

Behind the Scenes

A look at the messages pop culture sends us
and how God wants us to respond



MATT ABBOTT

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and how God wants us to respond*

by

Matt Abbott

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Contents

Acknowledgements

1. The Pen *is* Mightier
2. Important Questions
3. Manipulating the Masses
4. Five Reasons to Believe That Media Affects Us
5. Self Sells
6. The Better Way
7. Sex from Commercialism's Perspective
8. Sex from God's Perspective
9. Relationships from Commercialism's Perspective
10. Relationships from God's Perspective
11. Violence from Commercialism's Perspective
12. Violence from God's Perspective
13. Our Pace in Life from Commercialism's
Perspective
14. Our Pace in Life from God's Perspective
15. Food from Commercialism's Perspective
16. Food from God's Perspective
17. Aging from Commercialism's Perspective
18. Aging from God's Perspective
19. Death from Commercialism's Perspective
20. Death from God's Perspective
21. Renewing Our Minds

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Introduction

As I sit here writing this introduction, I'm in a considerable amount of pain.

I wish I had some amazing story of heroism to tell, or maybe even a good accident story.

But, no; all I have is one of those "I-should-have-known-better" stories.

Actually, it's one of those "I-*did*-know-better-but-didn't-do-anything-about-it" stories.

See, last Saturday, I took my youth group to a music festival at an outdoor amphitheater. But did I bring any sun block? No. I could see the sun shining, hear the weather people warning me, and note common sense knocking on the door of my mind, asking "aren't you forgetting something?" Yet I ignored them all.

Why, I'm not sure. Perhaps it was pride ("I know what I'm doing; I *do* usually tan quite well on my arms and legs, after all"), perhaps it was lack of planning ("We gotta get to church to pick everybody up; we don't have time for 'unnecessary details'"). All I know is this: now I'm sitting

here with legs that look like they've been soaking in a tub of red paint for an hour. And, boy, do they hurt!

All I can do now is put aloe vera cream on my sunburned extremities, drink water, and seek sympathy from my wife.

I wish I could honestly say that my sunburn is the only area of my life where I ignored the warnings and ended up with consequences I didn't want, but I can't. I sometimes do the same thing with the media that I surround myself with. TV shows and movies may not produce burns on the skin, but their harmful effects can be felt on the mind and in the heart. Listening to music that's full of inappropriate language tonight could mean I inadvertently use those words tomorrow. Watching that sex scene this morning could produce distracting thoughts—and even ruin relationships—this afternoon.

Is that what I want?

I know that's not what God wants. He has a much better life in mind for us. To find that life, however, we'll need to take an honest look at some things that may make us uncomfortable, both about the media and ourselves. But I guarantee that it'll be worth it.

I hope you'll take a journey with me through the rest of these pages as we take a look at what is *truly* going on

“behind the scenes” of our entertainment choices, and what we can do about it. You might even end up avoiding some unnecessary injuries.

Now, where'd I put that aloe vera cream?

Chapter 1: The Pen *is* Mightier...

What's your pet peeve?

For some people, it's country music. For others, it's rock music. There are “dog people” who don't like cats, and “cat people” who don't like dogs. Some people despise being late to an appointment while others claim that their chief annoyance is “being rushed.”

For me, it's manipulation. It irks me when people twist their words in order to gain something at my expense. I loathe it when people use mind games or “guilt trips” in an attempt to make me do something that I don't want to do. I detest it when people choose to be pushy and—somehow—seem to get me to act in ways that I know are wrong.

Anyone with me?

Just like with any pet peeve, however, my dislike of manipulation doesn't make it suddenly disappear from the world. There are a lot of people out there who try to manipulate others every day. Some people are so good at it that we don't even notice when they are doing it to *us*.

That’s why I’m writing this book—to alert you to some of the manipulations that happen every day in our media, and to share how we can best respond. Before we can look at some of those manipulations, though, it’s important to understand how our culture got to where it is now.

A quick history lesson...

Some of you just felt like yawning as soon as you saw the words “A quick history lesson.” But stay with me. I promise that it will be worth it.

If you were to open your Bible’s front cover, flip over a few pages to the twelfth chapter of Genesis and begin to read, you’d find yourself following the life of a man named Abram, whom God later renames “Abraham.”

Back in Abram’s time, people lived mostly in what we call “oral” cultures. They didn’t read or write, nor did they have TV, radio, or computers.¹ That’s okay, though, because they had something else: incredible memories.

People like Abram would pass on stories and keep historical records alive by telling them to the next generation. The next generation would then pass those tales on to the generation after them, and so on, and so forth.

Now, I totally understand if you're looking at me (or, actually, this page) like I'm crazy right now. I know that, in our modern day of hand-held computers and cell phones, it's difficult for us to believe that anyone could have had a memory that strong. But it's true! The only reason our memories aren't as strong as the memories of people in Abram's time is this: we don't *have to* remember things; we can write things down.

I do it all the time. Just ask my wife. ("Honey, where's that note pad? I have to jot something down before I forget it.") I have a "crutch" by being able to record a quick "voice note" on my cell phone or scribble a reminder on a legal pad. I don't have to use my memory, so I don't.

As a result, my memory doesn't function as well as it could if I exercised it more, and I end up forgetting things pretty easily sometimes. People in Abram's time, however, had memories sharper than a carving knife on Thanksgiving.

People who lived in oral cultures were also very close in their relationships. They had a deep loyalty to their families and/or tribes, and they would often spend a lot of time together, whether hunting, celebrating, or doing other activities—many of which were outside, as oral cultures were very "natural" (living out in nature).

