

Chapter Two

# God, My Heart, and Media

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CONSIDER A DAY IN THE LIFE of a typical American adult. The waking moments begin with the radio alarm reporting weather, traffic, and headlines. Breakfast is gulped down with a side of business news and features from the morning newspaper.

Then the commute to work, where the companion for the drive is a radio talk show host lathered into a political frenzy or a shock jock whose tongue releases a barrage of crude humor.

At the office, checking e-mail presents opportunities throughout the morning for a bit of extracurricular web-surfing to shop for a birthday gift, check out a favorite blog, and catch up on the latest celebrity news. Lunch in the break room is spent connecting with a favorite sports magazine while a TV talk show blares overhead, showcasing the latest claimants to fleeting fame. Back in the cubicle's afternoon boredom, virtual adventure can be found on an Internet video game offering a quest for world domination.

When the work grind ceases, the drive home provides a reprieve from thinking and a nostalgic unwinding as the oldies stream in on satellite radio. The trip down memory lane is interrupted by a stop at soccer practice to pick up a young daughter who eagerly buckles up and warmly greets the Disney character coming to life on the DVD screen that descends in the backseat.

After a welcome-home kiss from the wife—and a friendlier kiss from the dog—comes the irresistible beckoning to collapse into the La-Z-Boy, grab the remote, and scan all three hundred digital cable channels to take the edge off the workday weariness. Following dinner, the TV illuminates the family room as all gather to enjoy the hottest sitcoms, reality shows, and crime dramas.

The day concludes with a drift into slumber to the soothing voice of a newscaster recapping headlines on the bedroom TV.

For most Americans, media is the omnipresent backdrop of life. Even if you don't find yourself in every scene of the previous day-in-the-life

scenario, you're nevertheless surrounded. Whether at home, in the car, at the store, in a restaurant, or even at the gas station (I've seen CNN piped in via a small screen built into the pump), the perpetual media lifeline continues. We're never beyond its ubiquitous reach. We're so engulfed that media seems like a second atmosphere; in fact one author terms our cultural surroundings the "media-sphere." We give no more thought to it than we do to the air we breathe.

But give thought to it we must. As followers of Christ, we cannot afford to take lightly the media's pervasive presence in our lives.

Think about the power of video entertainment, for instance. Whether viewed on computer, a portable player, or a traditional TV set, television and film are without peer in their cultural influence. Ken Myers, an astute Christian observer of popular culture, notes that television is not only "the dominant medium of popular culture" but also "the single most significant shared reality in our entire society." He compares television's impact to that of Christianity centuries ago, when "Christendom" defined the Western world:

Not all citizens of Christendom were Christians, but all understood it, all were influenced by its teaching. . . . I can think of no entity today capable of such a culturally unifying role except television. In television, we live and move and have our being.

Similarly, pastor Kent Hughes offers this alarming appraisal:

Today the all-pervasive glow of the television set is the single most potent influence and control in Western culture. Television has greater power over the lives of most Americans than any educational system, government, or church.

But it's not enough to acknowledge the dominant, nearly godlike authority exercised over our culture by TV, the Internet, and the rest of the media. We must evaluate the content of media messages and the consequences of their influence.

We begin by recognizing that the media's messages are nothing new. Essentially, our world puts forward the same allurements that the apostle John's world did some two thousand years ago: "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions" (1 John 2:16).

Christians in John's day didn't have the Internet, cable television, or iPods, but the desires of the flesh have been around since the fall. To be sure, the packaging and delivery of the world's offerings have advanced technologically, but their substance has remained as primitive as a talking serpent. Christians of all ages have been required to soberly assess the temptations found in the surrounding culture and to respond in a God glorifying way. We are no different. As this book's subtitle points out, our calling as Christians involves resisting the seduction of a fallen world.

This chapter will focus on television and film media, though the principles are relevant for evaluating all forms of media, all of which to some degree embody values of our fallen world. If we're faithfully to resist the ever-present "desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions," we'll need to sharpen our biblical discernment and wisely evaluate our media intake, for the glory of God.

### **Watching Unwatchingly**

Many of us don't think about actively filtering our viewing. As long as we avoid the obvious traps such as pornography, we don't consider deliberate evaluation necessary. Though we may faithfully apply the Scriptures in other areas of life, we may not consciously think about how God's Word applies to our entertainment choices.

All too often, we think about neither what we watch nor how much. Our watching is just inevitable. We watch by habit. We watch because we're bored. We unwatchingly watch as the TV stays on for background noise.

We watch alone or with others. We gather with friends on Friday night and rent a DVD because there's nothing else to do.

