 3
CURRICULUM

This appendix includes the curriculum developed and taught in the project.
Each session also provides a participant guide that was provided to the students.

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation

Session 1: *God's Call to Holiness*

Teaching Guide

Main Idea: Christians are called to pursue holiness.

Biblical Texts: Ephesians 4:22-24, 1 Peter 1:13-16, Romans 12:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Introduction

What is the farthest you have ever run at one time? Would you ever run a 26.2 mile marathon? For most people, running a marathon falls into one of two categories: either you do it, or you are puzzled at those who do it. Legend says the origin of the marathon is 490 B.C. After the Greek victory over the Persians, a soldier named Pheidippides ran approximately 25 miles from the battlefield in Marathon, Greece, to Athens to deliver the news. After he arrived, Pheidippides shouted, "Rejoice, we are victorious," then collapsed and died. During the London Olympics in 1908, although the length was originally intended to be 26 miles, starting at Windsor Castle and then finishing at White City Stadium, Queen Alexandra requested the distance be extended 385 yards, or 26.2 miles, to the East Lawn so that the royal children could watch the race from their nursery. Marathon distances have been 26.2 miles ever since. Marathon runners must train for months. As they run, they must block out pain and fatigue to focus on finishing. They pursue one goal. In our Christian lives, we pursue a goal as well. We pursue holiness. This curriculum will cover how to pursue holiness in the face of digital temptation. Before we do that, we should understand what pursuing holiness looks like.

Point 1: Holiness is being set apart

Read Ephesians 4:22-24.

Holiness is a major theme that runs throughout the Bible. God is the definition of holy. He is holy. He is pure and free from sin. He cannot tolerate evil. He is set apart and distinct from all of creation. He created humans in complete perfection. Adam and Eve were able to fellowship with Him in the garden. However, they sinned and distorted their holiness. In the Mosaic Covenant, God setup rules for his people to become holy, but humans could not live up to those standards. In the New Testament, God became flesh so that we could be holy again. Through faith, Jesus reconciles us to God, justifies us and sanctifies us. He makes us holy.

Holiness is separating from evil and sin. It is living a pure life. Holiness is purity. It is being free of sin. It is obedience to God's law which includes moral purity. Holiness means to be set apart. Because holiness is freedom of sin, it must be separated from evil. Holiness is incompatible with impurity and should be separate from it. In fact, the root meaning of the Hebrew word for holiness is "separation." Holiness is distinct. It is to live a life in conformity to God's commands in Scripture. It is, as Paul says in Ephesians 4, putting off our old sinful flesh and putting on our new selves. Holiness is the goal for Christians and should be pursued.

Point 2: We pursue holiness by obeying God

Read 1 Peter 1:13-16.

In Peter's letter to the church, he commands us to be holy. God saved us so that we will be holy. Personal holiness must characterize the life of a believer. God desires our lives be marked by righteousness. Holiness is God's plan for us. The reason for your salvation, the design behind your deliverance, the purpose for your life is holiness. We are saved by grace through faith, and we are created in Jesus for good works. The gospel saves us and transforms us. Those who are justified will be sanctified. The same grace that brings salvation teaches us to renounce ungodly living. We cannot receive half of God's grace by receiving eternal rewards without receiving personal transformation. Obeying God always leads to holiness.

The passage informs us that holiness begins with confidence in God. Peter tells us that we set our minds fully on the hope of the grace to come. God is faithful, and his promises are true. We can overcome the temptations around us because we know the joy of the future is incomparable. Therefore, we should prepare our minds, and be ready for action. Holiness is not passive, but it is being alert for the temptations around us and self-controlled with the distractions within us. It is actively resisting the devil and his schemes. It is actively obeying God and his commands. It is actively avoiding sinful passions and desires. It is actively imitating God. We are to be obedient to Jesus in every area of our lives. Our new nature has produced a new identity. We are to live a pattern of holiness in our lives that transforms every moment, every action, and every thought.

Point 3: We pursue holiness by transforming our minds

Read Romans 12:1-2.

Paul tells us that we pursue holiness by not conforming to the pattern of the world around us. Throughout the Book of Romans, Paul encourages the church to put their flesh to death. This verse is a reference to their sinful nature. Although we are given a new nature when we are saved, we are still constantly in a battle with our old flesh. Instead of living according to the flesh, we are to live according to the Spirit. This action requires total surrender. Paul appeals to us to offer our lives as living sacrifices. We do not just offer words, songs, and service; we offer our entire lives. One way we live as sacrifices and worship God is not by conforming to the world around us. While we live in a sinful world, we should not be squeezed into its mold. We should avoid letting the world around us tempt us to stop pursuing holiness. When we allow the beliefs of the culture around us to infiltrate the church and influence us, holiness is often elusive.

Paul also tells us that we pursue holiness by transforming our minds. We are not only encouraged to sacrifice our bodies, but to renew our minds. We should adjust our way of thinking. We must take captive every thought. We need to change our sinful thought patterns. Paul says that when our thoughts are changed, we are able to approve the will of God. A renewed mind leads to discerning God's will. It is the ability to understand and agree with what God wants and understands how to put it into practice. A transformed mind allows believers to discern God's will and live it out well. God's will for believers is to be holy.

Point 4: We pursue holiness by fleeing immorality

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.

First Corinthians is a letter Paul writes to the church in Corinth. The city of Corinth culturally was much like the United States today. Idolatry and immorality were rampant. In the passage, Paul writes to the church to remind them to avoid both. To pursue holiness, we must run from idolatry. While we are free in Christ, we are not free to worship idols. It is easy for us to become enslaved to activities, people, or sins. Even if an activity is not inherently sinful, it becomes sinful when it enslaves us because it has become an idol. For example, sports is a good gift from God, but if it is placed ahead of God, it becomes sinful. We should not let anything control us or dominate us. Christians should not be mastered by anything. Our freedom in Christ should be used to pursue activities that are beneficial.