Writing Cultures

All of that began to change around 4,000 B.C. when “writing cultures” emerged as people began to invent reading and writing. Records could then be kept, and a number of activities—no matter how far away—could be overseen and controlled by one person (say, the king). That means there’s *power* to be had.

Whereas the idea was once “every person for the tribe’s benefit”, now the people who could read and write begin to rule over those who couldn’t. And so people began to separate into “upper class” and “lower class,” and weren’t as relationally close as they were before in history.

Print Culture

As writing culture grew and developed over time², it eventually turned into “print culture” somewhere around 1400 A.D., when the printing press was invented. People were then able to make numerous copies of any document they chose and send those copies out to a lot of people in a very short time frame. One person’s ideas could be sent all over the world, giving even more power to those who had a printing press than writing had previously done for the literate.

Electronic Culture

Then, in the 1800's, technology went crazy and began to make communication even faster and easier, bringing us into the type of culture that we live in today: “electronic” culture.

It began with telegraphs and typewriters, continued with telephones and radios, and eventually lead to televisions, CDs, computers, cell phones, the internet, MP3s, cell phones *with* MP3s and the internet on them—and who knows what next! Suddenly we find ourselves in the 21st century, surrounded by technology.

Pretty different from Abram's time, isn't it.

Instead of being surrounded by large fields, trees, lakes and mountains, we're surrounded by concrete and street lights.

Instead of taking days to get to a nearby town by foot or horse, we drive there in a couple of hours or send an e-mail in a matter of seconds.

Instead of taking an hour to prepare dinner with our families, we zip through the drive-thru at a fast-food restaurant or microwave an “instant” dinner.

Instead of working, living, and/or learning in structures that were built by “my great-great-grandfather”, we do those things in machine-produced buildings.

And instead of taking things “slow”, life is full of interruptions and we find ourselves working harder (and crazier) than ever before in history.

Mass Media

As far as our relationships go, we aren’t very “connected” anymore either. Think about it: how many people that you come across each day do you ever *really* talk with? The lady at the bank? The clerk at the store? I know I have to be careful not to get on “auto pilot” with them...

Clerk: “Hi how are you today?”

Me: “Good, how are you?”

Clerk: “Good. That’ll be \$23.54”

Me: “Here you go.”

Clerk: “Thanks, have a good day.”

Me: “You too...”

...and I’m out the door onto my next errand.

But what was that? I didn’t really talk with that person. I didn’t share anything with him or listen deeply to him.

All I did was repeat a conversation I'd had with a zillion other people in my lifetime.

Of course, that's assuming I even come in contact with another human being at the store. Many times I'll go to an ATM instead of talking to a bank teller, or use the automated "self-check" kiosk instead of waiting in line for a human employee at the store.

Sure, those things may be "convenient" and "faster", but are they really what's best? Am I connected to anyone, at all, anymore?

I bring it up because I know it's not just me in that situation. Everyone from school children to the CEOs of corporations experiences the same thing. All of this technology that has developed has led to what we commonly call "mass media". Now, instead of giving, say, this book to people I know personally, it's being sold to so many people that it just becomes a faceless "mass."

We're Surrounded

And make no mistake, we are *surrounded* by that "mass media", aren't we? Commercials, billboards, ads in magazines—they're everywhere! (I've even seen ads in men's restrooms—what is *that*?!)

“Eat here”, “Buy this”, “Look like them.” It’s everywhere.

Sometimes companies even get to advertise on you and me when we wear clothing that displays their logos in big letters across the front.

And why is all of that advertising out there on television, radio, billboards, and clothing?

Is it because all of those corporations are genuinely concerned about making Matt Abbott’s life better? Did their CEOs stay awake countless nights, concerned about my welfare?

Hardly. Companies may tell me things like “it’s all about you” in their advertisements, but you and I both know why those ads are really there, don’t we?

That’s right: to try to get us to buy their products so they can get rich.

That’s no big revelation or conspiracy theory, is it. It’s just business. Corporations exist to make money.

And, to them, you and I are just part of this faceless “mass” of people. If I’m in their computer database, I’m most likely there by an ID number that they assigned to me. If they send you a birthday greeting, it’s probably because their computer was programmed to do so. If the president

sees you or me in the mall someday, he or she is probably not going to even recognize us.

Wow. If that's what they mean when they tell me that "it's all about me", I think I'll start shopping somewhere else.

Chapter 2: Important Questions

So, if all we are to media corporations is “one more bank account” of money that they’d like to make their own, how much do we really want to listen to them? How much do we want to trust them?

After all, they’re missing two very important things that are needed to earn our trust, don’t you think?

1. They don’t care about us as individuals.

As we’ve said, corporations are in business to make money, so that’s their focus. They don’t necessarily care about the people who are receiving the messages or the products they send out; they care primarily about the people who are *paying* for the messages and products they send out.

For example, consider this quote from the website of Viacom, the owner of television stations like MTV and Nickelodian:

We work to deliver growth and superior returns to our stockholders and bring our global audiences the entertainment they want where they want it.¹

Notice whom they mention first: stockholders. Viacom's number one concern obviously is not the general well-being of the people who watch their shows. Viacom's concern is what's best for Viacom.

I'm not the only one who's noticed either. Check out what journalist Richard Corliss wrote a few years ago for *Time* magazine's website:

The distributors of entertainment are not creators; they are vendors. Their job is to sell things to people—sell anything to anybody. In an unguarded moment, they'd probably tell you that that is their corporate responsibility. They know that you increase the potential profitability of any product by increasing its potential audience. If a 12-year-old will and can buy their violent movie or CD or video game, they will sell it to him. If the kid wanted beer and could buy it, they'd sell him that too.²

As much as we may not like to think about it, that is the (sad) truth.

