

Turn with Me in Your iPhones... How the Smartphone has Changed Preaching

Bearett Wolverton, M.Div
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
bearettwolverton@gmail.com

Abstract

I once chuckled at a guest preacher when he began a sermon's scripture reading by saying, "Turn with me in your iPhones to James chapter 2." Of course, the congregation chuckled, but he was right—most churchgoers in the 21st century do not bring their bibles to church anymore. Instead, they utilize their smart phones — and for much more than just reading scripture during sermons. This paper will assess the challenges and the advantages of preaching in the smartphone age. Utilizing specific research on mobile device use and attention spans, this paper will also help preachers better understand how to effectively reach their audiences in the face of technological competition.

INTRODUCTION¹

I once chuckled at a guest preacher when he began a sermon's scripture reading by saying, "Turn with me in your iPhones to James chapter 2." Of course, the congregation chuckled as well, but he was right — many churchgoers in the 21st century do not bring their bibles to church anymore instead, they utilize their smart phones — and for much more than just reading scripture during sermons. This paper will assess the challenges and the advantages of preaching in the smartphone age. Utilizing specific research on mobile device use and attention spans, this paper will help preachers better understand how to effectively reach their audiences in the face of what can be perceived technological competition.

The Royal Public Health Society in Great Britain has recently sponsored an event called "Scroll-Free September", where smartphone users are encouraged to decrease the use of their mobile devices to improve sleep, relationships and wellbeing.² While the topic of smartphone misuse could be greatly expounded upon, the scope of this paper will be limited to the mental effects of cell phone use by listeners during public speaking, specifically preaching. I will first present recent research on the cognitive effects of smartphone use by listeners followed by studies linking this to attention spans. Then I will provide some positive insights regarding smartphone

¹ I would like to thank fellow EHS member and my undergraduate homiletics professor, Dr. Jeff Magruder for his insight and guidance as I wrote this paper.

² Scroll Free September: Social Media Users Urged to Log off. July 27, 2018. Accessed August 14, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-44980893?ns_source=facebook&ns_campaign=bbcnews&ocid=socialflow_facebook&ns_mchannel=social.

use during sermons. The paper will conclude with eight strategies that preachers can utilize to effectively engage listeners in the smartphone age.

COGNITIVE EFFECTS OF SMARTPHONE USE

The rise of smartphone use has led many psychologists and researchers to conduct studies to determine the cognitive effects on the human brain as a result of their use. This is relevant to preaching because as Richard Cox pointed out in his book, *Rewiring Your Preaching*, “*the results of preaching are predicated and dependent on the worshiper’s natural (brain) ability to pay attention, integrate current thought with experiences and knowledge, and utilize memory.*”³ This implies that the available cognitive capacity of listeners is dependent on their ability to pay attention – something that is hard to do when we live in a world where our smartphones connect us to the internet and notifications are seemingly endless.

In 2017, a research team from the University of Texas at Austin led by psychologist Adrian Ward conducted two experiments to test “how dependence on these devices affects the ability to think and function in the world off-screen.”⁴ This particular study concentrated on the notion that the mere presence of one’s smartphone can impair their cognition and reduce their focus on a given task. The study consisted of nearly 800 undergraduate students who were asked to do one of three things with their smartphones: 1) place their smartphone on the desk in view, 2) place their smartphone in their pocket, purse or backpack, but within reach, 3) place their smartphones somewhere outside of the classroom. This study was then carried out in two different experiments.

In the first experiment, a group of the participants were subjected to a variety of tests that measured each student’s cognitive capacity. This experiment found that the students that left their phone in another room outperformed the students that had their phones close by. The researcher’s results revealed that the mere presence of one’s smartphone decreases available cognitive capacity and can effectively impairs cognitive functioning, even though individuals feel they’re giving their complete attention and focus to a task.

For the second experiment, another group participants were given the same focus-oriented tests to measure available cognitive capacity. The difference with this group however, is that the students were required to self-report when they felt the need to think about their phone. Again, the results revealed that the students that left their phones outside of the room outperformed the students that had their phones close by. This suggests that when preachers are speaking, listeners are already at a cognitive disadvantage by just having their smartphone in their pocket or in their purse nearby.

³ Richard H. Cox, *Rewiring Your Preaching*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 23.

