

The Blessings And Dangers Of The Internet

Introduction. As of October 2008, there were 182,226,259 websites on the Internet. With an average of 250 web pages per site, that equals just over 45,500,000,000 pages of information online. Talk about the information age!

As with anything, the Internet has advantages and disadvantages. The same kind of determination that was seen in Joshua (24:15) is needed by parents now, but we must understand the Internet. Joshua understood idolatry, and you need to understand what can happen to you and your children online (Romans 16:19).

We will look at advantages and disadvantages, and help you stay away from the bad parts of the Internet. Even when we look at the list of dangers in a few moments, it will become obvious we are not talking about newly-invented sins, but newly-invented ways of committing the same old sins (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10). With all of this technological advancement, an old problem still exists: the devil has new devices to practice his old art.

I. ***The Blessings Of The Internet***

A. Communication.

1. The Internet, with e-mail and instant messaging, has brought people closer together.
 - a) Because it is easier to e-mail than to send letters, brethren within a church and brethren from different churches have an easier time communicating.
 - b) Mailing lists (for individual churches or Brethren Online, for all Christians) and social networking sites, such as Pleonast, help brethren keep informed (Romans 12:15; Hebrews 13:3).
2. The Lord's church is a "household of faith" (Ephesians 2:19-20), and any chance we have to be closer in a relatively cold society is extremely helpful.

B. Discussion.

1. If you have a spiritual question or want to discuss an issue, many times you will find people on the Internet (via email discussion lists, message boards, social networking sites, and chat rooms) who perhaps have better knowledge or understanding of the matter than in your local congregation (Acts 20:32).
2. In Acts 2:46, the first Christians in Jerusalem were assembling and encouraging one another daily.
 - a) At most, churches assemble three times a week. This is good, but it still leaves a lot of time between services.

- b) Now brethren can go online and give encouragement to or receive encouragement from other brethren throughout the world every day.
 - 3. This is especially helpful for Christians who live in areas where there are few Christians. The Internet encourages bonds that otherwise would not exist (Proverbs 27:17).
- C. Biblical materials.
- 1. Many Christians around the world maintain websites full of biblical information for the purpose of teaching (2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:18).
 - a) One can find sermon outlines, articles, class books, teaching guides, audio files, and video files of lessons.
 - b) Maps and photos, freely available on the Internet, can be very advantageous in edifying God's people (cf. Hosea 4:6).
 - 2. This perhaps has been the Internet's greatest reward for God's children -- the building up of our knowledge and faith.
- D. Evangelism.
- 1. A phenomenal strength of the Internet is its capability for use in evangelism. The Internet is unique in that one can anonymously access all kinds of information -- one can search for spiritual materials without concern of being "preached at" directly.
 - a) In general, society is more distant now. It is much more difficult to go door-to-door and get Bible studies with people.
 - b) It may seem odd to those of us who are older that anyone would go to the Internet to discover spiritual truth, but it does happen.
 - (1) The younger generation especially has become dependent on the Internet for information. This can be easily seen by the decrease in newspaper and magazine circulation.
 - (2) If they find restaurant information, make travel plans, compare car and house prices, purchase supplies, and other activities on the Internet, they would also be likely to get information on spiritual matters online.
 - (3) Our church's website receives hundreds of visitors and thousands of hits per month from multiple countries, and I have received many questions about biblical topics.
 - 2. As more and more people get online, and people become more and more dependent on using the Internet, then effective Internet evangelism may lead to many people coming to the faith in future years (Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Thessalonians 1:8). In this way the word of the Lord will be glorified (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

II. ***The Dangers Of The Internet***

A. False teaching.

1. Just as the Internet can be used to promote and spread the truth, the Internet can also be used to promote and spread error.
 - a) The distribution of error is nothing new. Paul had to deal with it on many occasions (Acts 15; Galatians; Philippians 3:18-19; et al.).
 - b) The Internet, however, allows the dissemination of error at a greater level and more directly than ever before.
2. The present reality of the Internet must cause all of us to change some habits.
 - a) Generally elders, preachers, and members needed to be on the lookout from Christian publications, other congregations in the area, and perhaps from new or existing members in the congregation.
 - b) Elders can no longer think that geography can keep error away; it is not enough to expect others to know the truth on issues to keep others from being deceived (cf. 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18).
 - c) The Internet allows a false teacher to send material directly to any Christian, without anyone else perhaps knowing (2 Peter 2:1; cf. Hebrews 5:12-14).