We watch because others watch. Everyone at school or at work is talking about a popular movie. It's a must see—so we must see it. Without researching its content, without thinking about its effect on our hearts, without comparing an evening at the movies with other options, we go, and we watch.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying it's wrong to watch television, rent a DVD, surf the Internet, or spend an evening at the cinema. The hazard is thoughtless watching. Glorifying God is an intentional pursuit. We don't accidentally drift into holiness; rather, we mature gradually and purposefully, one choice at a time. In the Christian

walk, we can't just step onto the right path and figure all is well. Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey consisting of a series of countless steps. Each step matters, and thus our viewing habits matter.

A lifestyle of careless viewing should concern us. At best, careless viewing reveals an ignorance of the media's power of temptation. It probably indicates a degree of laziness as well—and we can't afford to be lazy in what our minds absorb. Biblical discernment involves critical thinking, which often leads to costly action. It's true that we grow in sanctification by God's grace, but this doesn't deny that our growth involves work. To mature, we need engaged minds asking biblically informed questions about the media's messages and methods. What's more, we need perseverance to travel against the cultural current.

To change the metaphor, detecting and avoiding temptation is a battle; every time we pick up the remote or glance at the movie listings or go online, we take up arms. Ken Myers describes this battle in strong terms:

I believe that the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries. . . . Enemies that come loudly and visibly are usually much easier to fight than those that are undetectable.

It may seem that Myers exaggerates the danger. Pop culture as deadly as persecution and plagues?

But I think he's right. When it comes to waging the war of sanctification, severe trial usually alerts us to battle, rousing us to our need for God. Popular culture, especially entertainment media, often lulls us to ignore our battle with the flesh.

In this conflict, how many Christians are waving the white flag of surrender by disengaging their discernment when it comes to media? But passivity is no option. We're called to live purposefully. That means we must watch on purpose and resist the lifestyle of passive viewing.

### **Watching with Immunity?**

Unlike those who watch thoughtlessly, many Christians recognize the tempting influence of media yet assume they're immune from danger. They end up watching just like everyone else.

“After all,” they’ll argue, “I’m not going to watch a murder on TV and then go out and murder someone.” This misses the point. Our sanctification aspirations should be loftier than avoiding murder. Just because we don’t instantly mimic all we see doesn’t mean our hearts aren’t negatively affected by the programs or films we watch. Tugging like a subtle undertow below the surface, the media can tempt us to drift toward love of the world.

Drift toward worldliness may be slow, its symptoms not immediately apparent. This drift is usually a sign of a dulling conscience. The conscience doesn’t function like a light switch—one moment the lights are on, then everything is dark with a flip of the switch. Instead, the sensitivity of our conscience dulls over time as it is resisted or ignored. Paul charges young Timothy to “wage the good warfare” by holding on to a good conscience, and warns him that rejecting a good conscience can lead to shipwrecking one’s faith (1 Tim. 1:18–20). Over time a good conscience that once was sensitive to the holiness of God and the conviction of the Spirit can become seared (1 Tim. 4:2), losing all feeling.

The drift toward worldliness is subtle, gradual, and internal. And if we assume we’re immune to it, that’s a sure sign the drift has begun.

The media has great power to influence, but most people—both Christians and unbelievers—presuppose that their worldview, desires, and opinions are safe from media sway. We’re convinced we’re beyond reach. How revealing, then, that advertisers spend \$215 billion annually just on television commercials. These marketing dollars are not charity gifts; our thinking is influenced by what we watch, and advertisers know it.

We also tend to think of ourselves as minimally exposed to media, especially compared to everyone else. In a Roper survey that reveals as much about human nature as it does about media consumption, 96 percent of people polled claimed they watched less television than the average person. You don’t need a sophisticated statistical analysis of that survey to realize a lot of us don’t have a clue about our viewing habits.

These examples illustrate what the Scripture teaches about our hearts. They’re sinful, and as a result, we’re prone to self-deception. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). We’re more easily tempted than we know or are willing to admit.

The Bible teaches that the battle is not “out there.” The real monster isn’t Hollywood or a beast residing in a plasma screen. He’s not lurking behind the curtain in the movie theater. He’s much closer. He’s us. Our battle is with the flesh. “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17).

If we watch, we must watch with this in mind: our hearts are deceitful, and our flesh will be tempted. Paul’s warning to the Corinthians is fitting: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

We’re commanded to “not be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2), but such conformity is the inevitable pathway for those who watch freely with the delusion of immunity.

### **The L Word**

No discussion of media standards gets far before someone cries, “Legalism!” Any teaching that advocates some level of viewing standards will be stereotyped in some quarters as a compromising of Christian liberty.

Such stereotyping works both ways, of course. The one advocating higher standards can just as easily broad-brush all detractors as “worldly” or “licentious.” Meanwhile we conveniently place ourselves in the center: all those with stricter entertainment standards than ours are legalistic, while anyone who’s more lenient is worldly.