Paul also commands the church to flee sexual immorality. To pursue holiness, we run from immorality. Some of the members of the church in Corinth were engaged in prostitution. Paul reminds them that they are one with Christ, and Christ cannot be joined with immorality. Because of our union with Christ, we cannot participate in any immorality. Our bodies were not designed for that. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. So, he commands us to flee sexual immorality. We must run from it and not entertain it. Sexual immorality can be defined as any activity outside of God's design for sex. A practical way of thinking of sexual immorality is that it is anything you would not want a person doing with your future wife. We are to glorify God with our bodies, and we cannot glorify God with our bodies if we are participating in sexual immorality.

Session Wrap-up

1. What is holiness? What does it mean to be holy?
2. What does it mean that holiness is not passive but active?
3. We must offer our entire lives in surrender to God. What is an area of your life you are holding onto?
4. What are ways to renew our minds? Where does a renewed mind lead?
5. Are there things in your life currently that have a hold on you? Explain.
6. What is sexual immorality? How can we run from it in our lives?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation
Session 1: *God's Call to Holiness*
Participant Worksheet

Holiness is being set _____
Ephesians 4:22-24

We pursue holiness by _____ **God**
1 Peter 1:13-16

We pursue holiness by _____ **our minds**
Romans 12:1-2

We pursue holiness by fleeing _____

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Session Wrap-up

1. What is holiness? What does it mean to be holy?
2. What does it mean that holiness is not passive but active?
3. We must offer our entire lives in surrender to God. What is an area of your life you're holding onto?
4. What are ways to renew our minds? Where does a renewed mind lead?
5. Are there things in your life currently that have a hold on you? Explain.
6. What is sexual immorality? How can we run from it in our lives?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation
Session 2: Screen Time
Teaching Guide

Main Idea: Pursuing holiness is redeeming the time by overcoming screen addiction.

Biblical Text: Ephesians 5:15-17

Introduction

In the 2018 movie, *Incredibles 2*, the Parr family takes on a villain named Screenslaver. He has the ability to control people through their screens. Because screens are everywhere, the villain brainwashes innocent citizens with his advanced hypnotic powers. In one of the scenes, Screenslaver states, “You don't talk. You watch talk shows. You don't play games. You watch game shows. Travel, relationships, risk...every meaningful experience must be packaged and delivered to you to watch at a distance so that you can remain ever-sheltered, ever-passive, ever-ravenous consumers who can't free themselves to rise from their couches to break a sweat and participate in life.” Screenslaver believes society is too attached to technology, and he uses that problem to try to assert his agenda. While the superhero family is able to defeat the evil villain, the movie's plot makes an obvious connection to our society. Screens are everywhere, and they are influencing the way we think and act. Teenagers spend about 9 hours a day on their screens. Based on our survey for this class, the majority of you spend over 5 hours a day on your screens. It is hard to get away from them. Over 500 million YouTube videos are watched in a day in the US. Over 2.1 million snaps are sent over Snapchat every minute. Video games are played by almost every teenager. Gamers have played the Call of Duty game series for over 25 billion hours which is 2.85 million years. That is just one game series among many. TikTok was the most downloaded app of 2020, and it was the most popular app in our survey as well. Over 91% of teenagers go to bed with their devices. We are a society constantly on our screens. The majority of you guys, 80%, answered you spend too much time on your devices. In Ephesians 5:15-17, Paul tells us to redeem the time. How do screens prevent us from this?

Point 1: Teenagers of Generation Z are addicted to their devices

Generation Z are those born between 1995 and 2010. Currently, in 2022, they are between the ages of 12 years old and 27 years old. A defining characteristic of Generation Z is that they are Wi-Fi enabled. They are the first generation who have known the internet their entire lives. Teenagers today are constantly connected to web. It is with them everywhere in their pockets, in their classrooms, and in their homes. Televisions, smartphones, tablets, videogames, computers, and laptops consume their time. The statistics in the introduction show just how connected they are. Mental health professionals are becoming increasingly aware of how much time teenagers are spending on their devices and how much of a problem it is. Currently, there is debate on whether screen addiction should be considered a stand-alone mental disorder.

Teenagers who are addicted to their phones display several signs. One indication is staying up later in the night on a device. They go to bed but stay up longer scrolling their phones. Another sign is if they are anxious and angry when they are away

from their device. Other signs of addiction are hiding device usage from authority figures, being apathetic and bored easily, and experiencing fatigue and tiredness throughout the day. It is important to understand that addiction is not defined just by the time one spends on his device. It is defined as having a lack of interest in other activities and having practical problems coping at school or at home due to the time spent on devices. Tech usage that impacts schoolwork, social life, and other activities is indicative of a problem.

Point 2: Technology was intentionally created to keep us engaged

Creators designed the technology we use to keep us engaged. Platforms were intentionally created to be addictive by their designers. Social media makes money from the number of advertisements that are viewed. The longer we stay online; the more money they make. Therefore, social media companies like YouTube and Instagram design their technology to demand our attention and keep us engaged. Video game developers design their games to keep us playing for an extended time. The research and development departments of the gaming industry are focused on making games as stimulating to young people as possible. The most addictive games are the ones that sell the best. They accomplish this addiction by utilizing chemical reactions in our brains to promote behavioral addiction and behavioral reinforcement. The apps stimulate our brains to reward us occasionally and keep us engrossed. Whether we are playing a video game or sending a text message, dopamine is released in our brains. Dopamine is the brain's feel-good reward response. It is often referred to as a pleasure chemical. When using technology, the amount of dopamine released in the brain is the same as cocaine use. Therefore, video games and social media can be just as addictive to us as cocaine is for drug users. Developers know that and use it to their advantage.

