

## **Faith – Screens and Real Relationships**

Good morning, everyone. It's good to be with you this morning—always is. And hello to those joining us online as well.

In recent weeks, I've been reflecting on the SDI training several of us completed. If you're unaware, SDI is a self-assessment tool designed to highlight personal motives and strengths. It's intended to improve workplace performance, but Doug Jared—Assistant to the District Superintendent—has found it extremely useful for ministry workers.

The assessment uses three colors to help us understand each other:

- **Blue** = people-oriented
- **Green** = process-oriented
- **Red** = performance-oriented

I tested as **very blue**—I desire to help people most. My next-highest area was green—I like things to be orderly, fair, and helpful to everyone. My lowest score was red; I do set goals, but I prioritize people and relationships before goals or gain.

I bring this up because it will come in handy when we look at applications later.

But now, I want to dive into some challenges we, as a church family, face—specifically regarding discipleship in a culture shaped by technology.

## **Cultural Influence Isn't New**

Cultural influence pulling God's people away from God is not new. It is part of the normal battle of faith. Throughout Scripture—and throughout human history—we see this ongoing cycle:

**Follow God → Drift into culture → Suffer consequences → Cry out → God restores → Repeat.**

In **Judges 10**, for example, God's people are pulled into the worship of Baal and the gods of surrounding nations—Syria, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia.

In **Nehemiah 9**, the failures of God's people are summarized, including their exile from the promised land—failures rooted in choosing culture over God.

And I want us to look at **Nehemiah 9 and 10** because they don't just describe failure—they present a solution.

Open your Bibles to Nehemiah 9 if you want to follow along. Because the summary is long, I will begin in verse 16 and paraphrase key sections through chapter 10:39.

## **A Story of Repeated Failure and Relentless Mercy**

**Verses 16–17** – The fathers—the leaders—stiffened their necks and refused to obey God, even after all the wonders He had performed. They even tried to appoint new leadership to take them back to slavery in Egypt.

**But**—verse 17—“You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and You did not forsake them.”

Then they created a golden calf and declared *that* as the god who rescued them. They blasphemed God.

### **But what did God do?**

**Verses 19–21** – In His great mercy, He did not forsake them. He guided them with a pillar of cloud and fire, gave His Spirit to instruct them, provided manna and water, and even kept their clothes from wearing out.

**Verses 22–25** – God brought them into the promised land and gave them cities, homes, cisterns, vineyards, orchards, and abundance. They delighted in His goodness and became “fat” off His blessings.

**Verse 26** – Nevertheless, they disobeyed again—largely because they refused to remove the surrounding sinful cultures, as God commanded (Judges 1; Joshua 13, 15, 16 and 17 tells us this). God warned them in Judges 2:2–3 that these cultures would become *thorns* to them and their gods a *snare*.

Influenced by culture, they ignored God’s law, blasphemed Him, and even killed the prophets sent to help them.

**Verse 27** – God brought consequences through foreign enemies. In suffering, they cried out—and God heard from heaven and sent deliverers.

**Verse 28** – After rest, they sinned again... then cried out again... and God delivered them again.

This wasn’t a couple of times— it tells us God saved them MANY TIMES - this was *the pattern*.

**Verse 29–30** – God warned them for many years through His prophets, but they refused to listen.

**Verse 31** – Nevertheless, in His mercy, He did not forsake them.

**Verses 32–37** – Nehemiah confesses the sins of their ancestors and acknowledges God’s faithfulness even in judgment.

Now God has brought His people back to their land under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. And the question becomes:

**How do they avoid repeating the cycle?**

**The Solution: A Multigenerational Team Commitment**

**Nehemiah 9:38–10:39** shows the leaders' response:

They write an oath—a recommitment plan.

They promise to:

- Follow God's commands
- Avoid mixing with surrounding cultures
- Honor the Sabbath
- Give generously to the temple
- Reestablish sacrificial and thank offerings
- Dedicate their firstborn and livestock according to God's Word

But notice something important in the opening of chapter 10:

At least **86 leaders** signed the oath.

Then **the rest of the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants, and their wives, sons, and daughters all joined in** (10:28–29).

And, I counted **six “we” statements** in those final verses.

**This was a multigenerational team effort.**

And as a blue, “people-person,” I love this!

**East Lincoln: A Church of Teams**

I am super thankful for how East Lincoln shows strength in this area.

