

1. iMail: the usefulness and unusefulness of email

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 00] Well, I'd be very glad if you'd turn back to Genesis chapter 2 in your Bibles for our reading this evening.

Genesis chapter 2. And as we come to read together and to study God's Word, let's pray.

Father, we pray that you would open our eyes. Help us to understand your Word. Help us to see you more clearly.

Help us to see our own lives in perspective with new clarity. Please teach us and transform us for the sake of your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Genesis chapter 2, verse 18. Then the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone.

[1 : 07] I will make him a helper fit for him. So, out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them.

And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man. And while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man, he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man.

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

[2 : 13] Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Did God really say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden. But God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that's in the midst of the garden. Neither shall you touch it lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die.

For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.

She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden.

[3 : 23] But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden. And I was afraid because I was naked.

And I hid myself. This evening we begin a series on the virtual world.

You all know the iPhone, the iPad. This evening it's iWise. The gospel, the human condition and the online world.

Facebook, email, online gaming, internet, porn, texting, Twitter, wikis, blogging, Googling. All that stuff is what we're going to be looking at over the next few Sunday evenings. The good, the bad and the ugly of the online world.

The world that most of us live in actively. Does a week go by when you're not online? Well, for some of us, yes. But I guess for the majority of us, certainly not.

[4 : 23] It's just every day now, isn't it? In fact, those of you who are young enough not to know any other way of doing things will wonder if it's really possible to be alive without being online.

Now, let me say we could so easily think very superficially about this subject. Come up with a list of topics and a list of do's and don'ts.

Pornography is bad. Don't do that. Email is neutral. Well, do that if you fancy it. Facebook is good. The more friends you have, the better. Do lots of that.

But we are not going to do that. Partly because these topics are really much more joined up than we might think. And too important just to operate with do's and don'ts about.

And also partly because Christianity is never do's and don'ts fundamentally. Jesus Christ is a new world of being for a believer.

[5 : 22] Christianity is not first of all about what we are to do or not to do. It's first of all and fundamentally about who Jesus is and all that he has done on our behalf.

And how what he has done has changed the very nature of being for people like us. Jesus is the center of the whole thing. And really it's no good having a load of do's and don'ts if we don't understand how they relate to who he is and what he's done.

So our question for this series is this. How does who Jesus is and what he's done relate to the online world that we rub shoulders with?

Now let me say that we'll not be doing quite our usual thing of looking at one passage and just explaining what it means. We'll be doing this more thematically over these next Sunday evenings.

What does the Bible have to say about this topic and that topic and the other? And therefore handouts will be provided partly for you to make notes on if you wish.

[6 : 33] Partly to give you some encouragement that we're making progress towards an end every Sunday. But mainly to give you opportunity later on to think whether the passages we've looked at really do think, really do say the things that we've said, that I've said that they say.

We'll be referring to passages fairly briefly and a number in each given week. Well, let's kick off the subject this week with email.

Today the program says, I mail the helpfulness and unhelpfulness of email. We're going to think about email today. But I want to think about this today, first of all, because it's a helpful route into thinking more widely about the whole area.

You've got mail.

It's a helpful route into thinking more widely.

[8 : 19] There are some obvious ones like technology envy. You all know that irritating little signature at the bottom of the email you've just received saying, sent from my iPad. But here's an observation.

Over the last few years, I've spent a good deal of time dealing with pastoral problems caused by email. My emails and other people's.

Somebody's got upset because they've sent me an email and I haven't responded quickly enough. Or somebody's got upset because they've been sent. Or somebody's got upset because they've been sent an email that they interpreted negatively, even though it wasn't meant negatively by the sender.

Or someone's received a negative email. Or someone's received a negative email they got steamed up about and bashed off another negative one in response while they were still steamed up. And that has not gone well at the other end.

Here's the issue. Email has the permanence of a letter. But the spontaneous feel of the spoken word.

[9 : 20] It has the permanence of a letter. You can reread it again and again. It can't be unsent or taken back. But it lacks often anyway the deliberateness of a letter.

When you sit down and write a letter, especially if it's a difficult one, it takes a long time. Does it not? Many drafts. Lots of rubbish in the bin as you throw the old one away.

Why? Because you know that when you've only got words to communicate with, you have to be careful with words. If I use that phrase, how will it go down?

If I say this before that, will that soften the tone a bit and help? And one of the reasons you do that when you're writing letters is that you know that letters are likely to be read and reread, picked over.