...Which brings us to our next topic of discussion:

2. They don't care about honesty.

Major corporations don't necessarily care about honesty either, because honesty doesn't always bring a profit with it.

If corporations like Viacom are to lead their audiences to spend money, they have to get us to keep tuning in to their stations. And, to keep us tuning in, they have to keep us happy *when* we tune in.

That's where a concern comes into play for them: sometimes the truth isn't fun to hear. Sometimes the truth can be flat-out painful.

So painful, in fact, that some people may not want to hear it at all—including the sponsors of the station. If people hear something painfully true on a station, they may turn that station off.

“So, why not *bend* the truth a little?” corporations say, “or even just lie?”

“...and be sure to say things that our sponsors would want us to say...

“...especially never saying anything *against* our sponsors!”

Of Tacos and Money

For example: let's say there's a company called Joe's Taco's, which produces the most unhealthy food a person could possibly eat on this earth. Your favorite TV station, however, never tells you that.

I mean literally *never*.

Not in a news story, not in a commercial, not in a sit com. Because if your favorite channel *did* say something against Joe's Taco's, Joe wouldn't pay that station to run Joe's commercials anymore.

As a result, you'll never see a sit com where a lead character says that Joe's Taco's is terrible...unless the character is made out to look dumb for saying it shortly thereafter.

And you may never hear a news report about Joe's Taco's causing health problems either...because even how the news is reported is controlled by the company who owns it. No joke.

Good News, Bad News

Pay close attention the next time you watch the news. Notice how they talk about the hot-button issues of the day.

Not long ago from my writing this book, a major court case involving a man who was accused of murdering his

pregnant wife was all over the news. Something that was very interesting to me, however, was how different stations would report about the tragedy.

Some stations said the man “murdered his wife and their *unborn child*” while other stations reported that he “murdered his wife and *her fetus*”. Simply by how the station reported that story, a viewer could easily tell which side of the abortion argument was supported by the corporation behind the station’s news.

...*and* the viewer could tell which point of view the station wanted its viewers to adopt themselves.

Consider what Academy Award-winning actor Russell Crowe, who is (obviously) around the media all the time, had to say about it in a September 26, 2006, interview:

“I don’t think that there is such a thing as a fair shake in the media the way it exists now. I think it’s rotten to the core. I think it’s full of a whole bunch of people who write late into the night while drinking themselves into oblivion. And I think it’s a very nasty situation that we’ve got ourselves in, in the world, where you cannot go to a news source and reliably be told the truth. And the fact that a lot of people who work in the media don’t actually think that that’s part of their job, you know...just turning up and making sure that they file when they’re supposed to file;

that’s their job... Truth, justice, integrity—none of these things are actually co-joined, they’ve all been separated... The line gets crossed 99% of the time, mate.³”

Wow! (And that’s coming from someone who makes his living by being in the media.)

It seems plain, doesn’t it: we simply can’t trust a lot of what we see and hear in our commercial media.

Who Says?

Along those lines, it’s also important to consider who pays for the ads that tell us “good things” about products.

For example: those ads that talk about how “good” eggs are for us and show happy dads waking up early on a farm—who pays for those? *The egg industry*. Are eggs really that good for us? Will eggs truly bring our smiling families closer together each morning? The egg industry obviously wants us to think so.

Or take any product that’s advertised. Who says those food items are good for you, or that those pants are made of the “best material”? The companies who are producing selling them, usually. (And, sometimes, *only* the companies that are producing and selling them.)

We must learn not to accept everything the media tells us *just because* we heard it on a major network, no matter how “official” it sounds. We need to ask: is it true?

And, sure, sometimes it is. But many times it’s not. At least, it’s not *100%* true. Because, as we’ve said, the reasoning of corporations goes like this:

1. “If our station says something viewers don’t like (even in the news!), they’ll stop watching.

2. “If people stop watching, people won’t buy the things we advertise.

3. “If people don’t buy the things we advertise, advertisers will stop giving us money to run their ads.

4. “If advertisers stop paying us, we go broke.”

5. “We don’t want to go broke; our whole purpose in being a business corporation is to make money.”

As a result, there’s little, if any, complete honesty in the programs and commercials corporations produce for our “mass” of people. Instead, they try to manipulate us in a number of ways, as we’ll discuss in the next chapter.

Good Corporations Do Exist

All of this isn’t to say that there aren’t any good media corporations, however. Indeed, there are! I used to work for one: a nation-wide, nonprofit Christian radio ministry.

Now, of course they need money if they are going to continue broadcasting. But money isn't their sole purpose for being in business. Their purpose is to spread the good news about Jesus Christ through Christian music, which they seek to do through donations.

You read correctly: they are listener supported, airing no commercials whatsoever.⁴ Their funds come mostly from a system of monthly pledges given by the very people they're ministering to: the listeners. Any prizes they offer for contests are items that have been donated by other companies.

That doesn't mean they're perfect. But—from what I've experienced at least—they are in it for the right reasons. They aren't constantly looking at advertisers and asking “what would ‘Joe’s Tacos’ want us to say on the air?” Instead, they consider the opinions of the people their corporation affects the most, and they look at the Bible and ask, “what does God want us to say?”

Many of their employees could easily make a lot more annual income by using their skills for another organization, yet they don't. Why? Because they genuinely love God and want to make a difference for Him, helping listeners find true life through a personal relationship with our Creator.