They use several tactics to keep us engaged. Have you ever gotten to the end of a YouTube video, and another automatically played? That is a tactic. Streaming services, like Netflix, automatically play the next episode without prompt. These platforms have never-ending, bottomless content. Have you ever gotten to the end of a YouTube video or the end of your Instagram feed and had similar content suggested? They are pulling us in by using algorithms to gauge what we are interested in. Then, they suggest content based on the results. Another tactic they use are read receipts. Knowing someone has seen that we have read their message encourages us to respond faster and stay more engaged. Social media companies also send random notifications. The purpose of these notifications is to get us back on their platform after we have been off for a while.

Point 3: Screen addiction can lead to negative consequences

Being addicted to screens can cause harmful effects to the body and the mind. It affects our physical bodies in numerous ways. A medical condition called "text neck" occurs when someone compulsively looks down at his phone. It creates back, neck, and arm pain and bad posture. Obesity rates in teenagers have skyrocketed and have quadrupled in the last 30 years. The more time we spend on our phones, the less time we have for exercise. We are also prone to eating snacks as we engage our devices.

Screen addiction also affects our mental health. Video games have been proven to cause aggression. We are more likely to be violent as our playing time increases. It causes more violent thoughts, more violent behavior, and less empathy for others. Screen

addiction also causes depression. The more time we spend on our devices, the less happy we are. The less time we spend on our devices, the happier we are.

There are also behavioral affects in screen time addiction. It leads to laziness, poor academic performance, and lower attention span. The rapid changes and attention-grabbing nature of screens compromises our ability to sustain focus on tasks that are not attention-grabbing.

Point 4: Redeem the time

Read Ephesians 5:15-17.

It is easy to spend hours playing video games, scrolling social media, and watching YouTube. However, as Christians, we are called to a higher standard. We are called to redeem the time. Paul writes to the church in Ephesus and tells them to make the most of every opportunity. Making the most of every opportunity means making every moment an occasion to glorify God. It means to use our time wisely because it is a limited resource. It means to take advantage of the moments we have because we could use them for God's purposes. Pursuing holiness with our screens requires us to not be enslaved to our screens and using our time wisely.

If you're addicted to your screen, there are several steps you can take. First, consider a digital detox. Take a break from your devices for a period of time. Then, set a time limit for how long you will spend on your devices each day. Do not exceed it. Another step is maintaining boundaries. Limit your access to devices in certain places and at certain times. Turn off nonessential push notifications on devices to prevent them from interrupting the day. Do not immediately pick up a device when there are spare moments on a schedule. Delete time-wasting apps. Use a real alarm clock, not a phone. Mute your phone during events and interactions.

Session Wrap-up

1. What is your reaction when you read the statistics about screen time? Do you think those are accurate based on your experience?
2. How does knowing developers intentionally design apps and games to keep you addicted make you feel? What engagement tactics have worked on you in the past?
3. Which of the negative consequences stuck out to you the most? Have you seen any of those consequences in your own life?
4. How do you know if you are addicted to your device? Is that sinful? Explain.
5. What does it mean to redeem the time? Why is that important?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation
Session 2: *Screen Time*
Participant Worksheet

Teenagers of Generation Z are _____ to their devices

Technology was intentionally created to keep us _____

Screen addiction can lead to _____ consequences

Redeem the _____
Ephesians 5:15-17

Session Wrap-up

1. What is your reaction when you read the statistics about screen time? Do you think those are accurate based on your experience?
2. How does knowing developers intentionally design apps and games to keep you addicted make you feel? What engagement tactics have worked on you in the past?
3. Which of the negative consequences stuck out to you the most? Have you seen any of those consequences in your own life?
4. How do you know if you are addicted to your device? Is that sinful? Explain.
5. What does it mean to redeem the time? Why is that important?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation

Session 3: *Approval and Fame*

Teaching Guide

Main Idea: Pursuing holiness is not seeking approval and identity through social media but finding it in Jesus.

Biblical Text: John 1:12

Introduction

In 2004, police found a man near a dumpster at a Burger King in Georgia. The man was naked, sunburned, and unconscious. When he became alert, he could not tell the police who he was. He did not know his name, where he was from, or how he had gotten to the Burger King. The only thing he could remember was his birthdate. They admitted him to the hospital under the name “Burger King Doe.” Police and investigators tried to determine his identity. They put his picture on television and the internet. They listed him as a missing person. In fact, he was the only person the FBI ever listed as missing even though they knew where he was. Yet, no record of his identity could be discovered. Finally, after eleven years, a genealogist sequenced his DNA and matched it with a family from Indiana. His name was William Burgess Powell. He was able to be reconnected to his family. He had left home in 1976, so his family did not know what he looked like when his picture was put out by the media. On his Facebook page, he wrote, “My identity has been found!” While we know our names and backgrounds, we often forget our identity in Christ because of social media. There are 3.7 billion social media users worldwide. Almost 89% of Generation Z Americans use some type of social media. The average internet user has 7.6 social media accounts. You guys mentioned 11 different social media platforms you are using in our survey. In John 1:12, the Bible tells us we are children of God. We have been purchased and redeemed by Christ. How does social media cause us to forget that?