⁴ Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy, and Maarten W. Bos, "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 2, no. 2 (April 2017): 140-154. Although this study was not done in the context of preaching or public speaking, its relevance to the issue of smartphone use and residual cognition can be applied because the study centered on the idea of the participants' abilities to focus on a given task.

Smartphones have also introduced a notion that multitasking can be good for the brain and that focus can be equally distributed. When listeners pull out their smartphones during a sermon to check a text message or read a sports notification, their intention might be to briefly multitask before returning to focusing fully on the sermon. According to Daniel Goleman, a bestselling author on emotional and social intelligence, the brain simply doesn't work this way.

Goleman shares: *“Attention tasks don’t really go on in parallel, as “multitasking” implies; instead they demand rapid switching from one thing to the other. And following every such switch, when our attention returns to the original task, its strength has been appreciably diminished. It can take several minutes to ramp up once again to full concentration”*⁵

This reality presents a challenge for preachers. Each time a smartphone is used by a listener, concentration on the sermon is lost and then must be regained. In fact, each time a listener interacts with his or her smartphone during your sermon, they might be tempted to view more than just one notification. Their intention of viewing one acute text message might lead them check other applications on their smartphone as well since they already have it out and available to them.

It is plausible to deduce from the research described above that the human attention span during smartphone use has been decreased. It is also plausible to link these decreases in cognition to the increased reliance on smartphones. In fact, Apple released a statistic in 2016 stating that their iPhone users routinely unlocked their devices on average of 80 times per day.⁶ Another 2016 study found that the attention span of students listening to lectures is determined by the skills of the lecturer rather than the material itself.⁷ These results indicate that a preacher skilled in the art of presentation should be able to capture the attention of an audience throughout a sermon, no matter the topic or length.

POSITIVE IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC SPEAKING IN THE SMARTPHONE AGE

Obviously, excessive smartphone use is not good for the brain or for us preachers who wish to use our homiletical gifts to make an impact for God's kingdom. But in light of all of the research that points to the negative aspects of congregational cellular use, there is a big advantage that preachers may wish to capitalize on. This advantage is that public speaking is still regarded as a popular way to communicate information in our modern society. The TED Talks organization is known for doing public speaking well.

⁵ Goleman, Daniel. "Multitasking Isn't Making You More Efficient, It's Frying Your Attention Span." *LinkedIn* (blog), September 9, 2017. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/multitasking-isnt-making-you-more-efficient-its-frying-daniel-goleman/>.

⁶ Bjarin, Ben. "Apple's Penchant for Consumer Security." *Tech.pinions* (blog), April 18, 2016. Accessed August 10, 2018. <https://techpinions.com/apples-penchant-for-consumer-security/45122>.

⁷ Bradbury, Neil A. "Attention Span during Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" *Advances in Psychology Education* 40, no. 4 (December 2016): 509-13. Accessed August 12, 2018. <https://www.physiology.org/doi/10.1152/advan.00109.2016>.

Just as the Apostle Paul would step up to speak with the Stoics and Epicureans in a public meeting place of his time, TED has become a popular medium to share insightful ideas in our contemporary society. The TED model allows presenters to speak in front of audiences at various events throughout a given year. These talks are then shared online to a larger worldwide audience. The popularity of TED is a reminder that public speaking is still a relevant and effective way to communicate an idea to an audience. The TED Talks website currently boasts 2,800⁸ available talks in digital video format. Though TED Talks began in 1984, the organization began publishing their talks online in 2006 and had already reached a staggering one billion views by 2012.⁹

According to TED's curator, Chris Anderson, public speaking offers listeners something that they can't get out of just reading information: personal connection, engagement, curiosity, understanding, empathy, excitement, conviction and action.¹⁰ Anderson understands smartphone competition with public speaking as an "attention war" and offers many pieces of advice in his TED public speaking guide to combat it.¹¹ As Anderson implies, public speaking itself still remains one of the most effective means of communicating an idea to an audience.

In the preaching world, though the message comes from God, the presenter has the opportunity to use his or her spiritual gifting to uniquely relay that message through one's own personality and method of speaking. Learning how to do this in a world where smartphones are "warring" for the attentions of listeners is vital. It can be done and it can be done well. Effective modern preaching strives to tear away the individualistic gratification offered by smartphones by in turn offering the communication of information with a personal touch.