We have:

- A large, multi-age worship team
- A multi-gen sound booth team
- Greeters, kitchen helpers, nursery workers
- A benevolence team

- A Good News Club team
- Care and prayer ministries
- Women’s ministry
- Missions committee
- Multiple adult small groups (around 80 people weekly)
- Middle and high school small groups (around 40 students with 12+ volunteers)
- Around 24 multi-gen team for children’s Sunday school
- A FCA group in the school
- As well as Active homeschool groups
- And I will be meeting with Ethan and Catlin Schwanke, soon, to talk about more small group options.

If you’re not part of a group or ministry, I encourage you: **join a team.**

But with all our strengths, we must also recognize a powerful challenge facing us today.

### **The Challenge: Technology Is Reshaping Discipleship**

Like the surrounding cultures that swayed Israel, technology today constantly pulls us away from God and chips at our ability to grow in Him.

We often say, “Technology is neutral; it depends how you use it.”  
That’s partly true.

But I would argue: **technology is often more bad than good.**

And here’s why...

### **Digital Immigrants vs. Digital Natives**

Generations tend to break down like this:

- **Boomers:** 65–80
- **Gen X:** 50–64
- **Millennials:** 30–49
- **Gen Z:** 13–29
- **Alpha:** 12 and under

If you're 25 or older, you're a **digital immigrant**— you learned face-to-face communication first, and digital communication second. Screens are the desert for a meal that you will gladly enjoy when you can, but you don't need it.

If you're 20 or younger, you're a **digital native**—you learned digital communication first and face-to-face second. Screens are not a optional desert, they are more like food and water *necessities*.

Sean McDowell in “Understanding Gen Z”, notes: If your 25 or older – you learned how to communicate face to face and have absorbed communicating online as an add on tool. If you're 20 or younger, it's very possible that you have learned how to communicate online far more than you have learned how to communicate person to person. Therefore, they need to LEARN how to communicate person to person.

The pull of technology in our culture is taking us away from TEAM and isolating us to electronic “connection”. And electronic connection is NOT life giving – the data is very clear. We are the most digitally connected generation in history—yet also the most lonely.

AI will likely make this worse. It can imitate companionship, but cannot love, pray, guide, or sacrifice. And I fear that many young people will find AI companionship easier than human relationships.

### **Adults, We Shaped This**

Not all tech is bad—communication, banking, weather updates—great tools.

But most adults have embraced technologies most addictive, entertainment-driven parts.

We binge shows.

We scroll social media.

We consume biased news.

We play games.

We live online.

In fact, according to data from “EMARKETER” adults older than Gen Z use Instagram, TikTok, X, Disney, Reddit, Pinterest, Netflix, LinkedIn, YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook more than them. So before we get to upset that our youth can't stop staring at a screen – realize we do it just as much – sometimes more.

Technology has gotten its hooks into all of us, and I can see how it started a long time ago. When my kids were little we liked getting them “Leap Frog” games. They were animal shaped, plastic keyboards with screens that provided an interactive game with colors and

sounds and rewards so that your kids learned about things like math and reading in an entertaining way.

That – pre internet game – had a TON of psychology built into it. It was designed to be so appealing that #1. Kids would want to play it and KEEP playing it. Leading to #2. So that, parents will buy it! (who’s going to buy an expensive thing that kids will ignore?)

Well, now we have even more intense psychological “appeal” designed into – every screen. Every website, video game, app, or other kind of platform is specifically configured to constantly stimulate our brains – releasing dopamine and endorphins that BRING addictions of various levels to our plate. Technology addiction is real and it’s with us whether we want to admit it or not.

Now try to imagine what kind of challenge the younger Gen z and Alpha kids are experiencing. Their brains have always had these stimulants present. They are hardwired to engage in a screen more easily than a person. Every screen they see piques their interest more than the people around it. Most of the sounds they hear remind them of something online, and screens constantly whisper:

**“Look at me. I’m better. I’m exciting. I have what you want—right now.”**

This leads to:

- Higher anxiety
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Social struggle
- Addiction
- & Shorter attention spans (personally, I believe the reason our Sunday school classes have so many attention span problems is related to this

And these consequences correlate strongly with high screen use.

