

How to Rise Above Addictive Technologies to Find Real Freedom

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep303>

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your virtually real host, Robert J. Marks. We're talking to Doug Smith about Apple's new Apple Vision Pro VR set. Doug is a passionate voice in the battle against screen addiction, and you can check out his book, *Unintentional: How Screens Secretly Shape Your Desires and How You Can Break Free*. Doug, welcome.

Doug Smith:

Thank you so much, Bob. It's great to be back with you today.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, good. We were talking last time about the propaganda, your words, of Apple Vision Pro's marketing. We went over the ideas that it promoted a vision, it promoted connection, it promoted control, convenience. One of the things we didn't talk about was its promotion of spirituality. How does the Apple Vision Pro promote spirituality in their marketing?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, it's really fascinating the way that they do that. It's even, as I mentioned in the last podcast, this idea that Apple, through Vision Pro, wants us to be immersed. They want us to be all in. They want us to be, and I provocatively said that's a synonym for baptized. They want us to be baptized into accepting their worldview. If you start digging into the worldview of a lot of big tech companies, they are coming from a more materialistic point of view, a very techno utopian kind of vision for the future. As you've talked about many times in the past of things like people who believe we could upload our consciousness into computers someday and how they really seem to believe that.

These products kind of have that sense to them, because they don't believe in the actual spirituality of what's real and true in our world, the real and true creator of all and those kinds of things. They're fabricating it and they're doing a really good job of making a fake spiritual world. But, there's one particular scene in the film and an app that they created called the Mindfulness app. The voice on there with this woman shown meditating, there's these colorful 3D objects floating around her, and the voice says, "Experiences on Vision Pro can also expand in three dimensions, filling the entirety of your space, like in the Mindfulness app where you can create a moment of calm."

Robert J. Marks:

Holy Toledo, wow. That's spooky.

Doug Smith:

It is spooky. When I saw it, it took my breath away because it almost promotes this out of body experience in a way, these beautiful environments that let you extend beyond the dimensions of your room. That's another phrase from the commercial. You're being baptized. There's this implied trust. I'm becoming a disciple of this, whatever it is. If you're trusting this Mindfulness app, you're trusting this 3D space to give you this moment of calm. It's this manufactured spirituality now, one manufactured in their matrix or whatever. We feel because it makes you feel things. I mean, like you said even earlier

when you put on the Oculus, you felt dizzy. If they put you over a 50 foot precipice, you're going to go, "Whoa," because it works. Right?

If they make you feel spiritual feelings, at least what they would call spiritual feelings, manufactured spiritual feelings, that's a really significant concern for those of us who are all-in truly spiritual believers in Judeo-Christian traditions, or whatever, we believe in the reality of the real spiritual world. The manufactured spiritual world ends up becoming what I would claim would be idolatrous. Yeah, that's a significant concern. One that I think because it has the label of mindfulness, so there's kind of the psychological aspect to it, people might think, "Oh, well, it's not that big of a deal." But the keywords around it that I already mentioned around immersion, giving you calm, is that the peace that passes understanding? What? That kind of a thing, are you going to be able to hear a still small voice? If the real spiritual world were to try to connect with you, but you're only attuned to the false spirituality now, what impact does that have on us? I think that's a really significant concern.

Robert J. Marks:

Here's the thing, Doug. I think it's above and beyond simple marketing. I think that there is a movement towards AI spirituality. I just wrote an article for Newsmax where I talked about the idea that inside of every person, there's a God-shaped vacuum, and you got to fill it with something. You and I are both followers of Christ.

Doug Smith:

Right,.

Robert J. Marks:

We fill it with Christianity and the truth of Christ. On the AI side, they believe of the coming of the singularity, when AI begins to take over. We believe in the second coming of Christ, so they're believing in some sort of coming also. They're also seeking immortality through uploading themselves. The entire idea of transhumanism is to use technology in order to extend your life. There is literally an AI church in California which promotes AI as God.