Their efforts are obviously working, too. Over the course of just *one* of the years I worked there, somewhere around **7,000** people (possibly more, I don't recall for sure) became Christians as a result of their ministry. 7,000!

They also have a number of pastors on staff, whom any listener—donor or not—can call for free counseling. (Many suicides have been prevented thanks to this area of their ministry.) These pastors also lead the employees of the ministry in 15 minute prayer meetings, 4 times a day. During these 15 minutes, employees pray for requests that listeners have submitted by phone and/or through the ministry's websites.

Is this ministry's heart in the right place? As far as I can tell, yes. Are they concerned about the welfare of those who listen to their stations? Absolutely. Are they interested in communicating the truth? Of course.

And, certainly I'm sure that there are other corporations in America like theirs, made up of people who genuinely care about other people and aren't just trying to take advantage of us.

Though, sadly, there are far more corporations that do only care about money. We need to watch out for them.

So, Really...

I mean, really: if you met a dishonest person who didn't care about you, personally, in any way—would you trust that person?

Would you let that person mentor you in how to “appropriately” live your life?

Would you let that person tell you what to eat and what to wear?

Neither would I.

Yet, every day, we do.

Every day we fall for the manipulation that trained experts use on us.

But we don't have to.

Chapter 3: Manipulating the Masses

Let's take a quick survey.

By a show of hands: How many of you have ever had an untrue rumor spread about you?

Let's see...1...2...wow, a lot of you!

It's annoying when that happens, isn't it? You know that you didn't say/do/think/feel whatever-it-was. But since "everyone else" is talking about it, a lot of people start believing that it's true. Then, when you try to tell them otherwise, they don't believe you, because "everyone else" says it happened another way.

Now think of that same principle on a larger scale. Let's say you send the same, untrue message to 3 million people. Then you send it again in a different form. Then you send it again. And again. And you keep doing that over the course of a year.

What will happen? Some people may question it and others may ignore it, sure. But a lot of people will probably start to believe it, whether it's true or not.

I bring this up because corporations know that principle too. They know that messages that are repeated over and over can begin to change your thinking if you're not careful. It's actually just basic psychology: humans learn by repetition.

...And Repetition It Is!

Need more proof? Okay. It's as simple as studying for a test or trying to memorize a speech. If you try to "cram" all that you need to know into your mind the night before you have to take that test or give that speech, you might do "okay." But if you were to study your subject for a few minutes a day, over the course of a week or so, you'd probably remember it much better, wouldn't you?

Why? Because we learn by repetition.

Now, let's go back to the rumor analogy for a moment. If, every time your best friends heard someone try to spread that rumor about you, your friends consciously said to themselves, "We know that's not true because of [whatever]", they wouldn't be as affected by that rumor (if affected at all), right?

But suppose people were *constantly* in the faces of your friends, telling them that lie about you. What if every person they spoke with—no matter the topic of discussion—added “oh, by the way, did you hear about...?”

Imagine if people even printed billboards and t-shirts in support of the rumor, wrote songs about it, and made movies about it. Over time, I’m guessing it might wear your friends’ resistances down (at least to some degree), and they might even start to wonder if “just maybe” there’s some truth to the story that “everyone’s talking about.”

It’s not much different in the media. Some of the messages they send to us can come at us so often that they slowly wear down our resistance, until we start to adopt that idea or value as our own, sometimes without even realizing it.

For example: if Bob Producer is constantly telling people, through television, that “all religions lead to God”, eventually a lot of people will start to accept that as truth without even questioning it. If I happen to meet one such person on the street and ask him about who gets to go to Heaven, he may even repeat back to me what was said on television *word for word*, without having ever stopped to consider if it even makes sense to believe such an idea.

Corporations Enjoy Psychology

Corporations use that kind of psychology in their attempts to make us buy their products. Remember: their focus isn't "what's best for the people"; their focus is "what's going to make money," even if it means bending the truth.

Some corporations hire the best manipulators they can find to help them advertise. A perfect example is Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and "an early leader in the public relations field who devised or developed many techniques for influencing public opinion", as an article from *The New York Times* put it in his March 10, 1995 obituary¹.

Among the many big names that sought Bernays' manipulative expertise was the American Tobacco Company's Lucky Strike cigarettes. Apparently there was a "problem" in the mid 1900's: women didn't smoke nearly as much as men did. So, Lucky Strike asked Bernays to "fix" that, which he did. As the *NY Times* obituary also reports:

[Bernays] was instrumental in making it acceptable for women to smoke in public, sponsoring, on behalf of the American Tobacco Company's Lucky Strike cigarettes,

demonstrations in which debutantes gathered on street corners to light up. The cigarettes were even called "torches of freedom."

On behalf of Lucky Strike, Mr. Bernays also undertook to alter women's fashions. When surveys showed that women objected to Luckies because the green package with its red bull's-eye clashed with the colors of their clothes, he swung into action to make green fashionable. There followed a green fashion luncheon, green balls (at which green gowns were worn), and window displays of green suits and dresses. The campaign was a brilliant success, according to sales figures.

He regarded himself as a professional opinion maker who, by following precise principles, could produce desired changes in attitudes.²

If that isn't manipulation, I don't know what is.

Did you notice how Bernays even marketed cigarettes to women as not only something "cool", but something that supposedly is an expression of their independence ("torches of freedom")? How ironic! If anything, cigarettes make a person *less* free by enslaving them to an addiction, don't they? But it worked.