Legalism, however, is not a matter of having more rigorous rules. It’s far more lethal than that. It strikes at the very core of our relationship with God. As C. J. Mahaney explains:

Legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through obedience to God. In other words, a legalist is anyone who behaves as if they can earn God’s approval and forgiveness through personal performance.

Do we risk legalism by establishing personal viewing standards? Absolutely! But the risk doesn’t lie in having standards; it lies in our motivation. The question is not, “Should we view selectively?” but “Why do we view selectively?” We must not seek to earn God’s favor by watching or not watching certain programs. Our forgiveness from God

and acceptance by God are based upon the gospel—we're already approved because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, our obedience springs from gratitude for the gospel.

Legalism is a heart condition that can easily affect our media viewing (or lack of viewing) just as it can color any other activity. Legalism can taint our Bible reading, praying, witnessing, eating, sleeping, lovemaking, working, recreating, joking, shopping—we can be legalistic about anything! The solution is not necessarily lowering our standards. It is necessarily raising our understanding of and response to the glorious grace of God.

Another objection to setting viewing standards is a fear of isolationism. Some will argue that our evangelism is compromised when we detach ourselves from our culture, and that we're called instead to engage it. There's truth to this claim; but when "engage the culture" is a euphemism for "watch whatever everyone else is watching," our witness is weakened, not strengthened. It's foolish to think the gospel will spread more powerfully if we hide its transforming effect in our lives. While we should celebrate any genuine concern for reaching out to the lost, we should be suspect of any approach advocating broad cultural accommodation when it comes to entertainment.

Recently, a lady in our church communicated to me her resistance to the idea of curbing media consumption; she believed that viewing current TV programs and movies enabled her to better relate to the lost. But she came to question her own reasoning: "Am I lowering my standards to stay up with our culture while not really reaching anyone by doing so?" I respect her for her humility and honesty. She asks a discerning question.

In reality, it isn't necessary to be a media glutton to share the gospel effectively. We can meaningfully relate with people in our culture without immersing ourselves in the latest entertainments. We can be aware of popular culture without being captive to it. Our personal and corporate relevance and witness won't be hindered at all by applying biblical standards to our media intake.

This leads us to explore a grace-motivated approach to media consumption. We begin, most appropriately, with God.

## **Living Coram Deo**

Coram Deo is a short Latin phrase packing a potent punch: “before the face of God.” All aspects of our existence—from private thoughts to public words and actions—are lived out before his face. Properly regarded, living coram Deo arouses our fear of God. The person who’s aware that God is seated front-and-center and watching everything will fear the Lord. And that’s good, for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7).

The fear of God is our starting place; it’s not the graduate school of Christian discipleship. Fearing God is where we begin in our search for knowledge and wisdom. The fool, by contrast, is one whose governing mindset excludes the reality of God (Ps. 14:1).

What does all this have to do with our media use? Put bluntly, it means we surf the Internet, listen to the radio, watch television, or rent a DVD in God’s presence. We make our choices—all our choices—with God’s holy face in view. It’s not the gaze of our pastor, parent, fellow small group member, or unbelieving neighbor that matters most. We’re accountable to God in all things, including our entertainment.

Wayne Wilson brings home this sobering truth: “We are accountable to God, and the label of ‘art’ on human expression does not remove this accountability in the slightest way.”

God is holy, and we are not. Coram Deo, we realize we’re in trouble—our eyes have lusted, our imaginations have trespassed, our time has been squandered. We must run to the cross where God’s holiness and mercy intersect decisively. Coram Deo, we find grace. Grace that forgives. Grace that empowers us to change. Grace that leads us to desire and pursue obedience. Any discussion of biblical obedience, including entertainment guidelines, must spring from a robust understanding of grace.

## **Grace-motivated Obedience**

No book in Scripture provides any clearer model for grace motivated obedience than Ephesians. We’ll consider a number of verses found in Ephesians 5:1–14, but in order to understand that passage better, we must first take into account the overall outline of the book.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul passionately portrays God’s grace. At points he’s led to uncontained, blissful worship as he



describes the gospel: we were chosen before the foundation of the world; we were graciously redeemed through Christ's blood; we were saved as a gift of God and not of works; we who were once far off are now joined with God's people. On and on, Paul recounts what God has done. Consumed with God's accomplishment for his people in Christ, these three chapters are a masterpiece of grace.

It's telling that Paul doesn't begin giving commands until chapter 4. He first wants to make sure we "get it": what God has done for us must be clear before discussing what we're to do for him. Then in 4:1 he urges the Ephesians "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Throughout chapter 4 he describes how that looks within the church, while in chapter 5 he describes how it looks in relation to the world. Without question, God calls us to a high standard of purity in these verses, a standard permanently tethered to the work of Christ.

