Samuel D. James

scroll less live more

10 Healthy Tech Habits for Teens

"This age of digital technology, social media, and AI is full of apps and tools that are constantly shaping us; their influence is impersonal and nearly inescapable. We are all at risk of living in a way that God never designed for us to live—and none of us is more at risk than our children. Because of this, I cannot recommend *Scroll Less, Live More* enough. The habits outlined in this wonderful book are the habits we need to survive the digital onslaught. And because they are rooted in the gospel, they are the habits we need to thrive as children of God. Parents, don't just hand this book to your teens; read it with them. As you invest this way in them, you will learn much about how you are being influenced too."

Paul David Tripp, author, *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*

"In a culture consumed by screens, *Scroll Less, Live More* offers more than just another warning about technology. With theological depth and practical wisdom, Samuel James casts a compelling vision of the fuller, richer life God invites us to pursue. Though this book is written for teens, parents will find it equally challenging and encouraging. It's an invaluable resource for families seeking to cultivate wise habits in a digital age."

Whitney Newby, Founder, Brighter Day Press; author, *Lift Your Eyes*; mother of four

"Few writers make me think more carefully than Samuel James does. He has a knack for evaluating cultural trends in light of Scripture, and that gift is on display in these pages. As a dad, pastor, and embarrassingly ordinary tech user, I need the kind of clear-eyed sanity that Samuel offers. He shows teens what their devices are training them to become—especially in regard to how they attend to others and how they discern what is true. This book never talks down to its audience; it reads as wise counsel, not an anti-tech screed. Best of all, Samuel leads readers beyond better habits to the grace of Jesus himself. I'm already eager to hand this book out to families at church."

Matt Smethurst, Lead Pastor, River City Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia; author, *Tim Keller on the Christian Life* and *Before You Open Your Bible*; cohost, *The Everyday Pastor* podcast

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For Charlie, Ruthie, and Wesley

Contents

Introduction *1*

1 Habit 1 *5*
Become Wise

2 Habit 2 *19*
Know Your Tools

3 Habit 3 *33*
Don't Believe Everything You Click

4 Habit 4 *53*
Log Off and Go Touch Grass

5 Habit 5 *71*
Make Friends Instead of Followers

6 Habit 6 *89*
Keep the Lights On

7 Habit 7 *107*
Live a Life Too Big for Screens

8 Habit 8 *123*
Make Things (Because God Does)

9 Habit 9 *139*
Rest Well

10 Habit 10 *155*
Live by Grace Alone

Acknowledgments *173*
Appendix: For Parents and Pastors *175*
General Index *185*
Scripture Index *191*

Introduction

I REMEMBER VERY CLEARLY the day I learned what an email is. I was probably ten or eleven years old. A giant khaki-colored box sat on the living room desk. What looked like a small television was right next to it, turned on. On the screen, I saw words being typed and a button labeled "Send."

"Push that button," my parents explained, "and anyone else with a box like this can read these words in just a few minutes." I was, as some people say, "shook."

Pretty much from that day forward, computers and the internet have had some kind of role in my life. To be sure, technology looks a lot different now than it did back then. Instead of using a huge box and mini television to send emails, I primarily use the piece of glass that is the size of my pocket and goes everywhere with me. Instead of having to plug in a phone line to a bulky computer and wait for the computer to connect to the internet, I can pick up my phone or my

tablet and immediately watch a movie, look up a recipe, or call someone, no matter where I am.

You could say that even though technology is smaller than it was when I was a child, the role it plays in my life is much bigger. And that's true for nearly all of us.

A few years ago I wrote a book called *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age*. It's primarily for adults, and in it, I explain what I believe the Bible and some very wise people can teach us about using technology in our digital world. *Digital Liturgies* focuses on some big-picture questions related to how the internet can affect our spiritual, mental, and emotional life.

This book was inspired by that book, so it covers some of the same topics, but I wrote this book specifically with teens in mind. My goal is to give you some practical ideas to help you and your family use digital tools, such as the internet and social media, in a healthier way.

One of my missions when I started writing this book was to make it as easy to read as possible. I hope I've done that. But making things easy to read can actually be quite difficult! I suspect that, as you read, you may come up with a few questions that this book doesn't answer. May I make a recommendation? As you read this book, write down those questions. Then check out *Digital Liturgies* and see if your questions are answered there.