Point 1: We are tempted to use social media to find approval

Due to the instant feedback of social media platforms, it is easy for us to look for approval and validation through it. Many of us want glory, praise, and approval, and having immediate affirmation magnifies the issue. So, we seek admiration from one another, and we cultivate a desire for affirmation through social media platforms. We find approval in the responses of family members, friends, and strangers. Notifications are like a drug. Likes and retweets produce a dopamine response in the brain. A recent study, discovered that every time a picture, post, or comment was liked, the brain lit up in the areas that produced pleasure chemicals. The more responses we get, the more we seek it. We feel we constantly must get another fix, and we become enslaved to it. The high of social approval conditions us to seek the bursts of validation given by every like, retweet, or comment. This new mental conditioning means that our lives become more and more dependent on the social media approval of others.

It becomes easy to judge ourselves on the number of interactions, likes, and comments our posts receive. However, having numerous friends, followers, likes, and comments does not make us a better person. It does not make us a more accomplished person. Unfortunately, social media has become a barometer of self-worth because it tells

us exactly how popular and well-liked we are. It is tempting to believe the amount of likes and interactions determine if we belong.

Point 2: We are tempted to use social media to find identity

Due to the access of social media platforms, it is easy for us to look for popularity and fame. Social media creates a celebrity culture where everyone wants to be known. It tempts us into achieving worldly significance with our immediate statistics. So, we use it for self-promotion. Many of us check our notifications constantly because we are more concerned with the applause of man than the affirmation of Jesus. We post on TikTok to go viral. We post on Instagram to make ourselves look good. We post on Twitter to get retweets. We are tempted to do all these actions to become popular. However, these actions cause us to be fake, wear masks, or glamorize our lives to make them seem better or more interesting than they really are. To garner more interaction, some people are highly selective in representing themselves. Many of us only post successes on social media. The better the content, the more interactions. These posts create an environment where everyone feels as if they must look and act a certain way. Tony Reinke stated, "What we think others think of us profoundly shapes our sense of identity and our search for belonging." We, especially teenagers, want to fit in. In that search of that conformity, we try to stand out. Often, we attempt to fit a mold to meet the opinions of others because our search for individuality in the world is a pursuit for conformity with the world.

Point 3: Find security in Christ

Read John 1:12.

You are a child of God. He designed you and created you. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. He purchased you and redeemed you. You are his special possession. Be secure in who He says you are. It is the only thing that matters. Our identity as Christians is in Jesus, not grades, not hobbies, not sports, not in a future career, not in friendships, not in dating relationships, and definitely not in our social media accounts. God did not design you to find significance in any other place besides His Son Jesus. Every one of us has a desire and a longing to be loved, to be accepted, to be wanted, and to belong, but you will not find that on the internet. Deep down all human beings want to be totally known and deeply loved. You are totally known and deeply loved by Christ. We are who Christ says we are, not our social media bios.

We should deprogram ourselves from seeking to be liked and seeking to be known. We cannot forsake justification in the gospel for seeking to be right in our followers' eyes. We cannot spend more time on social media than with Christ. While it gets continuous attention from us, the king of the universe is inviting us into His presence. If you are looking for approval in the amount of interactions your post gets, if you crave becoming an online celebrity, if you are wanting popularity and are seeking it through self-promotion, I plead with you to stop. These emotions are caused by your fear of being unloved and unseen.

Validation does not come through delivering crowd-pleasing content. Stop trying to impress the virtual world with your bodies or your intellect. Vain glory will not satisfy the human heart, but it will intensify the craving for human praise. If you are seeking social media validation or popularity, then you might want to reevaluate your

time on social media. Avoid prideful tendencies and pursue humility. Do not be more concerned with the applause of man than the affirmation of Jesus. Seek to find your worth in Jesus and not the prideful feedback of social media.

Session Wrap-up

1. What is your reaction when you read the statistics about social media? Do you think those are accurate based on your experience?
2. How do teenagers seek approval through social media? List some examples.
3. Do you believe that social media has become a barometer for your self-worth? Why or why not?
4. How do teenagers seek fame and popularity through social media. List some examples.
5. Often, our search for individuality is actually a pursuit of conformity. What does that mean?
6. What are ways you can deprogram yourself from seeking to be liked and to be known?
7. How does knowing you are a child of God change how you behave on social media?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation
Session 3: *Approval and Fame*
Participant Worksheet

We are tempted to use social media to find _____

We are tempted to use social media to find _____

Find _____ in Christ

John 1:12

Session Wrap-up

1. What is your reaction when you read the statistics about social media? Do you think those are accurate based on your experience?
2. How do teenagers seek approval through social media? List some examples.

3. Do you believe that social media has become a barometer for your self-worth? Why or why not?
4. How do teenagers seek fame and popularity through social media. List some examples.
5. Often, our search for individuality is actually a pursuit of conformity. What does that mean?
6. What are ways you can deprogram yourself from seeking to be liked and to be known?
7. How does knowing you are a child of God change how you behave on social media?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation

Session 4: *Mental Awareness*

Teaching Guide

Main Idea: Pursuing holiness is fighting the negative mental consequences of social media by taking every thought captive.

Biblical Text: 2 Corinthians 10:5

Introduction

Bait-and-switch is a popular illegal sales scheme. Businesses use the practice to get a customer's attention by advertising a low price or a really good deal. The consumer goes to the business to buy the product, and the business attempts to sell them another product. There are many examples of this tactic. Car dealerships may advertise a low-price for a car. The consumer gets to the lot and finds that the particular car is no longer available. Real estate agents may advertise a property for a great bargain. The property buyer calls the agent and finds that the property has been sold. Tech companies may advertise through the internet a price for tech equipment like a computer or phone for a good deal. The customer clicks the link, goes the store's website, and find that the specific items for that deal are sold out. With each business, they bait the consumer in by advertising a great deal and switch to a higher priced item. This common tactic is used with our digital devices as well. Consider that from 2010-2015, teens reporting feeling joyless jumped 33%, suicides in teenagers jumped 31%, teens reporting at least one depressive episode jumped 56%, and 22% more teens reported getting less than 7 hours of sleep. In comparison, in 2010 smartphones were used by 50% of teenagers, and by 2015, 73% of teenagers were using smartphones. These numbers show an obvious correlation between mental health problems and smartphones. The smartphone, social media, and video games promise more connectivity and better entertainment, yet they fail to deliver. They lead to mental health issues. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that believers are to take their thoughts captive. How does social media affect the minds of Christians?