Take a moment and read Ephesians 5:1–14. Seriously. Are you reading Ephesians 5:1–14? (I've been told most readers will never stop at this point and read Ephesians 5:1–14, but I don't think you're like most readers. So I'll just wait while you read it . . . )

In these verses Paul demonstrates what it means to live life resisting the seduction of a fallen world. These verses may not speak directly of sitcoms, romantic movies, or music videos, but they do speak to the themes of much of our modern entertainment. At the heart of this passage is this summons: "Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord" (5:8–10). Here is a call to God-pleasing discernment. God makes clear that all that is "good and right and true" pleases him.

Applied to our entertainment, God-pleasing discernment involves remembering his grace to us in the death and resurrection of our Savior, then responding to his grace with a heart eager to please him by taking pleasure in what is good and right and true. Discerning what pleases the Lord requires critically evaluating media content at all times.

Sometimes it's easy for me to sit back and watch without cautious evaluation. At other times, I watch on high alert. Interestingly, I've found that I reserve my highest scrutiny for infomercials. My discernment spikes off the charts when these modern snake oil sellers start talking. Though I'm not a fan of this programming and certainly wouldn't gather my wife and kids around the tube for a family night of popcorn and infomercials, I

must admit that while channel surfing I've landed on them from time to time, and I've watched. Like a rubbernecker inching past a wreck on the freeway, I guess I'm guilty of a morbid curiosity.

When I watch an infomercial, I'm anything but a passive viewer. I aggressively evaluate all claims. In fact, I'm compelled to carry on a loud conversation with the spokesperson. "No way!" I laugh. "Get out of here!" When some Ken doll tells me that only 30 seconds a day with the "Gut Buster 3000" gave him perfectly sculpted abs, and that this new washboard of a belly has changed his life in every way, I don't buy it for a second! I tell him, "What about the fact that as a fitness guru you exercise all day for a living? What about the fact that you eat nothing but vitamin supplements and lawn clippings? What about the fact that your genes and my genes are about as similar as Gene Simmons and Gene Kelly?"

Because the infomercial claims are exaggerated, the bait isn't so enticing. I know the worm's a fake. I know chiseled abs won't change my life. No one would even see them except my wife, who doesn't seem too troubled over this issue. Thankfully our marriage covenant is tighter than my abs.

We should apply this same level of discernment whenever we're exposed to entertainment media. If we don't realize that their claims are false, the bait will indeed appear enticing. Obviously, infomercials are a different genre than primetime TV or film, but they each communicate a worldview, a philosophy of what is good, right, and true.

Usually, the message of a TV show or film is far more subtle than an advertising spokesmodel sporting a cheesy grin and proclaiming, "With these new abs, life's great!" The more subtle the message, however, the more crucial the need for perceptive viewing. And if we fail to be discerning or neglect to watch wisely, we end up with something much worse than cheap exercise gear collecting dust in the garage. We end up hooked by the bait of "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions."

In Ephesians 5, God not only calls us to discern what is pleasing to him, but he also plainly identifies what is displeasing. As we move through these verses, we find that Paul's world and ours share much in common. The Ephesians, like us, live in a dark world where sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, and impurity are "normal." But for those transformed by the gospel, who were once darkness but are now light

(5:8), life is not culturally “normal.” We’re no longer to take part in “the unfruitful works of darkness” (5:11); rather, we’re to live in the light as those who have experienced new life in Jesus Christ. Now that we’re different people, we’re to live different lives.

Though not exhaustive, this passage does provide guidance for honoring God with our media intake. We start with the mandate to avoid impurity in light of Christ’s love and sacrifice (5:1–2).

### **Watch What They Do**

“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people” (Eph. 5:3 NIV).

It’s hard to imagine a stronger statement than “not even a hint.” Not even a hint of immorality. Not even a hint of impurity. Not even a hint of greed. I wonder how our viewing habits would be adjusted if this verse was constantly scrolled across the bottom of our television screens like the CNN news headlines.

We don’t have to look far to find television programs or films that feature more than a hint of sexual impurity. “But watching isn’t doing,” someone may argue. “Isn’t the sin in the act?” Yet these verses condemn sinful desires as well. The term “greed” (v. 3) is also translated “covetousness” (ESV). In his commentary on Ephesians, Peter T. O’Brien offers the translation “sexually covetous” because covetousness is a desire for something or someone that God has not provided. Even a hint of sexual longing for someone other than a spouse is covetousness. We must ask, “Does this program or film tempt me with sexually impure thoughts or actions?” If so, there must not be “even a hint” of this on our screen.