Another mission I had was to help all kinds of tech users navigate technology wisely. Some readers of this book may have virtually no experience with smartphones, streaming, social media, or artificial intelligence. Some readers may be deeply involved with all those things. And probably many people fall somewhere in between. For that reason, I've tried not to assume too much about you. I give you these details to say: If you find something in this book that doesn't apply to you, that's okay! Feel free to skip over it. But I hope you won't skip too far before you find something that does apply to you.

Before you begin the first chapter, let me offer you three tips for reading this book.

First, read this book with somebody else. It's a great idea to read it with a parent. You could also read it with a pastor, a teacher, or a mentor. Of course, you could absolutely read it with a friend, but reading this book with someone a little older will probably help you get the most out of it. Some of the best conversations I've ever had in my life have been started by a book.

Second, read this book slowly. There are some big ideas in this book. Some of the suggestions may require big changes for you. Take time to think carefully about them. Don't just agree because you're reading these things in a book. Any book worth reading is worth reading thoughtfully.

Finally, get a notebook ready and answer the questions at the end of the chapters. These questions are not quizzes to see how well you understood the chapter (who likes quizzes?). They are reflection questions that I hope will get you to engage with the book more deeply. Use these questions to think through how you could implement the recommended habits in this book. The questions will also prompt you to think about other related things you've learned or read and see how they compare with the ideas in here. The best way to read is to read thoughtfully, and the best way to think is to write.

I know that you could be doing many other good things right now aside from reading this book. So the last thing I want to say before we get started is thank you. Thank you for taking the time to read a short book about God's wisdom as it relates to our tech habits. I pray that this book offers you at least one piece of practical wisdom to truly help you flourish and that this book brings glory to our Creator, who loves us so much that he gave his only Son for us.

1

Habit 1

Become Wise

HAVE YOU EVER TRIED to fix something? It can be a big task. Unfortunately, I've discovered that as I get older, the stuff that breaks tends to be more and more complicated to fix. Broken LEGO sets and flat bike tires are one thing; leaky pipes underneath the bathroom sink are quite another. Some people, such as my dad, seem to have a natural talent for repairing just about anything they put their hands on. Other people, such as me, spend what feels like an eternity just staring at a tangled mess of parts, trying desperately to figure out which piece goes where, which thingy goes in which spot, and on and on. Sometimes we can get lucky. Many times we end up having to watch a video or make a phone call.

Fixing stuff can be hard. But the key to knowing how to fix something is actually quite simple: It's *knowing what that thing is supposed to be and do*. For example, though I can fix things that I'm pretty familiar with, when something underneath the hood of my car is making noise or causing problems, I often have no idea what I need to do . . . because I rarely even look at my car's engine.

The better we understand how something is meant to work and what it's meant to be, the better we can respond when it's not functioning the way it was designed to function. The Bible actually has a lot to say about this concept. In fact, it has a word for this whole idea of knowing how things are meant to be. It's called *wisdom*.

What do you think of when you hear the word *wisdom*? You might think of old people giving advice to the younger generation. You might think of very smart people who read lots of books and know something about everything. You might even think of specific people in your life: your parents, a teacher, your pastor, or people who have helped you think about things and make decisions.

When the Bible talks about wisdom, it does comment on things such as age, intelligence, and mentorship, but it goes much further. According to the Bible, the kind of wisdom that you and I really need is knowing the truth about God,

ourselves, and the world around us. When you know how God made the world to work, then you'll have a better idea of what to do when something in life needs fixing. If you don't know how God made the world to work, navigating life rightly is like trying to fix a car with plumbing tools. The key to living a wise life is becoming very familiar with how God has designed life to be.

What does this all have to do with how we use technology? We have to understand how God made the world to work in order to use technology rightly. Technology is like an enormously complex car that we are driving all the time. We carry technology in our pockets every day, yet we often have no idea how much it's affecting us. It's so common that we really don't even think that much about it. Many of us cannot remember what life was like before we could pick up a smartphone and see or talk to anyone in any place in the world. Technology is constantly changing, so it's constantly changing our definition of normal. We are like fish, and technology is like water—we're surrounded by it, so we hardly even realize it's there.

Because technology is constantly changing the way people *can* live, we have to regularly learn and relearn from Scripture how God intends for his people to live.

When we look to the Bible for wisdom, we learn three main things about God's design for living rightly: We are created

to fear the Lord, we are created to live well with others, and we are created to live skillfully in God's world.

Fearing the Lord

The first thing that wisdom teaches us is that we are meant to fear the Lord. As Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." What does fearing the Lord mean? Most simply, it means knowing who God is, acknowledging his authority, and submitting to him in every aspect of life. We fear the Lord when we believe what he says in his word. We fear the Lord when we put our trust in Jesus as our only hope for eternal life. We fear the Lord when we think deeply about what he says, when we choose to obey him even when it feels hard, and when we encourage the people around us to do the same.