As Sacramento State University Media Studies professor Steve Jenkins once said, “Remember this: in the hands of a manipulator, anything can mean anything.”³ How true that is! People like Bernays will tell us that “right is wrong” and “wrong is right” if it’ll make money for the company that hired him.

I find it interesting that God warned us about that very thing over 2,000 years ago in the biblical book of Isaiah:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.⁴

So, apparently, the things that people like Edward Bernays do are nothing new.

That doesn’t make it any less wrong, of course. As Professor Jenkins also once made the point, manipulation takes away my right to be a person, as “my ability to think and make decisions [is not being honored.]” As one of the teens in the church where I work would say, “how rude!”

I wouldn’t disagree.

“Yeah, right...”

I know what some of you are saying right about now.
“Come on, Matt; can we really even be sure that television,
music and the internet have any effect on our minds at all?
It certainly doesn't have an effect on mine.”

Good question. Let's find out.

Chapter 4: Five Reasons to Believe Media Affects Us

I want to give you five reasons why I think things like television, movies, and music can have a considerable impact our minds¹:

#1: The Actions of Corporations

Corporations obviously think that media affects us. They're so sure of it, in fact, that they're willing to spend millions and millions and millions of dollars just to run 30 second commercials. They figure those 30 seconds will be enough to grab our attention and make us end up in the checkout line at their stores next weekend.

Now think about this: if (a) the *only reason* a corporation exists is to make money, and (b) they're willing to spend that much on advertising, do you think that maybe they've done some research about it and found that it does affect our minds?

It would be a pretty dumb investment on the part of those corporations otherwise, wouldn't it? And, if it didn't

work, wouldn't all those well-known companies have gone broke by now? Yet there are plenty of stores we could point to who have advertised for a long time, and who are celebrating their 50th or 75th anniversaries.

They must be doing something correctly.

#2: The Studies That Have Been Done

Did you know that thousands of separate studies have been done on this subject, all of which have concluded that television *does* have an impact on those who watch it?

A news article about one recent study of infant TV-watching habits, for example, noted that “The American Academy of Pediatrics says that excessive viewing before age 3 has been associated with attention problems, aggressive behavior, and poor development.”²

Another recent study—actually a series of four studies with one focus—concluded that “Playing video games can satisfy deep psychological needs and, at least in the short term, improve people's well-being,” also finding this:

The more a game fulfilled a player's sense of independence, achievement and connectedness to others, the more likely he or she was to keep playing, Dr. Scott Rigby of Immersyve, a Florida-based virtual environment

think tank, and colleagues from the University of Rochester in New York found. And the more fully a player's needs were satisfied, the better he felt after playing.³

Doesn't that suggest that things like video games (at the very least) have some degree of effect on us?

That's not to say that every study on this subject is without flaws, of course. But if that many separate studies all point to the same general conclusion that media affects us, isn't that something to take into consideration?

#3. The Nature of TV Watching

When people are watching television, their states of mind are, basically, in what is called a "pre-hypnotic state." According to Webster's Dictionary, that means those people are in the state of mind that occurs just before sleeping, and/or that something is "readily holding the attention."⁴

Some people readily admit they go to see movies or watch television as an "escape" from reality, so they don't have to think about themselves and their problems. It wouldn't be a very good escape if it didn't work.

Then there are the people we know and love, who sit in front of a television and seem totally oblivious to the world around them. Oh, sure, we may ask them what they want

for dinner, or if they could help us with our homework. But do they respond? Rarely. Many continue to stare at the screen as if we don't exist. Others sometimes break out of their trance with that ever-popular phrase, "huh?", after which we must repeat what we've just said.

Here's my point: *obviously* our minds are in a different state when we watch television. They're passive, dreamy, not very "self-aware", and—perhaps the worst of all of those—highly suggestible.

If the people on television tell us that we feel a certain way, or that we like a certain thing, a highly suggestible mind readily accepts it without much of a fight.

Think about it: have you ever found it easier to laugh at a joke on a sit-com when the "studio audience" laughs? Sometimes they laugh at things that, actually, aren't funny at all. But what they're doing the entire time is telling us "this is funny; you should laugh." And our minds, because they're in that suggestible state, respond by saying "yeah...that's funny...hahaha".

#4. Drama's Effect on Our Egos

Historically, cultures have used drama to encourage people to change their behavior. In Greek times, for

example, tragedies were used to teach citizens, through entertainment, what was “right” and “wrong.”

It’s actually just more psychology. Drama looks like reality to us and appeals to our egos. It works like this: in my mind, my life is sort of like a movie in which I’m the main character (probably the “hero”). So I identify with the main characters in superhero shows. I long to be like the lawyer who wins the case in that courtroom drama. I long to look like that person everyone loves in that romance movie.

And when a movie tells me that the characters I identify with and want to be like “kill the bad guy” or “trample the loser underfoot”, then I want to do those things too. That way, I can be a “hero” like that character is, even if what they’re doing isn’t that heroic in real life.

#5. The Amount of Time We Spend With The Media

Studies show that the average American watches approximately four hours of television a day. That’s “average,” mind you. That means there’s someone watching television for eight hours a day in order to make up for me, as I probably only watch three or four hours of television *a week*—at most.

Sticking with the “four hour average”, though, let’s do some quick math. Four hours a day x 365 days in a year = approximately 1,460 hours of television watching a year, per person. That’s a lot of time!

Imagine holding your breath for 1,460 hours a year. Would that have any effect on you? I would think so.

Imagine exercising for 1,460 hours a year. Would that get you in pretty good shape? I would think so (assuming you survived it).