The passage doesn’t soften as it progresses: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret” (5:11–12). If sexual sin is shameful and shouldn’t even be spoken with specifics, then obviously it shouldn’t be broadcast—high-definition and surround-sound—into our living rooms. We take part in “the unfruitful works of darkness” when entertaining ourselves with things our holy God despises.

How far do we take this? Doesn’t the Bible itself record sexual sin that would be forbidden reading under these guidelines? If a film’s plotline

contains an adulterous affair, should we avoid the movie? What if the adultery takes place off camera?

These are good questions. The reference in verse 12 to things done “in secret” is clarifying as we apply this passage. It’s one thing for a film to include sexual sin as part of the story but quite another to dramatize the act for the camera. Sexuality shouldn’t be used gratuitously to titillate the audience. We live in a fallen world where fallen people sin sexually, and as an accurate reflection of our world, we’d expect some art to include themes like immorality or infidelity. However, the visual and verbal details of immorality should remain “in secret.”

Along these lines, author Wayne Wilson makes these beneficial comments:

Rather than giving us the details of depraved acts, good art can reveal the depraved heart through well written stories, enlightening us to the evil we may find within ourselves. We learn nothing by being made aware of the details of sexual acts or rape. We do learn by seeing the ruinous effects of pride, bitterness, anger, and yes, even lusts, which can be shown without the lurid details.

If a film or program does include off-screen impurity as a legitimate part of the story line, we still must ask, “How is the impurity represented?” In our passage Paul warns, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things [sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness] the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (5:6). Whenever we watch sin portrayed without consequences, we’re subject to deception. Sin—sexual sin in particular—is often glamorized and sensationalized in media. But like the infomercial, the claims are deceptive. They’re “empty words.” Pleasure without guilt. Ecstasy without relational destruction. And worst of all, sin without judgment. Filling our minds with these media deceptions dulls our sensitivity to God’s holy hatred of sin.

Under the old covenant, God prescribed stoning for adultery: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lev. 20:10). If we’re honest, we have to admit this seems extreme. Why does it? Probably because we don’t have a healthy view of the blazing holiness of God, who is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). It

may also be because we've seen adulterers go on to live happily ever after. We've watched innumerable romantic comedies where two beautiful individuals fall for each other in the most unlikely way. They enjoy beautiful, illicit sex and then stroll off hand in hand to a beautiful life together as the credits roll. In reality, sexual immorality is anything but beautiful—no matter how attractive the actors, how sentimental the plot, how touching the dialogue, or how romantic the soundtrack.

God commands us not to be deceived and reminds us that his dreadful wrath awaits the sexually immoral (5:6). Immorality must never be portrayed as appealing, alluring, or safe. When it is, we're to avoid such depictions.

### **Watch What They Say**

In today's American church culture, especially among young adults, it's unpopular to advocate restraint on speech. In fact, many of today's younger leaders take pride in their liberty to use terms and expressions (even in the pulpit) from popular culture that would have been assigned to the "bad word" list in previous generations. I understand their quarrel with a moralistic approach to holiness that seems to ignore the heart and that equates maturity with steering clear of certain so-called bad words. I'm not advocating that type of skin deep piety. However, Scripture is clear. Our words matter.

Grace-motivated obedience extends beyond our thoughts and deeds: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving" (Eph. 5:4). Paul's reference to "filthiness" has to do with obscenity. Vulgar, lewd, perverted, or off-color speech is out of place. "Foolish talk" describes the speech of fools. Biblically, a fool is someone who's lacking not in intelligence but in the fear of God. Foolish talk mocks or ignores the moral law of God. In this context, "crude joking" describes humor with sexual overtones. Double entendre relating to immorality, perverse humor, and just plain dirty jokes has no place for one who has been made new in Christ.

If we're forbidden to speak with filthiness and crude sexual humor, we're equally prohibited from listening to it when we have a choice. Just because we don't personally tell obscene jokes, we're not off the hook when we plop down our cash at the box office and hire someone to entertain us on the big screen with gratuitous immoral humor. Sometimes

people will evaluate a film, saying, “There’s no sex. Just some crude jokes, and that’s no big deal.” On the contrary, this passage says crude joking is “out of place” (5:4).

Such filthy talk or crude humor isn’t limited to the programs and films we watch. It can also surface as an Internet temptation. The same biblical guidelines are to govern our speech when we participate in online “conversations” through e-mail, blogs, or social networking web sites like MySpace or Facebook.

Filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking are “out of place”—they’re forbidden not because they’re on some arbitrary “banned words” list, but because they reflect the heart and attitude of those who disregard God and his Word. Living in a way that’s distinct from the world means speaking in a way that’s distinct from the world. Grace changes us from the inside out, and a changed heart will lead to a changed vocabulary.