There's a reason the entire Bible starts by talking about God rather than humans. The opening line says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Before any person lived, God was speaking the universe into existence. The world is by God, from God, and for God.

If you don't know how something is supposed to work, the best way to find out is to ask the person who made it. Nobody understands that thing better than its creator. The same is true for this entire universe. God is the Creator of all,

so we look to him—his mind, his will, his desires, his loves, his hatreds—for knowledge and meaning.

The Bible is clear that we will never really understand the way things are supposed to be or make the best choices in life unless we see things from God's perspective. This doesn't mean that non-Christians can't have any wisdom or do anything well. But it does mean that even the smartest, most thoughtful unbelievers can't really understand the ultimate truth behind everything, nor can they make the best choices—the choices that will last for eternity. There is no lasting wisdom apart from fearing the Lord.

Most of our technology does not help us fear the Lord or even draw our attention to God. In fact, when we're on our devices, scrolling aimlessly or invested in some kind of controversy, it's easy to not think about God at all. We believe things that don't align with what God says because they seem right in the moment, or we become more concerned with being popular than with pleasing God.

Fearing the Lord is the beginning of wisdom because it puts everything else in correct perspective. Seeing all of life from God's point of view is the only way to see it clearly.

Living Well with Others

Wisdom also teaches us how to live well with others. When I was a kid, my mom had to tell me not to laugh when others

messed up or got injured. I had to be taught how to use my words, watch my reactions, and take other people's feelings into consideration. As I got older, I had to learn other things, such as how to show sympathy or what to say to calm a tense situation. My mom's early instruction and perspective helped me grow in these areas as I became a teenager and then an adult. All these are examples of learning wisdom in relationships.

Becoming wise involves taking on God's perspective in our relationships and submitting everything we say and do to his perspective. To be wise in our family life, friendships, love life, and everything else, we have to see the people around us the way God sees them.

The Bible says that every person is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). It teaches us that people have infinite value and worth, not because of any particular thing they can do but because of who created them. In his wisdom, God also designed us to need other people from the very start of our lives. We do not choose to be born. We cannot care for ourselves when we're infants. We need parents, friends, teachers, pastors, and counselors. We have to learn from, depend on, and submit to others. We were made to live in relationship.

Therefore, those who are wise pay attention to people. They say and do things that strengthen relationships. For example,

the wise learn how to use their words in a way that encourages those around them. As Proverbs 25:11 says,

> A word fitly spoken
> is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Similarly, Proverbs 16:24 tells us,

> Gracious words are like a honeycomb,
> sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

The wise also know that genuine friendship is not just telling each other that we're right, even when we know we're wrong; it's knowing how to speak lovingly but truthfully to one another, whether our words are uplifting words or hard words. As Proverbs 27:6 tells us, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend."

As we think about technology, considering how to live well with others is extremely important. As we'll see, one of the biggest challenges about modern technology is how it distances us from other people. Our smartphones and social media apps make authentic connection with others more difficult. Our digital "friends" don't feel like real people, so we don't always treat them with respect. On the internet, we often talk to one another as if we are competitors in a

race for attention rather than as human beings made in the image of God.

To make the right choices with technology, we must be wise about relationships. Wisdom teaches us how to live well with others—in real life *and* online.

Living Skillfully in the World God Has Made

Wisdom also helps us live skillfully in the world God has made. Our phones and social media often make the world seem a lot different than it really is. For example, when I'm on social media, I can choose what I want to see pretty easily. I can follow and unfollow people, and I can share, mute, or even block certain content. If I say something I regret, I can delete it (and hope nobody has seen it yet). And if I'm tired of it all, I can just log off. On the internet, I have a lot of control over my "world."

But real life isn't like that. Real life requires wisdom precisely because so much of it is not under our control. If we say something to a friend that we regret, we can apologize or say we didn't mean it, but we can't "delete" what we said. Proverbs 12:18 tells us that "rash words" are like weapons—they can do permanent damage. And if we are lazy or shrug off our responsibilities in real life, we can't just log off and stop thinking about them. Irresponsibility will come back to haunt us, maybe horribly (see Prov. 24:30–34).