Doug Smith:

Wow.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh gosh, Ray Kurzweil was asked for example, what about God? Does God exist? His response was, "No, not yet." In other words, he believes that AI will come about and eventually become that God. Anthony Levandowski has founded this church and they literally have a Bible. Guess what their Bible was written by? Guess who wrote it? ChatGPT.

Doug Smith:

Wow.

Robert J. Marks:

They have followers and they have applied to the IRS for tax exemption, and all of this other stuff. It's one thing to say that they're using this as a marketing tool, but I believe that there's a deeper ideological push behind what they're doing. They're trying to push this idea of a technical utopia around AI and a

religion based around AI. It's really troubling. But, they're trying to fill their God-shaped vacuum with this, with their AI church. Really strange. I'll put a link to that article in the podcast notes if anybody's interested in looking at it.

One of the things that you mentioned in your work is that there's a lot of people in history, you call them dead authors, that have, I guess I can use the word prophesied, prophesied about the latest VR technology like Vision Pro. Could you touch on those? The one I'm familiar with is Marshall McLuhan. I haven't read a lot of his stuff, but I'm familiar with his phrase, the medium is the message. I don't even know what that means. Could you go through some of these older authors and say how they prophesied what was going to be coming with this VR sort of technology?

Doug Smith:

Absolutely, yeah. I'm a huge fan of Marshall McLuhan as well. I was introduced to him through another dead author, Neil Postman, who he just passed away in 2003, but he wrote about the impact of television on us in the 1980s in his amazing book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. If you haven't read that, it's short, it's punchy, but it really shows where we're at today, and he introduced McLuhan to me through that. Then I read McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, which he wrote in 1964 where he did, I'll talk about that, the medium is the message. The other one I'll mention just off the top of my head as well, is our friend and a senior fellow of Discovery Institute, Andrew McDermott, who's often hosting this podcast too. Such a great guy.

Robert J. Marks:

Great guy, yeah.

Doug Smith:

Yeah, I love him. He's a big fan of Jacques Ellul who also wrote about technology. He passed away in 1994, but he wrote this idea of technique called the *Technological Society* in 1954. He'd also talked about propaganda. All these voices, none of these things were a surprise to people who were paying attention in those days. I find that really grounding to be able to go, we're not completely unmoored from any wisdom from people who could explain to us what was happening, and they called it out. I'm going to share some quotes from McLuhan here in a minute. The idea of the medium is the message.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. What does that mean? Unpack that for us.

Doug Smith:

Yeah. The idea is that, and it does get kind of complex because of the way that McLuhan communicates that it's hard to do it. Neil Postman, though, has this really great example of explaining it. The idea is the medium or the way you're communicating actually makes, it so shapes and forms the possible messages that in so many ways we don't realize. What he said, this is Neil Postman explaining the medium is the message. He says, "Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence. Even if they were not, the Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom."

Robert J. Marks:

That's great.

Doug Smith:

You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content. That's a really good example of the medium is the message. There are things you can communicate through smoke signals that you can't communicate in other ways. But I mean, in writing you can say a lot more than you can say in smoke signals. Right? But, the medium ends up framing and constraining, or even making possible what can be said to the extent that McLuhan himself would say that the content is irrelevant. It's the medium that actually forms our relationships and our associations with each other.

I think about even a photograph, there are things you can communicate. They say a picture's worth a thousand words. But when you think about a thousand words, a certain thousand words, you can say things in a thousand words that you can't say in a photo. I mean, we try to in our memes today, but our memes are saying things in the way that they communicate that cannot be said, or that writing says in different ways. The medium is the message is a really powerful way to say that. I'm going to share this quote from McLuhan as he talks about how I found this related directly to Vision Pro now.