Point 1: Social media leads to anxiety and depression

With the invention and popularity of the smartphone, depression in teenagers has skyrocketed in the past ten years. A rise in depressive symptoms occurred at the same time as the rise in ownership of a smartphone. Study after study has shown that the more time a person spends on social media, the more depressed they become. Teenagers who spend the most time on social media are the most in danger of being depressed. Teenagers who spend more than six hours a week on social media are 47% more likely to say they are unhappy. Depression is dangerous. It is not just feeling sad and could lead to self-harm and suicide. Teenagers who spend more than three hours a day on their phones are 35% more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor.

There are many reasons for increased depression and anxiety. The fear of missing out on activities and events has become an issue of teenagers. FOMO is a real experience for many social media users today. Nobody wants to be left out or left behind. So, they constantly check their phones to make sure they are not missing anything with their friends or in the culture. Jealousy can arise from seeing posts and videos from

friends and classmates. They do not want to miss out on experiencing the newest trend, cultural event, or latest gadget.

Another huge problem is that social media causes people to compare themselves to others which can lead to anxiety and depression. Additionally, another stress of social media and digital communication is the delayed response to messages and posts. Not getting a reply to your message has a high potential to cause anxiety because you are concerned the other person may be offended or mad at you. Not getting immediate interaction on your posts can cause anxiety because you are concerned nobody likes it.

Point 2: Social media leads to loneliness

You would think that the constant access to others would make people feel more connected, but that has not proven to be true. In fact, the promise of social media is that we will never feel alone. Yet, so often, we feel the agony of loneliness amid online connectedness. Studies show teenagers who spend more time on social media feel more alone than those who do not. Just like with depression, the more time spent on social media, the lonelier you are. Teenagers who visit social media sites every day are 11% more likely to be lonely. The use of technology leads to isolation, and isolation leads to being lonely. While technology may temporarily relieve feelings of loneliness, it does not address the need for real, in-depth connections with others. We were created to be in community, and electronic communication does not solve our need for human contact.

Point 3: Social media leads to cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is also a significant problem with social media. Over half of all teenagers have experienced some form of this harassment. Name-calling, gossip, rumors, and offensive remarks are all common types of cyberbullying. Because it is easy to hide behind the anonymity of a screen, it is easy for people to say things online they would not say in person. Cyberbullying can occur at any time and any place, which makes it ruthless. We can feel harassed while we should be safe in our private bedrooms but being online gives people access to us. The effects of cyberbullying are consequential. Humiliation, anger, isolation, and powerlessness are common emotional responses to cyberbullying. Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, and academic issues are common psychological responses to cyberbullying.

We need to be aware of the power of our words. Words can build someone up or they can destroy someone. Do not use social media to provoke and bully others. Do not use it to spread false information, rumors, criticisms, and insults of others. We should not harm, belittle, mock, hurt, or destroy anybody with our words. We should be careful what we post and send on social media. We should restrain our words, and not respond in anger, damage another's reputation, gossip, or attack anyone. We should have graceful interactions and speech on social media. Conduct yourselves honorably among those who are unbelievers. What we say in messages, what we post on Instagram, and what we send on Snapchat communicates to a lost world. Resist the temptation to join in the griping, complaining, and bashing that often appears in online communication.

Point 4: Social media leads to interrupted sleep

Social media and video games cause sleep deprivation. Screens delay and interrupt sleep schedules, and teenagers today are more likely to have trouble sleeping than ever before. It is recommended that teenagers get nine hours of sleep each night. Yet, the majority of teenagers in the United States are averaging fewer than seven hours each night. Technology causes a lack of sleep in numerous ways. When we take our phones into our bedrooms, it leads to longer sleep latency, more sleep disturbance, worse sleep quality, and more daytime dysfunction. One study revealed that one out of five teenagers wake up regularly during the night to check the notifications on their phones. Additionally, the blue light emitted from screens deceives the brain into thinking it is still daytime. This light makes it harder to fall asleep. While it may not seem like a big deal, a lack of sleep can lead to depression, compromised thinking and reasoning, poor academic performance, susceptibility to illness, behavioral problems, limited exercise, and increased weight gain.

Protect your sleep. Turn off your devices before bed. Leave them out of your bedroom so there is no temptation to check them. Limit your screen time in the evening to avoid sleep disruption. Social media can cause us to distract ourselves and lose sense of time. We open apps, scroll through content, and mindlessly consume posts hours on end. It is easy for us to get lost in the virtual world and forget about the real world. We could start scrolling at 10 PM and soon realize its after midnight!

Point 5: Video games can lead to psychosis

Excessive time spent playing video games can lead to negative psychological consequences. Clinical research shows video games are contributors to psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia and psychosis. Psychosis is a mental disorder that impairs thoughts and emotions, and sufferers lose touch with reality. Video games can also lead to hallucinations and delusions. A condition called Game Transfer Phenomena can afflict those who play games excessively. This condition causes gamers to see the shapes and patterns of their games intrusively in their thoughts and dreams. It also causes sufferers to hear sound effects, characters' voices, and other noises from the game. Additionally, video games can cause issues in brain development. Researchers found the more video games teenagers played, the more it affected development of microstructures in the brain. While staying up late playing Fortnite and Madden is fun, we should be aware of these disturbing realities in obsessive video game play.