### **Warnings and Faithfulness of Jesus**

Just this morning I had devotional time with John21:34. It says: “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.” This is sobering warning to us. And its not just about obvious sin, it’s a warning about “drifting away from Him” due to three common ways we do so. #1. Dissipation – wasting our time, how obvious is so much of our

technology use a waste of time? #2. Drunkenness – now before you only put alcohol in this warning – consider the work drunkenness has a more broad meaning – it means to dull the senses and take away the pain or stress of life and escape. How much of our technology use is used to dull the reality of life and escape? And #3. The cares of this life – we all get carried away with all kinds of things. Worldly stuff that brings anxiousness and fear, or so focused on them we are asleep to what really matters.

But God is faithful to us. How blessed are we to have a God who is a patient and loving as He is despite our repetitive failures.

He never leaves us alone (Heb. 13:5). He is with us to the end (Matt. 28:20). And Jesus is so wonderful to us that He promises to keep working on us – to complete us, until He comes again! (Phil. 1:6).

### **A Gods solution**

And He gives us a simple, timeless blueprint—we can see it in Nehemiah 9:

**Band together. Form a team. Prioritize real, embodied relationships.**

Like a sports team:

we meet, practice, work, compete, and grow—**together.**

Eye to eye, elbow to elbow - this is how discipleship thrives.

Scripture affirms this everywhere:

**Acts 2:42** — Teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer – together.

**Romans 12:3–13** — Our many gifts, to be used in one body – together.

**Romans 15:1–7** — The mature helping the young – together.

**Hebrews 10:24–25** — Stir one another up by meeting - together.

Faith formation is:

**intentional, relational, communal.**

### **A Word About My SDI Results**

I may be a **people person** who works hard within the **process** of communicating the Bible to you...but, I can see some problems. Doug Jared made a comment that he's the type of person who doesn't mind "building the plane while its in the air". And when it comes to ministry – I'm that guy. I just go...I start flying, and as the ministry plane is in the air....then I address how to keep it airborne... that's not ideal.

But maybe I'm this way because I also realize how hard it is to DO ministry. I mean, think about it - is there one way to do small groups? No, there's LOTS of ways to do small

groups. Is there ONE WAY to do youth ministry? NO, there's lots of ways to do youth ministry. So, it's not that easy to build a plane ahead of time, without needing to tear parts of it out and rebuild them as you fly anyway. And because working with the gifts, knowledge, desires and preferences of other people brings so many options into play, it's probably easier to start flying and build as you go. It's not easy, but I see room for improvement, and I am thinking, praying and working on things.

With all that being said, allow me to remind you about some information I have brought before you in the past.

### **Sticky Faith and the Power of Multigenerational Teams**

The Fuller Youth Institute's Sticky Faith research confirms that faith "sticks" when young people have **5–6 adults** invested in their lives.

These adults are people like:

mentors, teachers, coaches, grandparents, neighbors—**living pictures of Christ.**

And East Lincoln is doing this beautifully through Sunday school, youth leaders, worship teams, nursery volunteers, FCA, homeschool groups, and many more.

Ministry leaders—keep finding ways to deepen these connections.

### **Closing: A Call to Community**

Church family, the greatest gift you can give the next generation is:

- **Your presence**
- **Your wisdom**
- **Your prayers**
- **Your Christ-like love**

We need players, not spectators.

Servants, not critics.

Teammates, not isolated individuals.

If you're already serving—thank you.

If something in your heart is stirring—come talk with us. Join the team.

I want to leave you with **A Statement and a Story**

I got from Matt Chadler and the Village church in Texas. The village church is very large and has a 20-30 year old ministry team. Their 20-30 mission statement is: *“Everyday, in all spaces, in each season of life, we are joyfully building beyond ourselves, living the greater story together, and creating a kingdom legacy for generations to come”*. *Doest that sound good? How do we do that....*

Let me use a final story Matt Chandler shared with The Village Church.

In 1922, Center College—the “Praying Colonels”—faced Texas A&M in the Dixie Classic. Texas A&M was in trouble, they were short on players. Then, out of the stands comes a student named E. King Gill. He grabs a uniform, suits up, and stood with the team - ready to enter the game.

This began the tradition of the “12th Man.”

Today, at every Texas A&M home game, roughly 20,000 students stand the entire game to honor that spirit.

So here’s my question:

**What needs to happen in your walk with Jesus for you to—at minimum—stand in support of the work God is doing here?**

What needs to happen for you to suit up?

To get on the field?

To carry the ball or stand firm against the enemy?

Let’s be a people who, in whatever we do, work heartily for the Lord, not for ourselves, not for pour own gain. But for the honor and glory of Jesus Christ. (Col. 3:23–24)

**Amen.**

**Let’s Pray**