When McLuhan talks about the medium is the message, he talks about this idea, it's the medium or the way it's communicated that shapes and controls how we relate to one another. "The content," this is his quote, "the content or the uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it's only too typical that the content of the medium blinds us to the character of the medium." We become blind as we adopt technologies. A medium like Vision Pro, which is literally mediating, right? It mediates what we see through its cameras and its screens and changes our perception of everything. Regardless of the content, we're actually being shaped as people in our relationships and in our ways of relating, and in even our identities, by adopting these technologies. It's a super powerful concept.

Robert J. Marks:

With the addiction that we have from media, has anybody ever thought about a 12 step program in order to overcome it? I mean, you get addicted to alcohol and you go through it through Alcoholic Anonymous 12-step program. They have the same thing for narcotics. I think there are recovery groups from, oh, pornography, for example, and a number of other addictions. What about media addiction? Anybody thought about doing something like that?

Doug Smith:

Oh, very much so. There are definitely psychologists that have programs for handling internet addiction. There's even special programs for younger people who, unfortunately the numbers are off the chart. If the average consumption is eight hours a day, teens are often 10-plus hours a day, and their addictions are really harming them and so dramatically that they often become violent when their devices are reduced or whatever. There's even programs in technology isolating environments and wildernesses that, almost like inpatient addiction recovery programs, where people are helped through their addiction because it is so powerful and so immersive that they have to be completely disconnected and isolated from it. Absolutely, there are many programs. They're not enough. I mean, it's a new area, but it is a burgeoning field, unfortunately.

Robert J. Marks:

It strikes me that addiction, in order to recover from addiction, you either have to do abstinence or moderation, and the abstinence is easy in the sense that it's just a yes or no question. If I'm an alcoholic and I decide to quit drinking, it's no, no to alcohol. If I want to quit drugs, it's no to drugs. If I want to go on a diet, it is not no to food. I have to go at it in terms of a moderation. I tried a technical fast and I

realized I couldn't do it. There are certain media interactions that I require for my day job, for communication with my family, et cetera. It seems to me that the recovery is going to be different than abstinence. It's a matter of moderation, and moderation is always much more difficult as those of us that have gone on diets know about. The 12-step program would have to address that. I guess they probably have this covered in Overeaters Anonymous where they go through the 12-step program.

Doug Smith:

Right, right. It is really difficult, you're right, because technology is such a huge part of our lives, and especially those of us that work technology and everybody, I mean, virtually every job uses some technology. I think the challenge is in terms of where abstinence can fall would be abstaining from intentionally addictive types of activities. Social media, video games, even streaming video for some people that get addicted to YouTube or TikTok and that kind of a thing. There can be boundary abstinence. Certainly we need to abstain from pornography, but that comes through our devices as well. There are kind of segmented abstinences among that. We wouldn't want to say moderate pornography, so we'd want to abstain from that within the context of whatever else you needed to do.

I often tell people that, so the problem with even the idea of moderation or balance is that, in our own estimation, we're the most moderate or balanced person that exists. I'm the most balanced person. It's all y'all that are crazy. In that perspective, we can let ourselves get away from a lot. But again, as a follower of Christ and the way I talk about it in my book is that we need to start from a posture of surrender with a willingness to surrender to Christ, whatever it is that's holding us back. I tell people when I speak, I'm an Android developer, but if Android devices became a problem for me, I'd have to get a different job and out of surrender to Christ. If I literally couldn't handle being around an Android device because I got into bad stuff, I'd have to change my job, and I would, because I want to surrender. I want to live out of surrender. I encourage people to look at it from that perspective, because there are some people, like an alcoholic that can't have any alcohol in the house. You might need to do that to overcome an addiction and to get your life back.

Robert J. Marks:

By the way, Doug, I think you just coined a new term, segmented abstinence.

Doug Smith:

Oh.