And also that you know that words without facial expression and tone of voice need time and care.

[10 : 26] The person can't see your face, can't hear your voice, can't pick up any of those non-word clues that are actually so helpful in communication all the time.

So in written communication generally, we're very careful with our words. But email is not like that often. Short, sharp. You send it. You get a response.

You don't have to wait until tomorrow's post to send it. There's no cooling down time. No time for reflection. It has nearly all the speed of communicating by voice.

But none of that vital non-verbal information. And that's the difficulty. See, if I say something to you this evening, face to face, I can quickly see, by the look on your faces, whether you've got what I'm talking about.

If you all go, then I'll know I've communicated wrongly instantly. And I can add things and qualify and restate things and change my tone of voice and try and say what I meant to say the first time.

[11 : 29] But not with email. And of course, that applies to all the other things as well, doesn't it? Texting, MSN, all those things have the same sense of spontaneity, but none of the non-verbal cues.

And as I found talking to people about this subject, all of them have the same capacity for creating enormous relational difficulty.

Now, here's what I want to deal with today for the rest of this evening. The fact that words and bodies belong together for human beings. Human beings are not just words.

I'm not suggesting for a second there's anything wrong with mere words. Words are very useful on their own. Think of printed matter, of books.

Think of the importance of letters in human society. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that given the circumstances between him and Corinth, it's better if he writes to them rather than visits.

[12 : 36] Sometimes writing is better than a face-to-face visit. Relating in words alone is a God-given thing to do. However, bodily relationship is the primary vehicle for human words.

And if we shift more and more towards depending on words without bodily relationship, there are real practical theological questions to face.

I want to make three big, broad theological points this evening and apply them to the world that we increasingly inhabit. First, we human beings are made bodily.

We're bodily beings. Genesis chapters 1 and 2. God has great plans for bodily creatures.

It's very interesting to note that right at the heart of the great plan in creation of the eternal God, who is spirit, is the creation of bodily creatures that bear his likeness.

[13 : 49] Genesis chapter 1 verse 26. Then God said, From the idea that God has big plans for small embodied creatures, namely ourselves.

Let me say something about the body and relationship in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. In Genesis chapter 1 and 2, the body is the vehicle for relationship and communication.

It's the vehicle for communication person to person. We see that perhaps most graphically in chapter 2 verse 23. At the end of this procession of animals looking for a fitting partner.

At last, the woman arrives and the man says, Whoa, how amazing is that? At last, that's the business. And the chapter ends with, The man and his wife were both naked and felt no shame.

The body is the vehicle for person to person relationship in this chapter. And that link between human bodies and communication continues to be expressed in the fact that the Bible uses the verb to know for bodily sexual relationship.

[15 : 42] Chapter 4 verse 1. The body is the vehicle for relationship between people and God.

Do you notice that in chapter 2? There's no suggestion that human beings are made to relate to God in some kind of esoteric, disembodied, mystical sort of way.

No, in Genesis chapter 3, after this great wickedness has occurred, The Lord God walks in the garden, looking for the now hiding body of the one made in his image.

The whole human enterprise is intensely relational at a bodily level. Be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth, says God to the creatures that he has made.

Now let me say that multiplying and subduing the earth are pretty body-ish sort of things, aren't they? Quite difficult to do that without a body. There is no point at which our bodies are not right at the heart of God's great plan and creation.

[17 : 01] Well, so what, you might ask. Let me make a couple of suggestions. There is something about the way that we human beings are made that gives a preeminence to bodily relationship and bodily communication.

Now words, of course, extend way beyond the limits of a human body, don't they? But words utterly divorced from bodily living might be said to be somewhat alien to what the Bible expects for these most important human relationships.

Perhaps it's not surprising then that words without sound, words without expression, need special care to avoid the limitations of not relating face to face.

You might also say that a preference for communicating merely in words cuts somewhat against the grain of the way God has made things.

Let me illustrate with another example. In Genesis chapter 1, day and night are God-given things. He made them. It is not wrong for human beings to work at night.

[18 : 25] Some people can't get employment at any other time. But there would be something slightly out of line to want to be up at night and want to be asleep all day if you had the choice.

And you might want to consider whether the person who loves night and hates the daytime wasn't in some way pushing against the boundaries of the way God has made things.

So here's a question. What does it say that many of us like email more than face to face communication?

Like messaging more than meeting? Like Facebook more than face to face? Disembodied words are fine in themselves.