Imagine reading scholarly books for 1,460 hours a year. Would you learn anything? If you paid attention to what you read, you’d probably end up as a genius!

My point is this: *anything* that you do for 1,460 hours a year is going to have an effect on you. So why would watching television be any different? If you spend that much time listening to messages from corporations who care nothing about you and nothing about honesty, wouldn’t that do *something* to the way you think about things in life?

“*But Wait, There’s More...*”

Then there’s the whole idea of learning by repetition (as we mentioned in the last chapter). Think about that in terms of music, if nothing else. As someone who has

learned from professional musicians and seen how CDs are produced, I can testify that any songs we hear on the radio are *made* to stick in our minds.

For example: the next time you're listening to your favorite band, pay attention to how often something in the song changes. Maybe a new instrument comes in, or everything drops out, or harmony is added. It may be obvious, or it may be very difficult to detect.

No matter which song you choose off of any "Top 10" list, though, I am guessing that every one of them will have something "new" happen after every four to eight measures. It keeps a song interesting to our minds and, when done well, can even elicit emotional responses from us. If a song can connect with our emotions, we're likely to want to buy the song and/or promote it verbally among acquaintances.

Then there's the whole idea of a "hook"—that "something" about a song that makes it stick in your mind (usually a catchy lyric). Perhaps it's the chorus, or an intro that is repeated often; maybe the topic of the song shocks you by how extreme it is, or maybe it makes you laugh. Wise record companies won't release a single that doesn't have a "hook." And those psychologically designed songs grab, and keep, your attention.

Might those songs, then, have the ability to affect the way you think?

“Well”, some of you are probably thinking, “I know some of the songs I listen to have ‘bad’ lyrics (be it swear words, sexual references, satanic words, etc.), but I don’t listen to the words, I just like the beat.” Did you know that, actually, that’s *more* dangerous for your mind than listening to the words?

Psychology tells us that “just listening to the beat” actually allows the negative messages to get into your mind easier—without a fight at all! It’s far better to be consciously challenging and evaluating such lyrics as you hear them (if you choose to listen to songs like that). Though, of course, it’s best to avoid such songs altogether and fill our minds with positive messages instead. Otherwise, before you know it, you’ll be agreeing with what those negative songs have to say, whether or not you originally would have agreed with them.

“It’s Just a Game”

Then there’s the idea of violent video games.

“Come on, Matt,” some may say; “they’re just games.” I don’t see how that could be the case.

How healthy could it really be for our minds if we play games in which we score points and “win” by viciously harming other people? Wouldn’t that be registering somewhere in our minds as “killing other people is good”? And if we register that message in our minds over and over (again, learning by repetition), wouldn’t we start to actually think like that to some degree? And if we start to think like that, couldn’t that lead to acting on those thoughts?

How many Columbine High School incidents have to happen or be prevented at the last moment before we realize that media affects us? How many testimonies of teen would-be gunmen who “loved” and “lived” violent video games must we read before we see that there *is* a connection between what we put in our minds and how we act?

The Messages They Send

But what messages, specifically, are those in the media sending us about life? And how are those messages affecting us in everyday life? Is there anything we can do to guard ourselves from being influenced negatively?

Those are important questions. Let’s go find the answers.

Chapter 5: Self Sells

Whatever else corporations may try to sell us, whatever else they may say to us in their ads, the underlying-#1-can't-avoid-it-because-people-go-for-it thing they're usually trying to promote is this: self-gratification. After all (as we've seen), they want us to give them our money. So, if it's self-gratification that sells, it's self-gratification they'll focus on.

I admit it: I want to be happy, enjoy life, and feel good. I'm guessing you do too. Pop culture's advertisers look at us and say, "okay, then—if you want those things, let us tell you how to get them: through gratification."

The only problem there is that it's not true. Gratification won't really make me happy. Gratification won't help me enjoy life. And gratification certainly won't make me feel good forever. (I have yet to meet anyone who would honestly say otherwise, too.)

Why? Because gratification and satisfaction are two completely different things.

Gratification vs. Satisfaction

Gratification is all about getting what we want and getting it *now!* It appeals to our senses and seems to be a simple, instant “fix” for whatever may be the problem or need at hand. Yet gratification is only temporary, and it leaves us empty after we get what we supposedly wanted.

Advertisers don’t tell us that, of course, because business for them is about making money, not a genuine concern for my well-being. And as long as I think buying their products will solve my problems and meet my needs, I’ll keep doing it and they’ll keep making money off of me. So why would they tell me the truth?

“Things” and “stuff” may gratify me, but they won’t satisfy me. They can’t. If it’s true, lasting, wonderful satisfaction that I’m looking for, there’s only one place to find it: a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As Jesus Himself once said to a woman He met at a well: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.”¹

Only in Christ is the emptiness in life replaced with purpose. Only from God do we get the things that we

really need, the things that truly satisfy. Only in that relationship with Him will we know why He put each of us on this planet and how we're supposed to serve Him.² Even our material possessions take on genuine meaning when we realize that they really belong to our Creator and have been entrusted to us to use faithfully for Him during our time on this earth.

Satisfaction lasts and is much deeper than gratification. That's the difference between the two.

Slowing Down

There have been days when I've run around doing everything I can think of to gratify some want or need that I have (even if it's just the need to "do something" with my day). And, sure, it may make me feel good and like I'm valuable for awhile. But those feelings don't last when they're based on something so empty.

What is so interesting to me, however, is this: if I'll just slow down and spend some time with God—maybe even just 30 minutes or less—reading the Bible and praying, I have a peace and a satisfaction that stays with me all day. It puts my worries, needs, and "to do" list in perspective, too. I even focus better and actually end up getting more

things accomplished that really matter than I would have otherwise.