Robert J. Marks:

I like that. That's very nice. That's a type of moderation, but it's a segmented abstinence. Very good. Getting back to Vision Pro, and this dovetails on what you've been talking about. Who should use devices like Vision Pro?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, that's a great question, isn't it? Should we use it? Should we use it at all? Well, Apple would have us not ask any questions around the, should we? They only want to ask, can we? Can you afford it? That's the only question, ultimately. There's no reason not to use it in the Apple's worldview. But, what I would encourage everyone to consider is should you. To answer the should you question, you have to have a way, a worldview, a view of who you are and what you're here to do. When you know who you are and what you're here to do, then you choose tools and technologies that fit within that. We don't let

our technologies decide what we're here to do or who we are, although the big tech companies would love it if we did that and follow them into their utopian view.

I would encourage everybody to ask the should I question very deeply considering the things we've talked about. I'm not going to say a categorical no, but I would definitely say there's a lot to watch out for here, a lot to be concerned about. Probably for most people, there's probably a pretty strong no, or very rarely, extremely rarely, maybe an occasional theme park ride of 30 minutes a year or something, I don't know. But yeah, it's a good question. In answering that, I was, again, pushing back to that should I, with the context of what I'm here to do, who I am and why I'm here. Then keep that question in the forefront, and you'll know whether you should adopt any technology, including Vision Pro.

Robert J. Marks:

Interesting. There's a church which is close to us here in Waco called Homestead Heritage. They have a number of people that live there voluntarily in kind of a minimalist society. They mostly do things like agrarian and craft-based activities. If you go to one of their services, you are surprised at the closeness of the family, the respect that the kids have for their parents, the wonderful relationship and love that you can feel in the families. I think a lot of that is because they have abstained from immersing themselves in technology. Now, they're not Amish in the sense that they've totally isolated themselves from technology, but they've certainly minimized their interaction with it. From my brief experience of going to their services, they are better off from having done that. I think this is what you're preaching right now. Right?

Doug Smith:

That's exactly right. I love that. Yeah, it's the intentional life. It's a return to who we are and what we're made for. So much of what comes through our technology does create the negative effects, as we've seen in recent headlines about catastrophic mental health problems. The suicidality, I just read a study of over a third of teen girls have considered suicide and more than 50%-

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, yeah.

Doug Smith:

Describe themselves in persistent state of sadness. This is caused by Instagram. This is caused by TikTok. This is, not even the surgeon general is seeing that. Those of us who would be willing to create alternative communities, really, like the church you described, that's a wonderful remedy to what we're seeing that's really destroying us, destroying our youth in their souls and in such tragic ways. Wouldn't it be worth it? Wouldn't it be worth it to take those steps like that? I, love that.

Too many churches, there'd be another soapbox, but yeah, too many churches are quick to say, "Well, all the kids are on Instagram, so we probably ought to run our church on Instagram and talk to them because where the kids are." Why not draw them out of Instagram? Why not draw them out to a better way? People aren't asking that question yet, but I think in 20 years people will wonder why we didn't do that in this era. Why did you let us all adopt all these technologies without question when you knew what it was doing to us? I hope to be a part of that, one of those voices that's calling out and asking people to do that.

Robert J. Marks:

Doug, you mentioned this idea of the alienation of the youth because of the media. I actually think this is one of the reasons that we're seeing revivals, Christian revivals across the United States. You have Asbury, you had one at Auburn. I guess at Pirates Cove where they started the Jesus Revolution, they had over a thousand baptisms a few months ago. I think a lot of it is this escape from the idea that you are a loser. Like you mentioned, all of these kids are involved in media. Because they're involved in media, they think the whole world is having a great time, everybody is perfect except for them, and that they are a loser. This is the reason that, gosh, what was the statistic? I think it was 70% of girls that are on social media have body image problems.

Doug Smith:

Right.

Robert J. Marks:

The suicide rate of teens has jumped up, and a lot of this is a consequence of the media, just like you're talking about. But I think that the message of Christianity, which is that you are not a loser, that you can come into the family of God, that you can be a son or a daughter of God and be accepted just the way you are is incredibly compelling to young people today. In our church, between services, we had 22 baptisms of people in junior high and high school. I hope that this is the pushback that we see from this addiction to the media and the terrible effects that it's having on our kids today. Really interesting stuff.