But you've got to say that doing that to the exclusion of the face to face thing might be going against the grain of the way God has made things. We are created bodily for bodily relationship.

[19 : 37] Second big point. We are fallen bodily. The minute Adam sins, the effects are felt in his bodily relationships.

Genesis chapter 3 verse 7. Then the eyes of both of them were opened. And they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Instantly they hide from each other. And they hide from God. Verse 8. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

And they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Since Genesis chapter 3, we human beings cannot do face to face as we once used to be able to do.

Now often this is thought of as being rather metaphorical. A kind of poetic idea illustrative of human shame.

[20 : 43] A kind of outward illustration of the inner condition of the human being. But I wonder if it's best understood as pointing to something much more straightforward than that. Namely, that the human being is a unity.

Body and soul. We are estranged from one another. And estranged from the God who made us. We hide.

And you'll notice that now they prefer words without face to face. God speaks to the man and from his hiding place in the bushes, he answers his creator.

One of the observations that people often make about the online community is how dramatic the levels of self-disclosure are. People share things online with those they've never seen that they would never share with those they know well.

Here's an example from one person's blog. There is the real world where I live, including especially the online world, which is broken, messy, scary, profane, filled with risk, sadness, loneliness, loneliness, hate, fear, doubt, death, love, hope, mercy, grace, friends, faith, and faithlessness.

[22 : 08] Then there is the church world. I haven't talked to anyone in that world about what is real in many, many years. Now, there are lots of issues in that statement, are there not?

How tragic that church has become a place of pretending. However, one thing ought not to be missed about that statement. There is a difference between relating in disembodied words to people you don't know and relating face to face.

Sin affects how we relate bodily person to bodily person in a way that it doesn't affect speaking to people we don't know.

Speaking words to people in the flesh is much more difficult than writing to people who are only words to us because we, as bodily people, are deeply affected by sinfulness.

In the body, we find it hard to be open face to face. There is a feeling of intimacy and trust online without face to face relationship.

[23 : 23] But it is not the same level of intimacy and trust as come when someone who sees you accepts you as you really are.

That is a different ballgame altogether because of the level to which sin has affected the way we relate in the body. We cannot be face to face in the way that Adam and Eve were at the beginning.

Now, we'll say much more about that in the weeks that come. But for now, let me say, I don't think it is a massive surprise at all that email and virtual communication has become such a massively important medium of communication.

Of course, it's efficient. Of course, it's quick. But also, it's less draining than doing things face to face. It's less relationally demanding.

But more than this, it takes away some of the sin-induced discomfort of face to face relationship. It is not a surprise then that there is a huge proliferation of disembodied relationship.

[24 : 32] It's convenient. It's quick. It's uncomplicated. And it's unencumbered by the painful face to face thing. If we are the sort of people who find it more attractive to relate online than we find it to relate face to face with people, there is a deep down reason for that.

Could it be that the openness that we often see online reflects a great longing for intimacy that we all have? A longing to be known and accepted as we are.

An intimacy that is very hard to find in face to face relationship because we hide. And the online thing avoids having to deal with one of our deepest problems, the fact that relating face to face is more difficult since the fall.

We've fallen bodily. And we'll only really be satisfied when our face to face relationships are transformed forever in the end. We're created bodily.

We can't be detached from ourselves. We've fallen body. And third, obviously, we are rescued bodily. First, God has spoken to us through bodies.

[25 : 56] When God sent John the Baptist to announce the birth of Jesus in Mark chapter 1, he did not just send a disembodied voice.

John, of course, calls himself a voice. And he speaks. But he was not just a sound. No, he was a man with a body. And the body suffered because of the message.

The one that John spoke about was not just a voice either. It's not just information we need. God doesn't... What we need is not a huge megaphone from heaven.

That's not what we need. Information could have been done at a distance. It could have been done by email. But that is not how God has made himself known to us.

He's made himself known through people. And not only has he made himself known, he's made himself known in order to rescue us.

[26 : 58] When God created at the beginning, he did it just with words. But his great recreating work is done in a body. He made himself known in a body. Turn over to Hebrews chapter 1.

We read from this a little earlier on. Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1. Long ago at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days, he's spoken to us by his son, who spoke the greatest words ever. Well, no, that's not how the writer puts it, is it?

The way it's put here is that the one through whom all things were made came as a made thing. A man in a body.

A man who died in the body as a sacrifice. A man whose body, verse 3, is right there now in the place where God is.