Point 6: Take Captive

Read 2 Corinthians 10:5.

With the mind-altering effects of social media and video games, it is easy to be passive and allow them to warp our thoughts. However, Paul tells us to take captive every thought. That means to gain control over what we think. What we think matters to God, and we are in a battle every day. What we feed our mind controls what thoughts we have. Feed your mind with positive things. This goal may require putting your phone down for a while. It may require you to leave social media. You might have to rethink posting a picture. You might have to stop playing a certain video game. Then, replace it with something positive. Replace it with Scripture. Memorize and meditate on the Word of God. Know verses to combat anxiety, loneliness, and anger. Control what you feed your

mind with and take captive every thought. As we talked about in Week 1, be transformed by renewing your mind.

Session Wrap-up

1. Do you struggle with FOMO? What are steps you take to overcome it?
2. Why do you think more time on social media leads to loneliness? Have you ever experienced it?
3. Cyberbullying affects so many teenagers. How can you as men step up and stop harassment?
4. Do you think your sleep has been affected by your screens? Discuss the ways to prevent it.
5. What are some boundaries you keep with your video game play? If you don't have any, what would be some good ones to implement?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation
Session 4: *Mental Awareness*
Participant Worksheet

Social media leads to _____ and _____

Social media leads to _____

Social media leads to _____

Social media leads to _____ sleep

Video games can lead to _____

Take _____
2 Corinthians 10:5

Session Wrap-up

1. Do you struggle with FOMO? What are steps you take to overcome it?
2. Why do you think more time on social media leads to loneliness? Have you ever experienced it?
3. Cyberbullying affects so many teenagers. How can you as men step up and stop harassment?
4. Do you think your sleep has been affected by your screens? Discuss the ways to prevent it.
5. What are some boundaries you keep with your video game play? If you don't have any, what would be some good ones be to implement?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation

Session 5: *Pornography*

Teaching Guide

Main Idea: Pursuing holiness is running from the dangers of pornography.

Biblical Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, Job 31:1

Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, asbestos was used in many products because of its heat-resistant properties. It was everywhere! It was used in home insulation, car parts, flooring and ceiling tiles, cement, household products, and clothing. Thousands of products contained asbestos. However, many people who were around asbestos began to get sick with mesothelioma, lung cancer, and other cancers. It was discovered that asbestos caused these conditions. Asbestos was found to be discovered and the government began to regulate its use. The danger of asbestos was everywhere, but for many years, nobody recognized it. They lived with the product in their house, in their cars, and in their clothes while it was slowly making them sick. There is a comparison with asbestos and the pornography industry today. The pornography industry brings in revenues of over 13 billion dollars a year. Every second, \$3,000 is spent on pornography and 28,000 Internet users view porn. YouTube averages 30 million visitors a day. Pornhub doubles that with over 60 million visitors a day. Porn sites get more visits a month than Amazon, Netflix, and Facebook combined. The average age of first internet exposure to pornography is nine years old. Over 86% of teenage guys surveyed said they view it at least once a month; 31% said they view it every day. Sixty percent of you guys answered you have viewed porn through our survey. Based on your survey, everyone who viewed porn used their smartphones. Pornography is everywhere. It is in our movies, our television shows, and our phones. Many view pornography without even recognizing it or the dangers of it. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul encourages us to abstain from sexual immorality like pornography. How is pornography so dangerous?

Point 1: Pornography is anything that elicits lust

What is porn? Often, we think porn is only videos or images of naked girls. Pornography is not just pictures or videos of people performing sexual actions, but it is anything intended to cause sexual excitement or arousal. Therefore, pornography can include pictures and any other material, such as writings. It can include video game graphics. It can also include images sent through Snapchat and other sexting mediums. Pornography can be something as serious as a picture or video of people performing sexual activity or a simple advertisement on social media. If it is used it for personal arousal, it's porn. It's that simple.

Because many of us believe pornography is more than that simple definition, we are introduced to more explicit content without realizing it. The porn industry uses soft-core pornographic images to introduce us to porn, which creates a desire and curiosity for more. Since culture has defined pornography as something worse than it actually is, sexually enticed materials have easily bombarded society and its entertainment. Television shows, movies, music, and other forms of entertainment are subtly filled with pornographic ideas and images. The perpetual barrage of sexual content

has caused us to become increasingly desensitized to its explicitness. Almost all media has appeal to sex, and this appeal is so common that we are hardly aware of it. The constant bombardment of sex seems normal. These sexual graphics and content have a soul-numbing effect. With each exposure, pornography becomes normative and somehow a little more acceptable. We must constantly be mindful to be on guard for sexual images. Don't become desensitized to the sexual content you are being fed. Don't entertain images or videos. Don't participate in the sending of this content.

Point 2: Pornography is addictive

The more we view pornography, the more it controls us. Although the term "pornography addiction" is not a clinical term, many counselors regularly treat people who are suffering from some sort of habitual pornography use. When someone habitually and repeatedly views any content intended to cause sexual excitement or arousal, he becomes addicted to porn. Just like we talked about with video games and social media, viewing porn releases dopamine. Because it involves the visual, motor, and sensory systems, the brain stores a reinforced neurological pattern. Pornography literally rewires our brains and makes us addicted. As the brain rewires itself, it requires more stimuli to get the same excitement. This overstimulation leads to searching out more graphic porn to get the same thrill. Porn leads to more porn. Therefore, even if we realize we need to stop, it is extremely difficult.