B. Music and movie piracy.

1. Stealing and sharing digital files that are the copyrighted property of another is an extremely serious and wide-ranging problem online.
2. Music and movie piracy is much easier than shoplifting, because it is anonymous and many think it to be harmless. They believe that as long as something is online, it is free. Some of my family members have downloaded thousands of songs illegally with no repercussions (as of now).
3. I have even spoken with younger Christians who thought there was no problem with piracy. However, it is stealing and the Bible condemns this (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Ephesians 4:28). If you earned your living in this way, how would you like it if someone stole your material (Matthew 7:12)?

C. Gambling.

1. Gambling can be roughly defined as covetousness expressed through attempts at gaining something for nothing at another's expense (Luke 12:15).
 - a) While gambling is strictly legislated in the U.S., the Internet has no boundaries. Many companies operate in other countries, where laws are not as stringent.

- b) The first online gambling site launched in August 1995. It is currently estimated that there are well over 2,000 Internet gambling websites offering various wagering options, including sports betting, casino games, lotteries, and bingo.
 - c) Internet gambling revenue in 2005 was estimated at \$11.9 billion and is projected to double by 2010, according to Christiansen Capital Advisors (CCA).
 - d) CCA estimates that nearly 23 million people gambled on the Internet in 2005. Approximately 8 million of those gamblers were from the United States.
2. The anonymity of the Internet can be a great temptation. Online gambling, being a form of covetousness, is equal to idolatry (Ephesians 5:3; Hebrews 13:5).
- D. Pornography and immorality.
- 1. Ever since the '90s, the Internet has been marked by significant quantities of hardcore and softcore pornography. The combination of anonymity, privacy, and lust has made the Internet the most lucrative market for pornography.
 - a) Pornography is a \$57 billion industry worldwide, with \$12 billion of the total in the U.S. market.
 - b) Child pornography generates \$3 billion annually and mobile phone pornography, the newest way to distribute this filth, is expected to generate \$5 billion by 2010.
 - c) Porn revenue is larger than all combined revenues of all professional football, baseball, and basketball franchises. It also exceeds the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC networks (\$6.2 billion).
 - 2. Pornography is not an "addiction." It is a serious character problem that must be changed before it leads to something else or condemns us (Matthew 5:27-28; 1 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 5:19-21).
 - 3. Many other kinds of sexual immorality exists on the Internet.
 - a) Many men who have indulged in online flirtation believe it to be harmless fantasy. However, it is far from harmless when married and unmarried men are meeting married and unmarried women they met online for the purpose of fornication.
 - b) There are also websites for people who want to find sexual partners in their local area who are interested in sexual encounters.
 - c) We have all sadly heard of sexual predators who are adept at getting enough information to find a target and convince him or her to meet. A lot of those instances have ended in molestation and/or death.

- (1) There are 24-30 million children online at any one given time, many of them in chat rooms or on social networking sites (Facebook, My Space, Xanga, Friendster).
- (2) One in 5 youths received a sexual approach or solicitation over the Internet in the past year, and one in 4 youths had an unwanted exposure in the past year to pictures of naked people or other sexually explicit pictures.

III. ***What Can Be Done?***

- A. There are many websites and services which can protect both you and your children from sin. Services such as NetNanny, CovenantEyes, and PC Tattletale can filter and monitor what is being done on the computer.
- B. Safekids.com is a website which offers family contracts for parents and children to sign, pledging that they will both do their best when it comes to the Internet. Safekids.com has the additional feature of a child-safe filtered web search.
- C. When children are young, they need their parent's direction and teaching.
 1. Parents should always know where their children are going online and with whom they are chatting. Leaving children on their own with computers in their room is asking for trouble.
 2. Dr. Keith Ablow, a psychiatrist, said, "Parents need to know that the Internet can be disinhibiting to young people and adults alike," he said. "And people do things on the Internet they wouldn't do in daily life. They offer information they wouldn't normally offer in an interpersonal interaction that's more human."
- D. As adults, these monitoring and filtering services are helpful, but we must also find it within ourselves to have the ability to fight off temptation (Psalm 119:11; 1 Corinthians 10:12; 16:13).

Conclusion. When everything is said and done, the Internet is a fantastic tool. While many use it for evil, we can also accomplish much good through the Internet in promoting and encouraging the cause of Christ. The fact that some have used it to perpetrate terrible evil does not mean that it is right to condemn the Internet on such a basis. It is a tool, just like the printing press, radio, television, and one determines how it will be used.

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