[28 : 01] There is at the moment a body in the place that God inhabits. Bringing bodily humans to rescue required a bodily revelation and a bodily rescue.

And bringing bodily humans to bodily rescue is where the Bible story joyfully ends. Because our future is an embodied one, not a disembodied one.

Turn over, please, to Revelation chapter 21. Looking forward to the great day when the Lord Jesus Christ and his people will be united forever.

Look at how that day is described. Verse 4. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain anymore for the former things have passed away. The end of the book of Revelation describes a human future that is an embodied future.

[29 : 15] Bodies that don't die anymore. Bodies that don't die anymore. Don't decay with age. Perhaps more wonderful even than that. Bodies who, when Jesus returns, will be able to relate to one another and to God face to face.

Person to person. Without hiding. And without shame. Forever. Forever. On that day there will be nothing left to hide.

Nothing left to be ashamed of. For sin will be gone forever from the created order. That's where the future is headed.

That's what Jesus came in a body to bring. That is the marvelous reality that you can be part of through trusting in Jesus for that eternity.

We've created bodily. Fallen body. Fallen bodily. And redeemed bodily. Let me conclude. Two conclusions.

[30 : 25] First, a specific one. And related to email. Email. It's a useful tool, is it not? But it has its problems.

It feels instant. But it lacks the vital bodily information that makes spontaneous conversation possible. So, be careful with your words.

It may seem efficient and easy, and it is. But treat it carelessly, and you'll have loads of problems to deal with. Words are very powerful and precious things.

You bang off a quick response in the heat of the moment. Hit the send button. And you'll wish you hadn't done it a millisecond later. But it will be too late. It's so easy not to give the emailed word.

The time that written words need. Time to think about how the recipient will take things. Time to cool down. Written words need time.

[31 : 34] Time to cool down. Time to cool down. But let's get more general. If you, like many of us, I guess, find certain aspects of online relating easier than face-to-face relating, well, you've got hold of something really important.

Something worth reflecting on. There is a great problem face-to-face. It's at its most noticeable face-to-face.

Openness is difficult face-to-face. It's difficult to make yourself known and to be known by others. And, says the Bible, that is a symptom of how profoundly damaging our sinfulness is relationally.

The opportunity to relate so easily with disembodied words can sidestep that face-to-face problem in certain ways.

Some of them useful ways. But don't confuse that disembodied intimacy for the real thing. For real face-to-face human interaction, which is primarily a face-to-face thing.

[32 : 55] Yes, disembodied words are a great supplement, but a poor substitute for the real thing. Because the acceptance, the knowledge experienced face-to-face is much greater and deeper, though much harder in this world.

It is what we were made for. And though in this age the face-to-face thing is not all it might be and will never be all it might be in this age.

It is where everything is heading. Everything. In the end, those who depend on Jesus will see him face-to-face.

Without embarrassment. Without shame. With no guilt or difficulty. Because he will have dealt with their sin and shame utterly and forever.

And in the end, those who belong to Jesus will be able to know and be known by one another. With no shame or hiding. Because we will have been perfected, finally, by his great work in his death on the cross and his resurrection.

[34 : 18] Don't, whatever you do, let the digital world, the virtual world, dull your appetite for face-to-face relating.

And especially for that great future, which will be face-to-face, intimate and profound. Jesus is raised from the dead.

In a body, he sits in the presence of his father. In the future, he will return in the same body and will, with a word, in an instant, raise all the bodies of earth.

To a bodily future. A future either of wonder or catastrophe. Of ultimate shame. Or ultimate glory. There are many things that are delightfully attractive about relating by email.

Digitally. But don't let it dull your appetite for ultimate reality. Face-to-face with people and with God.

[35 : 27] Of course, it's harder to do the face-to-face thing now in this age. But it is what we were made for. And it is the way everything in reality is heading.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them. And they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. We thank you, Heavenly Father, for the reality of your word.

We thank you that you have made us bodily beings. We recognize the truthfulness of what your word says about our bodily fall.

[36 : 43] We dare to look forward to a bodily resurrection. And a great day when we will be able to see you face-to-face.

We will be able to see you face-to-face, known and being known. And we will be able to relate to our brothers and sisters face-to-face without shame.

And with no hiding. Help us, please, to rejoice in this. Thank you for the forgiveness of sins that you have brought. Thank you that one day that great plan will be fully worked out.

Help us to look forward to that day. And to work towards that day. And in the meantime, to live humanly. In touch with the way things are in this difficult world.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.