Point 3: Pornography has damaging effects

We are being sold the subtle lie that pornography is a harmless pleasure. As a result, many teenage boys do not see the destructive effects it can have on their lives. They are growing up with sex-saturated minds exposed to much sexual content, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to teach them to accept a biblical theology of sex. They buy into the lie of the sexual fulfillment it promises while not realizing the damage it causes. Those effects are damaging. First, they begin to objectify girls. Pornography affects their minds and causes them to see the opposite sex and think of them as a mental sexual partner. This objectification is degrading to women, and it violates the image of God in them. Eventually, our future spouses may become nothing more than an object to be used for selfish desires.

It makes intimacy difficult when we are married. Seeking pleasure through pornography leads to hormonal and neurological consequences, which are designed to bind a man to the object he is focusing on. Consequently, it's possible to have relations with our future wives while having mental images in our minds of women we have seen in pornography. In this situation, we are using our future wives to have an experience that relationally has nothing to do with her. Pornography is not relational and violates God's principle for sex. It incites lustful thoughts and sexual actions toward objects, pictures, and images rather than individuals. God designed our minds to emotionally and relationally bond to our wives during sex. Pornography disrupts this natural bonding created by God. It teaches us to be selfishly focused on meeting our desires. Our sexual excitement will become linked to isolation from others and a focus on ourselves. The tragedy is that pornography pretends to meet a need for intimacy while making intimacy impossible.

Pornography desensitizes and oversexualizes our minds. Eventually, you will need more and more pornography to increase sexual arousal because excitement diminishes with repeated exposure. We will find that an image that was stimulating sexually at the beginning no longer stimulates after a while, and more explicit pornography is needed to achieve the same arousal. Pornography also increases the likelihood of sexual dysfunction. It shapes our views on sexual behavior and what actions are appropriate. It exaggerates the prevalence of most sexual practices. It desensitizes us to violence and causes us to trivialize rape. It makes us insensitive toward female sexuality and concerns. A desensitized mind can lead to behaviors that are unacceptable. It destroys intimacy and communication because it is self-centered, and often expresses a desire to manipulate, control, or hurt another person.

Pornography causes unrealistic expectations of our partners' appearance and behavior. It creates unrealistic beliefs about sex. As a result of viewing digitally enhanced women, it's hard seeing women as they truly are. It also creates unrealistic expectations of performance. Pornography causes people to create expectations for sex that cannot be met in reality. Real sex is not like pornographic movies. Durations, positions, and moves of these materials are hard to duplicate or equal in real life. We subtly believe we should make love like a porn star to a woman who should look like a porn star. Ultimately, we will measure our performances against the unrealistic performance we have seen.

Point 4: Flee pornography

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 and Job 31:1.

Purity now paves the way for intimacy later. Pornography is sinful and damaging. As we learned Paul say in Week 1, we must flee sexual immorality. Paul later writes in 1 Thessalonians that God's will for our holiness is to abstain from sexual immorality. To be holy, we have to be sexually pure. Jesus says in Matthew 5:28 that lust is adultery. We see, in the Old Testament, Job made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully at a woman. Make that same covenant. Set up guardrails in your life to keep it free from the prevalence of pornography. The battle in the fight against porn begins in the heart. Pray for a heart change. Pray for conviction and brokenness. We can come up with many strategies, but none of them will work if God doesn't change our hearts first. We cannot look at Jesus and porn at the same time. Keep eternity in mind, and remember the girl has a soul and is loved by Jesus. Then, work a plan. When are you most likely to look at porn? Avoid those situations. Always keep your devices in public places. Block certain websites and unfollow certain social media accounts. Consider getting filters for your internet. Replace viewing porn with a more positive activity like memorizing Scripture or a fun hobby. Finally, have accountability. By confessing and bringing sin into the light, the isolating effect of porn will be reduced. Be open and transparent with a peer and a mentor. There are many software programs that can help accountability partners and your parents keep track of what you are viewing on your devices. Utilize them.

Session Wrap-up

1. How do you define porn? Do you agree or disagree that it is anything that elicits lust?
2. Why does porn lead to more porn?
3. How does culture sell you the lie that sexual immorality is not bad?

4. Which negative effect of porn was most alarming to you?
5. What are practical ways you can flee pornography?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation

Session 5: *Pornography*

Participant Worksheet

Pornography is anything that elicits _____

Pornography is _____

Pornography has damaging _____

_____ pornography
1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 and Job 31:1

Session Wrap-up

1. How do you define porn? Do you agree or disagree that it is anything that elicits lust?
2. Why does porn lead to more porn?
3. How does culture sell you the lie that sexual immorality is not bad?
4. Which negative effect of porn was most alarming to you?
5. What are practical ways you can flee pornography?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation

Session 6: *Adventure Seeking*

Teaching Guide

Main Idea: Pursuing holiness is pursuing God's will.

Biblical Texts: Ephesians 2:10, John 15:12-13, and Acts 20:24

Introduction

Have you ever read *The Hobbit*. It's a thick book and takes a long time to read. However, within the first couple of pages you will become completely captivated by the story. It is the tale of an unsuspecting, unlikely nobody becoming a brave hero in an unforgettable adventure. A timid "hobbit," named Bilbo, leaves his comfortable home to overcome tremendous obstacles to reclaim a grand treasure. At the beginning of the story, when Bilbo was debating with himself whether to even go on this journey, the book states, "Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking stick." This shy hobbit longed for adventure. Today, the concept of adventure is everywhere. We have all seen the quote, "Adventure is out there!" used and reused hundreds of times. Why? Because the human heart longs for adventure.

Point 1: Leave the virtual world

Read Ephesians 2:10.