EIGHT STRATEGIES FOR PREACHING EFFECTIVELY IN THE SMARTPHONE AGE

In light of diminished attention spans and the reality of the presence of smartphones in our sanctuaries, I would like to conclude this paper with eight practical strategies that preachers can utilize to maximize the effectiveness of their sermons in the smartphone age. These strategies are derived from the success of the popular TED Talks organization and other well known sources of homiletical wisdom. They are intended to help preachers think of the attention of their audience when writing and delivering their sermons.

Strategy #1: Start strong.

⁸ TED Talks. <https://www.ted.com/talks?sort=popular> (accessed on Sept. 1 2018) This number represents the available TED Talks as of the writing of this paper. This number continues to grow each month as TED adds more events and talks to their library.

⁹ TED Staff. "TED Reaches Its Billionth Video View!" *TED Blog*, 30 Oct. 2014, blog.ted.com/ted-reaches-its-billionth-video-view/. (accessed on Sept. 1 2018).

¹⁰ Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*. (New York, NY: First Mariner Books, 2017), 199.

¹¹ Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*, 157.

In *Preaching That Connects*, Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson offer this advice regarding the opening sentences of a sermon:

*“The opening sentence of a sermon is an opportunity. It’s not crucial that we craft it perfectly — even the most apathetic will bear with us at least two or three sentences before turning us off. Still, it’s a shame if we waste the moment when listeners are giving us their highest attention. If we do this sentence well, we won’t still be working for people’s attention when we are well into the sermon.”*¹²

Preachers must capitalize on their opening sentences, and use them well. The opening statements set the tone for the rest of the sermon and it is at this time that most of your listeners will determine whether they are in with you for the long haul or not. Remember, if listeners are not engaged from the very beginning, they have a device in their pockets or their purses that can give them access to literally anything else that could entertain them for the next 30 minutes. Sermon introductions set the tone for the rest of the message. They must raise curiosity, demand complete attention and provide a hook that will lure listeners in for more.

Strategy #2: Use Visuals.

The use of visual aids can give preachers a powerful tool to transform their sermons into three-dimensional messages for their listeners. When preachers introduce some sort of visual aid in the form of a prop, a photograph or a short video clip, they are actively drawing the attention of their listeners away from other distractions. Of course, visual aids should be used sparingly and for maximum effectiveness. These tools have the potential to stick in the memories of your audience’s visual learners. In his book, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Gregg Allison correctly noted that preaching has become problematic due the rising reliance of visual communication as opposed to the auditory learning style promoted by preaching.¹³ One such answer to this problem would be to implement visuals to reel in the members of your audience who learn better visually.

Strategy #3: Repetition, Repetition, Repetition.

Another powerful weapon in the armory of a skilled homilician is the use of repetition during a sermon. Even distracted listeners can pick up on a sermon’s main points if the key words, phrases and ideas are repeated often by the preacher during the delivery. In *How Effective Sermons Advance*, Ben Awbrey writes that through the use of repetition, sermons gain greater unity, which enhances the cognitive understanding of the sermon and text in the minds of the hearers.¹⁴ Repetition provides the mental reinforcements that the brain needs to piece together the information being presented during a sermon.

¹² Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching That Connects* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 37.

¹³ Gregg R. Allison. *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 436.

¹⁴ Ben Awbrey, *How Effective Sermons Advance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 186.

Strategy #4: Make a Note to NOT Use Notes.

If preachers desire for their listeners to not be glued to their smartphones during a message, they must not be glued to the notes in their pulpits. TED encourages its speakers to give their presentations without notes so that they can better engage their listeners.¹⁵ This allows speakers to have proper eye contact with their listeners and better use non-verbal gestures to retain attention. On the practice of not using notes, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote in *Preaching & Preachers* that preaching itself “*implies living contact.*”¹⁶ Preachers must not lose their audiences’ attention by referring back to their notes multiple times throughout a sermon.

Strategy #5: Strong Sermon Structuring.

Effective sermons that engage and command the attention of listeners are structured well. Whether your sermon is arranged deductively or inductively, it is important that listeners can follow the trajectory that you are walking them through. Arrange your sermon in an organized manner that clearly outlines various points that are memorable and easy to understand. Doing this will allow you to keep their attention throughout the message and make them want to hear more.