... Which can be a problem for corporations. If I'm genuinely satisfied, and I have the kind of perspective that comes from that satisfaction, I don't buy things that I don't need. I'm not constantly looking for "more, more, more!" Instead, I'm free to make wise decisions. I might even end up buying things that will last me for a long time.

So, corporations surround us with messages of "go for gratification" and "get gratified by shopping!" "Shopping is what life is all about, after all!" And, sadly, we often believe them.

There's Certainly Something Wrong with Someone

And, as we've seen before, advertisers use manipulation. They use psychology to try to try to make us feel insecure about ourselves. You've probably seen it in plenty of ads. The idea is that "there's something wrong with you."

Maybe the "problem" is that "your stuff isn't new enough" or "you need more clothes." Or maybe it's as serious as your looks, like "you're not pretty enough" or "you're too fat" or "you're too hairy" or "you're too [whatever - you name it!]"

“...*but*”, they tell us, “just buy our product and we’ll fix it! Then, you’ll be happy.”

“...Chew our gum and a pretty girl will kiss you.”

“...Wear our clothes and a big hunk will put his arms around you.”

“...You won’t be lonely if you do what we tell you. You’ll be loved and accepted.”

Then we go buy their products, but it doesn’t work like the commercials showed.

“Oh...” they say five minutes later, “well it didn’t work because you don’t have the *right* car or the *newest* version of what you bought.

“Or, perhaps it did work but there’s something *else* wrong with you, so you need to buy more.”

...and Why Do They Do It? Say it With Me Now...

They say those kinds of things because those things are true, right? You really are lacking in a lot of areas, and they genuinely care about making your life better, right?

Hardly. The only reason they say any of that is one we’ve already discussed: they’re lying in an attempt to get you to spend money.

They’re not selling you lasting satisfaction. They’re trying to sell you temporary gratification. When you do go

out and buy their product and it doesn't work, you'll come back for something else. You'll come back to their store again and again and again, because you're never satisfied.

On and on it goes: "buy this, buy that, get it now!" Seems like it never ends. But that's okay with the corporations we're talking about, because if it did end, and you ended up genuinely satisfied, you'd stop buying their products and they'd stop getting richer.

"It's Who You Are!"

So, commercial corporations basically tell us that we—as humans—are "self-gratifiers" (as if seeking gratification is a core part of our identity). They don't want us to think too deeply about much of anything, especially things like God and who we *really* are in Him. Instead, corporations want us to worry about what we plan to buy next. Many times the underlying messages they send are like these:

- "Define yourself by what you buy!"
- "You are what you own!"
- "Don't worry about your soul, worry about the next thing you *want*!"

A lot of the messages that commercials send us through the media try to teach us to live for gratification in every area of our lives.

Missing Life!

And, sadly, it's very easy to get caught up in that kind of mindset and end up missing a lot of the blessings in life as a result.

We might easily miss ever really getting to know another human being, for example. There's no gratification in listening to someone else share his heart, because when we listen we have to give of ourselves, our time, and our attention. There's no room for impatience and selfishness if we want to truly listen to someone else.

A mind controlled by gratification, however, would say, "Shut up and get out of my way; it's all about me; let me do what I want; I don't care about what you think and feel." I'm guessing that wouldn't lead to very many good, deep relationships.

Along those same lines, a gratification mindset also prompts us to view people as objects. If a guy "gets" a girlfriend, it's like he "got" a new shirt or a candy bar or something. "She's just an object for me to use and throw away when I'm tired of her," he may start to think; "then I go off to find a 'newer, better' one, just like with anything else."

I know that sounds shallow (and, certainly, it is!) but that's the kind of perspective we end up with if we let ourselves adopt a gratification mindset.

Gratification can also lead us to the point where—somewhere in our minds—we begin to truly believe that the worst tragedy in the world is “not getting what I want.” If the item I want is sold out at the mall, or I can't afford those new shoes, my life is ruined.

Then there's the idea of truth. If the media is constantly trying to avoid any truth that would upset us, wouldn't that condition us to try and avoid such truths on our own time as well? Sure it would. I saw proof of it a few hours before I wrote this paragraph.

When I began to read and discuss a news article about a recent school shooting, a person I had recently met up with said something to the effect of, “can't we just focus on positive things?” As a youth pastor, I told the person that it was something I needed to be aware of. The person, consequently, said I should focus on it myself and not talk about it with him. Shortly thereafter, my mind shot to exactly what we're talking about in this book.

With a gratification mindset, we may even lose our ability to slow down and truly experience things like a slow walk along the beach or a hike in a beautiful forest. We'd

be looking at our watches the entire time, longing for the current activity to end so we can move on to the “next big thing.”

But when is enough, enough? How are we going to feel when we get to the end of our lives and wonder why we spent so much time on so many things that don't really matter in light of eternity?

A Way Out...

There is hope amidst all of the manipulative nonsense that surrounds us in the media, however. It *is* possible to avoid being influenced negatively by all of these messages they constantly throw at us. There *is* “a way out,” so to speak.

I'll share what it is in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: The Better Way

What if I told you there was a source of information to guide us in life that wasn't corrupted by a hunger for money?

What if it was produced by people who genuinely cared about those who would encounter their product?

What if the product even held the keys to helping us find out what our purpose is in life, and truly satisfied us while doing so?

And what if it had the ability to break the power the media holds over so many of our minds? What if it could set us free to be the people we were *meant* to be, instead of the people commercial corporations want to shape us into?