The other thing I would mention is in terms of this disciplined life, Jordan Peterson says it very well, and I'm paraphrasing what he said. He's a psychologist. He's really famous for his work and his political stance in Canada and his martyrdom on altar, okay, the altar of Wokeism. Peterson said, "When you live a disciplined life, when you do what you should do as opposed to do what you want to do, you are more fulfilled." Happiness has the same root as the word happening. When you look at happenings all the time, you get happiness, but that's temporary, and that's very, very different from the joy that you were talking about, the joy that surpasses all understanding. You get a sense of joy in your life when you lead a disciplined life away from all of this stuff. I think that that's what happens at the Homestead Heritage, and I think that that's kind of the crux of what your mission is.

Doug Smith:

That's exactly right, Bob, thank you. Yeah, I love the stories. Both of those points are really important. I think you're right. I think what's wonderful about the message of Christianity, it is timeless, it's real, and it is an answer to the harms and the pain that especially our youth are feeling as a result of living in these online worlds that are hurting them so much. Come to the real, come to what's real, and you will be accepted and loved. That's beautiful and I love seeing that. Yeah, Peterson's exactly right. We often think freedom means unrestricted, unbounded. It's our culture's definition of freedom, do whatever you want without consequences. But everybody knows you can't jump off your roof and expect to fly. You fall on the ground and the consequence is gravity.

The disciplined life ends up creating boundaries for a freedom that most people don't recognize, and we're missing that. One of the great metaphors that I've heard in the past is everybody's free to play all the keys on a piano that they can play. Anybody can play all the keys on the piano that they want to. You're free to play them, but only some people are free to play Mozart or Chopin. They're free because of years of disciplined practice, but now they can play whatever they want, whenever they want in true freedom. But, that freedom came at the cost of discipline. In all areas of our lives that are worth living and growing into require that level, including our spirituality.

Robert J. Marks:

Right, right. I think this idea of doing what you want to do is captured in the book that you mentioned by Postman, titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Doug Smith:

That's right.

Robert J. Marks:

That's exactly what we're doing. That's really important. Could you give a summary of what we've talked about? Are you able to do that and capture, I guess, a basic overview of your feelings about Apple Vision Pro, the VR set, and screens in general?

Doug Smith:

Sure, absolutely. What I would say is that the Vision Pro is another example of big technology companies who do not care for what is actually good for us. They only care really, ultimately what's good for their bottom line. They're totally willing to make profit at our expense. They're totally happy for us to be addicted to their products, because they don't lose either way. They win, even with all the critiques. What I would just encourage people to take away would be that they need to be more intentional with their lives than the companies who are spending billions of dollars and millions of hours to get them to be unintentional. We need to take our lives back from these intentionally addictive technologies and live the life that God has called us to live. When we do that, we are going to experience real vision, real connection, real control, real spirituality, not the false versions that Apple's selling with Vision Pro.

Robert J. Marks:

Excellent, excellent. Thank you, Doug. This has been a lot of fun and very enlightening. Look, everybody, we've been talking to Doug Smith about the new Apple Vision Pro VR set and its impact on us. As you've heard in this podcast, Doug is a passionate voice in the epic battle against screen addiction. You got to check out his book, *Unintentional: How Screens Secretly Shape Your Desires, and How You Can Be Free*. You can go to unintentionalbook.com, unintentionalbook.com and find out more about his book. If you want to follow Doug, go to his website, thatdougsmith.com. Doug, I guess this Doug Smith was taken already. Right?

Doug Smith:

It was, it was. Dougsmith.com costs like \$32,000 to license, so I was like, I don't have that. I'll just go with that Doug Smith.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, that's great. Thank you, Doug. Until next time on Mind Matters News, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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