Therefore, “instead” of perverse language, “let there be thanksgiving” (5:4). Thanksgiving characterizes the believer’s new vocabulary. Here’s the point: we shouldn’t crudely joke about sex. We should thank God for it. As John Stott explains,

Christians should dislike and avoid vulgarity . . . not because we have a warped view of sex, and are either ashamed or afraid of it, but because we have a high and holy view of it as being in its right place God’s good gift, which we do not want to see cheapened. All God’s gifts, including sex, are subjects for thanksgiving, rather than for joking. To joke about them is bound to degrade them; to thank God for them is the way to preserve their worth as the blessings of a loving creator.

Our culture degrades God’s gift of sex in countless ways. This is nowhere more obvious than in sitcoms, stand-up routines, late-night talk shows, and comedy movies. In light of God’s holiness, immorality should lead to weeping, not laughing. God is not by any means a prude; he created sex to be enjoyed to the fullest in marriage. We cultivate a high view of both God and sex when we thank him for it; we demean both God and sex when we obscenely joke about it.

Any sexual impurity fails the standard of what is “proper among saints” (5:3). A “saint” is someone set apart through the gospel. Walking in a manner worthy of the gospel means we’re to watch what we watch. We’re not only to avoid impurity in thought, speech, and action but also to

steer clear of impure entertainment as well. Christ died for the impure sins of impure people so that we may live as new people testifying to the transforming power of the gospel.

### **Viewer Discretion Advised**

Having unpacked some of Paul's instruction for discerning "what is pleasing to the Lord" in Ephesians 5:1–14, we now broaden our discussion and consider how to further apply biblical discernment to our media consumption.

When deciding on the appropriateness of a particular program or film, we often make a judgment based on its rating. However, simply knowing what it's rated does not mean we've applied thorough biblical discernment. While offering some help, the ratings system doesn't use biblical criteria to evaluate the content of films. And no ratings system can answer questions regarding the stewardship of our time or the motive of our heart in viewing. We need more than a rating if we're to honor God through our viewing. We need an evaluation process that takes into account our time and our motive, as well as offering a biblical benchmark for measuring content.

The following application questions can help in discerning the benefit of watching a particular movie or program. I've also included some related questions regarding Internet usage.

#### Time Questions

- Am I skipping or delaying something important in order to watch this now?
- What are my other social/entertainment options besides watching television or going out to see a movie?
- How much time have I already spent on media today?
- How much time have I spent surfing the Internet? How much time have I spent blogging or maintaining an online presence through social network sites?
- In the last week, how much time have I spent on the spiritual disciplines, building relationships, or serving in my local church compared to time spent consuming media?
- After investing the time to view this, will I look back on it as time well spent?

### Heart Questions

- Why do I want to watch this program or film? What do I find entertaining about it?
- Am I seeking to escape from something I should be facing by watching this? Am I seeking comfort or relief that can be found only in God?
- What sinful temptations will this program or film present?
- Do I secretly want to view something in it that's sinful? Am I deceiving myself by saying, "I'll fast-forward through the bad parts"?
- Similarly, am I telling myself, "I'll just visit this web site once, and I won't click on any other links I find there"?
- Am I watching because I'm bored or lazy? If so, what does that reveal about my heart?
- Am I watching simply because others are? Am I trying to be relevant or to fit in?
- How have my online relationships impacted my face-to-face relationships? How has my online activity impacted my soul? For better or worse?
- What motivates me to create and maintain a blog, MySpace, or Facebook presence? Am I attempting to impress others? Am I being prideful, slanderous, deceitful, or self-righteous?

### Content Questions

- What worldview or philosophy of life does this program or film present? What's the view of man's nature? What's the view of sin? Is sin identified as such? What's the view of God ordained authority figures? And how do these views relate to God's view?
- What does this program or film glamorize? What is valued or considered important? Who are the heroes of the story? Why are they heroic?
- Is sin shown as having negative consequences? Or is sin glorified or rewarded? Is sin presented in an appealing or seductive way?
- What is humorous in this work? How are people made fun of? What is mocked?
- Does violence appear as a natural part of the story, or is it used gratuitously to entertain?



- What's the sexual content? Is there nudity? Sensual or seductive dress? Are there images, language, or humor that are sexually impure?
- Is sinful self-sufficiency honored? Are the heroic characters concerned for others or merely for themselves? Does the program or film portray materialism as "the good life"?
- Would seeing this help me better understand God's world? Would it help me understand my surrounding culture better without tempting me to sinful compromise?
- Will I benefit in any way from viewing this program or visiting this web site?
- Does its content or artistry reflect truth, beauty, or goodness?
- Online, do I communicate graciously, patiently, and humbly? Do I use crude or arrogant speech? Is my speech consistent with the gospel, or does it reflect worldliness?