Technology also tends to make us forget about the reality of our bodies. God created us to live in physical bodies, constrained by time and space, but when we go online, we feel as if we can travel anywhere, be anyone, or see anything. Everything is at our literal fingertips. So we must remember that we're not just brains that can post stuff and scroll on screens. We are bodies too—bodies that need sleep (Ps. 127:2), bodies that need to be outside in nature, and bodies that need to be with other people (Prov. 27:9).

A person who is wise knows how to make good choices in all kinds of real-life situations. And good outcomes tend to follow in everyday life when we make the effort to learn. For example, diligence in school is typically rewarded. Being careful in how we talk to people can help us avoid fights or even heal tense relationships. Paying attention to the physical creation can teach us valuable lessons. Wisdom is about being able to step away from our technology long enough to learn about the world God has made.

How Do We Become Wise?

"Great," you may be thinking. "This sounds wonderful. I want to become wise. So how do I do it?"

I have good news and bad news. The good news is that you absolutely can become wise. In fact, it doesn't matter how old

you are, what your grades are, where you live, or anything like that. It's possible for all people to grow in wisdom.

The bad news is that if you're hoping for a quick, easy list of things you can do to become wise, it doesn't exist. Wisdom doesn't work like that. No book, podcast, or YouTube video can reveal "the five things you must do today" to get wisdom. Why not? Because wisdom is really about *becoming a certain kind of person*.

What kind of person? A person like Jesus Christ.

You may not be shocked by the idea that Jesus is a very wise person. But the Bible doesn't just say that Jesus is wise (although he certainly is); the Bible says that Jesus himself actually *is* wisdom.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminded the Christians at the church in Corinth that they weren't following Jesus because they were so smart. In fact, most of the Christians in Corinth were ordinary people, people nobody would have thought were particularly wise or intelligent. Paul said that this was a good thing because God didn't want them thinking that wisdom came from themselves. He wrote,

> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is

> foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:26–31)

The doorway to wisdom can be entered only humbly, on your knees. Wisdom is not something we can earn or develop with enough life hacks. If I could make myself wise by doing a certain list of things, I know exactly how I would feel: proud. I would look at myself and boast, saying, "I must be a pretty smart, good, and determined person to have become this wise." But that's not the truth. The truth is that I'm a sinful, lazy, distracted, and selfish person. I need wisdom, and I need it to come from outside myself.

That's why we need Jesus. Only he exemplified true wisdom. Jesus is not just a wise person to listen to. He is wisdom in the flesh because Jesus is God. God created everything in this world through Jesus (John 1:3), and he created everything in this world for Jesus (Rom. 11:36). Jesus is wisdom.

So how do we become wise? By humbly turning to Jesus. If we admit that we are fools, turn away from our foolish sin, and turn to him instead, he will not just teach us wisdom (though he does that); he will actually live inside us (Col. 1:27). If Jesus lives inside our hearts through faith, we will become wise—the same way that an apple tree will make apples or a computer with good working parts will turn on and function. Having Jesus fixes our foolishness.

Even after turning to Jesus in faith for the first time, we still draw near to him regularly and humbly acknowledge his wisdom. We become more like Jesus by storing up the Bible in our minds and our hearts (Ps. 1:1–3). We become more like Jesus by loving other people as he commanded, especially other Christians in a local church (1 John 3:16). We become more like Jesus by doing all that he says (John 14:15). As we grow in relationship with him, we will think like him, talk like him, and make decisions like him more and more—slowly and imperfectly, but surely.

Conclusion

Using technology well is not just following a list of things to do or not do. Using technology well begins with understanding God, ourselves, other people, and the world around us. We don't need a huge list of rules that will have to be updated

every time Apple releases a new phone or a new social media app; we need something that will help us determine how to use technology well in any circumstance. We need wisdom. And Jesus is the source of all wisdom.

For the rest of this book, we will think about other habits that will help us be wise with technology. There are other things to know and do that can make our life with technology better, healthier, and more honoring to Jesus and the people around us. But all these other habits are rooted in this foundational habit of becoming wise. If through Jesus we are becoming wise, then even when we make mistakes, we will have a way to get right again.

Big Idea

We need wisdom to live well in this world, and wisdom means thinking and living more like Jesus.

Putting It into Practice

Look to the Bible to understand God, yourself, other people, and the world around you, and you can live a flourishing life in light of that reality.

Wisdom Connection

Growing closer to Jesus will make us wise because he is wisdom.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think wisdom is so important?
2. When you look at your social media feeds and the internet, do you see a lot of wisdom there? What are some ways that social media and the internet might make it harder for us to be wise?
3. What is something you can do each day that will help you become wise?