Paul tells the church in Ephesus that God created them for good works. He has created us for good works as well. He has created us with a desire to complete them. Men were wired to seek adventure. We want to be a part of a story bigger than ourselves. We want to explore and discover. We want to compete and win. We want to make an impact in the lives of those around us. We want to make a difference in this world. We want our lives to matter. Just like Bilbo's need for adventure, the craving for adventure is seen in boys at an early age. They don't just want to ride their bikes; they want to ride their bikes with no hands. They don't just want to fight with their Nerf gun; they want to fight an entire war. They don't just want to throw the ball; they want to see who can throw the ball the hardest.

Unfortunately, this hunt for exploration and competition is often corrupted and distorted as boys mature. Somewhere along the way, the desire for adventure that was once fulfilled through imaginative games is traded for addiction to a screen. And all too often, we find ourselves preoccupied with the virtual world of social media, pornography, and video games. The underlying issue for digital consumption is the longing for adventure. Every day we are trapped in a land of make-believe, fighting a fake war, battling a fake opponent, or watching fake girls as we stare mindlessly and endlessly into a screen. This reality has created a generation of boys looking to satisfy their desire for excitement in fake women, fake romance, fake interactions, fake realities, fake games, and fake battles. We are tempted to seek to fill our craving for exploration with computer screens and computer-generated images. We find a sense of purpose through a digital fantasy realm of adventure. The digital world has usurped the real world. For many of us, it is preferred to the real world.

In the digital age, where the divide between the real and the virtual is blurring. In a world of virtual school, virtual church, and virtual reality, the solution to one of the main problems for teenage guys is the opposite: Put down the phone, turn off the screen, and seek to be a part of a bigger story. Instead of suppressing masculinity, redirect it to something noble. Instead of mastering things of little value or no importance, master spiritual disciplines. Instead of seeking adventure in fantasy land, seek it in Godly ambitions. Instead of occupying yourselves with fake people and fake fights, invest yourselves into a real battle. It is a cosmic battle waging for the real souls of real people.

Point 2: Pursue human connection

Read John 15:12-13.

Screens hurt authentic human connection. Teenagers from Generation Z will experience less face-to-face interactions throughout their lifetimes. Because of screens, many in Generation Z do not know how to interact with others. They have a diminished ability to recognize facial expressions. They also have a lack of empathy for others because they are self-absorbed. Additionally, Generation Z has fewer close friends than previous generations. Because of screens, it is hard for young people to relate to others and to converse with others.

With the huge rise of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, genuine relationships are needed. God created us for community, and we have a deep need for human contact. It's impossible to play, serve, worship, laugh, or cry together if we're not physically together. In John 15, Jesus commands his disciples to love on another. He tells them to love them sacrificially. What greater adventure is there than to sacrifice for others? Pursue human connection. Put down your phone and controller and seek out companionship. In a society that views deep male friendships as unmasculine, men have too few intimate male friends. Develop friendships that go deep and meet your need for intimacy in nonsexual ways. Share memories. Develop traditions and enjoy inside jokes. Pray together. Support one another unswervingly, hold each other accountable consistently, and love one another deeply.

Point 3: Pursue God's will

Read Acts 20:24.

In Acts, Paul says his life is worth nothing except for testifying to the good news of the gospel. Throughout the New Testament, we see he truly meant it. He endured much to make the gospel known. He devoted his life to God's will. Like Paul, use your life to expand God's Kingdom. God designed men to be the leader of their families, to be the leader in their churches. He designed them to protect and care for others. God designed us for the purpose of making Him known. Jesus has offered us a real, not a virtual, life of adventure in which we can experience the challenge, thrill, and joy of being part of a purpose greater than ourselves. Allow yourself to be equipped and sent to announce the gospel boldly and live for the gospel courageously. Stop wasting time staring at a screen, but instead, chase worthy, meaningful, eternal pursuits. Accept more responsibility. Be challenged and stretched. A bored man is a dangerous man. Be part of something bigger than yourself. You were created for adventure; be a part of the greatest adventure of a missional life.

Session Wrap-up

1. Why are we tempted to give up the real world for the virtual world?
2. What are ways we can embrace living in the real world over the virtual world?
3. How can we pursue human connection? Why is it important?
4. What is God's will for our lives?
5. Why is a bored man a dangerous man?
6. How can you be a part of God's mission?

Pursuing Holiness in the Face of Digital Temptation
Session 6: *Adventure Seeking*
Participant Worksheet

Leave the virtual _____

Ephesians 2:10

Pursue human _____

John 15:12-13

Pursue God's _____

Acts 20:24

Session Wrap-up

1. Why are we tempted to give up the real world for the virtual world?
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5. Why is a bored man a dangerous man?
6. How can you be a part of God's mission?

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ABSTRACT

EQUIPPING THE TEENAGE BOYS OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN HALEYVILLE, ALABAMA, TO PURSUE HOLINESS IN THE FACE OF DIGITAL TEMPTATION

Jonathan Gregory LaMarque, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022
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This project seeks to equip the teenage boys of First Baptist Church Haleyville (FBCH) to pursue holiness in the digital age. Teenage boys must overcome many obstacles on their electronic devices. Chapter 1 presents the ministry context within the project, the rationale of the project, and the goals of the project. Chapter 2 provides biblical exegesis of God's commands to pursuing holiness and fleeing immorality. Chapter 3 addresses the issues teenage boys face today. They should successfully navigate addiction to devices, psychological issues created by social media and video games, and immorality with pornography. In chapter 4, the project is described, and the curriculum is detailed. Chapter 5 contains an overall evaluation of the project and suggestions for improvement. Ultimately, this project seeks to give the next generation knowledge and strategies to overcome sin when it comes to their devices.

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