After reading these questions, you may get the feeling that practicing discernment is a lot of work. It can be, but it's worth the careful deliberation because the goal is lofty: discerning what pleases the Lord.

By asking these sorts of questions, we may find that although a certain program is acceptable, spending the time to watch it may not be beneficial. Think about Paul's counsel to the Corinthians: "'All things are lawful,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up" (1 Cor. 10:23). One author offers the following application of this verse:

What if we began to test all our media consumption from the nightly news to our entertainment programs to our video rentals? And furthermore, what if the standard was looking for what might be beneficial instead of what might simply be permissible?

On the other hand, we may have the discretionary time to view something, but the content may be questionable. Whenever possible, we should research the content of a program or film before watching. (For example, [www.pluggedinonline.com](http://www.pluggedinonline.com) is a helpful resource to preview film content from a Christian worldview.) To be forewarned is to be forearmed: when we're informed, we can make selective choices to avoid temptation and sin.

Once we walk through a process deciding “if” we should view and “what” we should view, we also want to think about “how” we should view. How can we view entertainment media for the glory of God?

### **View Proactively**

Viewing for God’s glory requires responding to temptations as they arise. This means we press the remote, click the mouse, or walk out of the theater when we discern that our entertainment displeases the Lord. We must resist the temptation to think, “There’s nothing else to watch,” or “I’m only looking for a moment,” or “It would be stupid to waste the money I spent to see this.” Watching coram Deo leads to acting coram Deo.

When writing to the Thessalonians, Paul made a sobering, categorical statement: “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22). When it comes to watching media, I’ve found that abstinence “from every form of evil” requires me to keep my discernment alert and my remote in easy reach. What may begin as a harmless program may quickly transform into a “form of evil.” How can we detect an evil entertainment form?

In *Worldly Amusements*, Wayne Wilson says that entertainment forms are evil when they either “promote an evil message” or “use evil methods.” Promoting an evil message is presenting sin in an appealing light. We’ve considered this in some detail, but it’s worth noting here the nature of an evil method. Using an evil method is employing sin itself to entertain. Examples of this abound. Consider reality television programs. Commonly the sin of gossip is gratuitously thrown into the mix. Completely apart from the “game” or the “plot,” participants are interviewed on a private camera in order to slander other participants. The character assassination is offered as a juicy morsel to be savored by viewers. This can seem harmless, since we don’t relate with the person in real life. But the reality is that gossip is being used as an end in itself to entertain. Seemingly innocuous by cultural standards, it’s an evil method using sin to entertain.

When it becomes clear that what we’re watching is promoting an evil message or using an evil method, we should be proactive and stop watching. Pleasing the Lord means turning from evil in private when no one else sees or knows. The psalmist speaks of this type of integrity:

I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall be far from me; I will know nothing of evil. (Ps. 101:2-4)

These verses easily apply to viewing proactively. The psalmist describes a fear of the Lord that leads him to “know nothing of evil” and to set no worthless thing before his eyes. His commitment is to “walk with integrity of heart within my house.” That is, he obeys the Lord in private. If we’re to similarly honor God in our homes, we must grab the remote or click the mouse when “anything that is worthless” appears.

### **View Accountably**

Accountability is a gift to aid us in pleasing God. Thankfully, we’re not called to resist the seduction of a fallen world alone. God places us in families and local churches so that we may benefit from the support of fellow believers who accompany us in our pursuit of godliness.

As I write this chapter, I’ve been praying for a friend who’s on a business trip. Before he left, he requested that upon his return I ask him what he watched while alone in his hotel room. I respect his humility in enlisting others to stand with him in his battle with the desires of the flesh. My friend understands that defeating temptation requires exposing temptation, and so he acknowledges his battle, requests prayer, and invites inquiry regarding his viewing.

In our culture, even the church culture, television viewing usually occurs in private and is rarely discussed in public. We may speak specifically about something we saw on television, but unless we disclose our viewing habits, no one outside our family or roommates would know about the content or quantity of our TV or DVD watching. The same certainly holds true with our Internet usage. Many Christians privately explore web sites (including pornographic sites), mistakenly assuming there will be no damage to their soul and no exposure of their viewing. I believe a primary reason many Christians are either ignorant of the entertainment media’s influence on their souls or powerless to change their sinful viewing practices is that their viewing remains secretive.

If we’re to live in our culture’s media-sphere and grow in our love for the Lord and not the world, we simply must make our media consumption a category of personal accountability, especially if we’re weak in this area.

It's worth asking ourselves, "Does anyone know what I watch or how much I watch?" "Have I invited anyone to ask me about my television and movie viewing?" "When I watch sinfully, do I confess my sin to anyone and ask for help?"

