

Please Turn Off Your Phone

On any given day I communicate with dozens of people through texts, calls or video chats. Thanks to apps such as iTranslate and WhatsApp, I can talk on my smart phone with friends on the other side of the world who don't speak English. You will never hear me complaining about the blessings of technology.

But there's a downside to the digital age. What began as a tool has become a tyrant. So many people today are slaves to their phones. We use them to read books, watch TV, shop, order food, play games, follow the news, check facts, pay bills, monitor the weather and plot the route to a destination. Sometimes I wonder how we existed back in the days of paper maps, phone booths and brick-and-mortar stores.

Smartphones make communication so much easier, and yet they have ruined communication. I've seen groups of friends sitting together in a coffee shop, gathered around a table, yet everyone is engaged in his or her own private phone conversation. With all of our texting, calling, FaceTime chats and social media posts, we sometimes ignore the people who matter most.

We've become "experts" at multi-tasking. People talk on their phones or check their Apple watches while they carry on live conversations with friends. They text and drive. People even surf the Internet in church, not to look up Bible verses but to see yesterday's Instagram posts.

We are hopelessly distracted. We are everywhere, and yet we are nowhere. With all of our digital savvy we forgot how to care. We know how to download an app, but we forgot how to focus on those we love. If this is true for you, I recommend three steps to reclaim genuine human contact:

1. **Change your phone settings.** My phone has a button on the home screen called "Do Not Disturb." I use it often. If

you're eating dinner with your spouse, meeting a friend for coffee or gathering in a small group, you don't need to hear every text or call that comes through. Unless someone you love is in the hospital, silence your phone. Common courtesy demands that you prioritize the people you are with.

2. **Retrain yourself to make eye contact.** I've noticed that young people today aren't always comfortable making eye contact with others. We are so used to texting, sitting behind anonymous Uber drivers or ordering food at fast-food counters that we don't know how to look into someone's eyes and have a meaningful conversation. With all our modern connectivity, we are the most disconnected generation in history.

When I meet with someone for mentoring, or just for a casual conversation, my goal is to make them feel special. I look them in the eyes, ask questions, pay attention to details and deeply engage. If I'm constantly looking at my phone while I'm in a conversation, I am rudely saying, "You aren't important to me."

When Jesus saw Nathanael from far away, He noticed details about him. When they met, Jesus said: "When you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (John 1:48b, NASB 1995). Nathanael was amazed that Jesus took such genuine interest in him. That small gesture changed his life! If you want to communicate love, stay focused.

3. **Learn to listen with both ears.** When my elderly father sustained a brain injury a few years ago, he lost the ability to filter out background noises. Every sound was amplified to the same level, whether it was the person talking to him directly, the icemaker on the other side of the room or a passing train a mile away. He heard every sound equally, so he couldn't focus.

Today many people have lost the ability to focus. In this

noisy, media-saturated culture, we are too easily distracted. We are losing the ability to listen.

This distraction is actually a form of laziness. We are too undisciplined to focus on one thing, and this can ruin relationships. If people see you constantly answering texts or glancing at your phone notifications during a conversation, they will tune you out. It's obvious you don't think they are worth your full attention.

An old Irish proverb says, "God gave us two hears and one mouth, so we ought to listen twice as much as we speak." I urge you to evaluate your communication skills. People in this fast-paced, distracted world need someone to talk to. They need a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on. If you will turn off your phone, look them in the eyes and listen carefully, they might open their hearts and ask you to tell them the secret of your genuine kindness. {eoa}

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