Transitions also play a large role in this strategy. In *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson wrote that transitions serve as road signs to point out where the sermon has been and where it is going next.¹⁷ Skilled preachers can provide carefully crafted verbal transitions to guide the audience through the various points of your message. By doing this, you can help your listeners follow along with you well so that they are not tempted to pull their attention away from the sermon.

Strategy #6: Timing is Everything.

While the purpose of this paper is not to determine a suggested time limit for sermons, I would like for preachers to consider the clock as they preach – their listeners are. As a child, one of the table topics of Sunday lunches after church was our pastor’s sermon length in minutes. My father consistently checked his watch when our pastor would begin his sermons, announce his conclusions and when he actually concluded his message. To this day, my mind thinks about those who might be in my audience doing the same thing. There is no set standard for a sermon’s length, but it should be closely considered in the age of smartphones.

TED mandates that their speakers have an allowed time limit of 18 minutes for their talks. Here is how Chris Anderson, TED’s curator explained his organization’s thinking on the issue in terms of public speaking and timing:

¹⁵ Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*, 143.

¹⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers, 40th Anniversary Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 309.

¹⁷ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 138.

“It [18 minutes] is long enough to be serious and short enough to hold people’s attention. It turns out that this length also works incredibly well online. It’s the length of a coffee break. So, you watch a great talk, and forward the link to two or three people. It can go viral, very easily. The 18-minute length also works much like the way Twitter forces people to be disciplined in what they write. By forcing speakers who are used to going on for 45 minutes to bring it down to 18, you get them to really think about what they want to say. What is the key point they want to communicate? It has a clarifying effect. It brings discipline.”¹⁸

Preachers should consider this logic when writing their sermons. I’m not suggesting that all sermons should be contained to an 18-minute timeframe, but that they should consider being more concise when preaching. What elements are the most important in the sermon? How much time should really be used to get the main points across? These types of questions can be helpful to ask when considering the limited attention spans of your listeners. The more “fluff” your sermon has, the more prone your listeners will be to turn their attention to their smartphones.

Strategy #7: Preach About Smartphone Idolatry.

As silly as it sounds, smartphones have increasingly become what Tim Keller refers to as “hidden idols of the heart.”¹⁹ Perhaps one of the most effective ways that preachers can truly get to the root of the issue of excessive smartphone use is to speak about it from a biblical context as a heart issue. A sermon on idolatry or addiction related to smartphones and their distraction from what God may want to speak to them can be appropriate. The research presented in this paper speaks volumes to the adverse health effects of excessive smartphone use. As preacher of God’s word, can speak directly to this issue as a component of practical spiritual formation.

Strategy #8: End Strong.

The final strategy fittingly focuses on the conclusion of a sermon. As a preaching student in seminary, I remember being shocked by my professor's instruction to always begin writing sermons with the conclusion. George Sweazy, a former homiletics professor at Princeton Theological Seminary once wrote, “*The conclusion [of the sermon] is burdened with two handicaps: The minister prepares it when he is the most tired, and the congregation hears it when they are the most tired.*”²⁰ To avoid this scenario, effective communicators must begin their sermon writing process with the conclusion in mind. This will allow the structure of the sermon to point towards a climatic ending that could stick in the minds of even the most distracted listeners.

¹⁸ Carmine Gallo, *The Science Behind TED’s 18-Minute Rule*. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140313205730-5711504-the-science-behind-ted-s-18-minute-rule/> (accessed on Aug. 14, 2018).

¹⁹ Timothy J. Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), 3.

²⁰ George Sweazy, *Preaching the Good News* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 100.

If you have been successful in keeping the attention of your audience away from their smartphones for the duration of the sermon, you don't want to lose them by failing to end without a strong pay off. Haddon Robinson famously asked his preaching students, "*What can your people do to carry out the truth of Sunday morning's sermon in Monday morning's world?*"²¹ A strong conclusion will answer that question for your listeners by summarizing the message and doing it in such a way that it remains in their minds.

CONCLUSION

Preaching in the smartphone age can have its challenges. As advancements in technology, communications and instant connectivity continue, preachers will need to counter such distractions to relay the gospel message effectively. Research will continue to trace the mental effects of smartphone use as time progresses and preachers should stay abreast with it. Smartphones will keep getting smarter and so homiletics must adapt to meet the needs of a constantly changing reality. By utilizing strategies such as those listed in this paper, preachers can actively engage their audiences well before they engage their devices and gain the upper hand in the "attention war."

²¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 130.