As you read this chapter, God may be convicting you of laziness, lust, filthy speech, pride, self-righteousness, deception, or other sins. Before you can begin to honor God with your entertainment choices, you must respond to him by acknowledging your sin, turning to the Savior, and receiving forgiveness. As you turn to Christ in repentance, turn to a brother or sister as well, asking for support and accountability. God gives grace to the humble, and as we acknowledge our need and confess our sin, we find God ready to strengthen and empower us for change. God's help often comes in the form of a fellow believer who will listen, ask questions, pray, correct, encourage, and follow up.

If you're a parent, you have the privilege and responsibility to serve and protect your family with accountability. It's wise to place televisions and computers in public areas of the home so viewing is always open to others. Another way to safeguard the family is to employ an Internet filter to block inappropriate web sites. In our part of the country, many homes are now built with media rooms that provide isolated viewing, often in a remote part of the home. Few combinations are more dangerous for a teenager than cable or satellite television, a media room, and privacy. Parents should set biblical guidelines and be aware of when, where, and what their children watch. Foolish companions are not only "out there" in the world; they can be invited into our homes if we aren't discerning about what our children view.

It's easy for parents to be passive in our supervision of the family media diet. When we've failed to exercise protective oversight for the quantity or content of our children's viewing, we should repent and ask our children's forgiveness. Likewise, if you're a young person, you may have resisted your parents' guidelines. You may have failed to communicate honestly about web sites you've visited or your online conversations. If you've deceived your parents and secretly exposed yourself to television, films, Internet sites, or any other media that dishonors God, confess your sin and ask for your parents' forgiveness and for ongoing accountability to them.

If opening your life to others is foreign, you may see accountability as an unwelcome intrusion. I assure you it is not. Accountable viewing is a blessing and not a burden, for it positions us to experience the grace of God, the fellowship of his people, protection from sin and temptation, and the freedom of a clear conscience.

### **View Gratefully**

Much of this chapter has appealed for deeper discernment and higher standards for television and movie watching. Given my personal and pastoral experience, it seems to me that discernment and adjustment are needed for most of us when it comes to entertainment. However, I believe we can selectively view television and film for the glory of God. I own a television and a DVD player. (Full disclosure: while making the final edits on this chapter, I've actually been shopping for a new television.) I'm not advocating cultural isolation, shunning all movies, or taking a sledgehammer to your TV set. We're free to pursue and enjoy entertainment within biblical parameters.

The Bible tells us not only what to avoid, but also what to pursue. Consider this pertinent passage:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil. 4:8)

This overarching guideline affirms rather than restricts. Messages in TV and film that correspond to these categories are valuable and may be enjoyed, even celebrated. We're not limited to watching only explicitly Christian programs or films. By God's common grace, unregenerate artists made in God's image do create works that make "true" observations about life. Unbelievers can craft "honorable" stories and "lovely" songs. They can produce films with "commendable" screenplays and "excellent" visual artistry. It's possible to enjoy entertainment media for the glory of God, and this passage helps us do so.

When we watch something true, beautiful, commendable, or excellent, our thoughts and emotions should ultimately drift heavenward. God is the source of truth, beauty, and goodness. More than that, he is the ultimate truth, beauty, and goodness. The discerning viewer will recognize

the image of God in human art and glorify him with gratitude. For the person who has been saved by the glorious grace of God, life is to be viewed through the lens of gratitude:

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:17)

Gospel-centered living is grateful living. Whatever we do is to be done with thanks toward God. “Whatever” in this verse certainly includes entertainment. If we can’t thank God with a clear conscience for a particular program or movie, we shouldn’t watch it. But if we’re wisely investing our time and watching something that’s true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8), then by all means we should thank God for it. We shouldn’t watch sheepishly or with a vague sense of guilt, but freely thanking God for the viewing experience. God is honored not only by our avoiding sin but also by our active gratitude for the many good things he provides, including drama, cinematography, creativity, beauty, and laughter.

To be clear: we can watch television or go to the movies and glorify God by it. To do so, we must be motivated by grace, and we must view selectively, proactively, accountably, and gratefully.

While I’m optimistic about the possibility of watching for the glory of God, I’m also realistic about life in the media-sphere. For most of us, applying biblical discernment and viewing with discretion will mean watching less than we currently do. But that’s no great loss. It means more time to interact with actual people—a date with your spouse, talk-time or play-time with your children, fellowship with your friends, serving people in your church, or reaching out to unbelievers. There’s a world of things to do with the TV turned off.

Many of us could use a vacation from viewing, some rest and relaxation from the constant distraction of entertainment media. Dropping the remote and getting off the sofa won’t guarantee we’ll escape worldly drift, but it’s a step in the right direction. And each step counts when we’re resisting the seduction of a fallen world.

Will you take the first step now