Would you want to know what it was? Would you want to go out and buy your own copy? If so, I've got good news: you may already have one.

“What on earth are you talking about, Matt?” you ask.

The Bible.

No, That Wasn't A Typo...

That's right—the Bible!

Now, I know what commercial corporations would like us to believe about the Bible: that it's a big, scary, outdated, hard to understand, boring book. But I promise you that the Bible is actually quite an awesome book (or, actually, collection of books)!

It's got the same types of things that the media tries to get our attention with, except better: touching love stories, stories with action and battles, accounts of God doing miracles and other amazing things through ordinary people, guidelines for life...

If you haven't read much of it, I think you'd be pleasantly surprised at what you'd find in there. It's quite different in its purpose, and effects, than those commercial corporations out there.

A Concern for Individuals

Unlike the commercial media, the Bible is filled with a genuine concern for the well-being of its partakers. It was written by 40 (or possibly more) authors over a period of about 1,500 years, with some of its authors writing and

saying what they did at the risk of losing their lives! (They obviously weren't in it for the money.) They were people who had experienced a relationship with God and wanted to share what He had showed them, so other people could experience that relationship too.

As far as content, the Bible gives us many encouraging, life-giving concepts to think about, like these:

- (A) humans are made in God's image,
- (B) every person is valuable to God and unconditionally loved by Him,
- and (C) each of us has a need to know and follow Him.

According to the Bible, we're not a faceless "mass" to God like we are to commercial corporations. God knows us, and cares about us, *personally*¹. The Bible even tells us that God pays attention to how many hairs are on each of our heads²!

Honesty

The Bible also takes honesty very seriously (unlike the commercial media), as is evidenced by its content:

- One of the Ten Commandments is “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16).
- Shortly thereafter, the command not to lie—*at all*—is recorded (Leviticus 19:11).
- Jesus Himself said things like “[I am] the truth” (John 14:6), “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32), and “everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37)
- Jesus also identified the devil as “the father of lies” (John 8:44).

So, obviously, a key goal of the books contained in the Bible is to uphold the truth. It even views truth as something that comes from God, and it views dishonesty—of any kind—as something evil.

Think back to the authors we mentioned earlier, too (who spoke at the risk of losing their lives). They certainly wouldn’t have written about things that could get them killed because they had nothing else to do. They obviously believed that they had truth that other people needed to hear, and the authors wouldn’t stop until others heard it.

If we want to know the truth about life and how life works, I believe (from experience!) that we can find that truth right there between, and including, Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21.

If we want to know how loved we really are, despite what we buy or how new our cars may be, all we have to do is read what God says about us in His book. He had it all written down for us. The Bible is like a giant love e-mail from God to us, sent through time. It'll tell us everything we need to know, including who God created each of us to be.

Who We Really Are

I guarantee you that who God created you to be isn't the same person commercialism says you are. As Jesus Himself said,

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a [person's] life does not consist in the abundance of his [or her] possessions.”

- Luke 12:15

God doesn't tell us to define ourselves by what we buy. He says to define ourselves by something much deeper and more meaningful: by who we are to Him!

According to the Bible, God created us out of His perfect love for us. Then His One and Only Son came to earth, lived a perfect life, and died on a Roman cross to pay for our wrongs, so we can be forgiven and have a full, eternal life. As a result, we can be free to have a personal relationship with Him now and forever.

And don't miss that: God paid for us with His Only Son's life because that's how much we're worth in His eyes. That's what our value is: the incredible price that God has placed on us! That's what truly defines us; not how much money we make, or what we buy, or how we look, or even the things we do.

A Different Perspective

God's perspective on life differs with pop culture on a lot of points, though. He's not interested only in getting our money; God wants the best for us simply because He loves us! Jesus even said that He came to earth so people could have "life, and have it to the full"³.

That doesn't mean that His ways will always make sense to us. God's ways and thoughts are far higher than

ours⁴. But God has proven Himself trustworthy. He suffered the pain of hell in our places to save us! That's some amazing love that was shown, not just talked about.

And we've already seen that God is out to tell us the 100%, unaltered truth.

Plus, we can trust that God not only wants the best for us, but that He *knows* what's best for us. He designed us! If anyone knows how life will truly "work" correctly, it's God. He knows what will harm us and what will do us good in every area of life, including our minds.

And, certainly, the Bible shows us that our minds are important to Him. Verses like Romans 12:2 make that clear enough:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Check out that verse! Go ahead, read it again. I'll wait.

All done? Great! Did you notice what that verse is? It's God's remedy for what the media tries to do to us! That's the solution! God wants us to learn to think like He does, so we can have good things in life and escape the

kind of mindsets commercialism is constantly trying to sell us.

We just need to “renew our minds.”

Renewed Thinking

How do we do that? Actually, it’s no different than how we get the media’s thoughts into our minds: by spending time with the source of what we want. If we spend daily time with God, reading His words and talking with Him in prayer, and then go out and put into practice what we’ve learned, things will start to change for the better in our lives.

Part of renewing our minds, however, is challenging the ideas that the media throws at us. God calls us to a higher standard than commercialism does, and God’s standard must become our own if we want to have that “full life” Jesus talked about. We must learn to look at what God says in the Bible and evaluate the things we see and hear in light of His words.

Every word in the Bible can teach us something about life, even the long lists of names in the book called “Numbers.” God made sure that the Bible would always be relevant. Just because we live in an electronic age now doesn’t make His words outdated in the least bit. It’s

meant to permanently be the standard “until heaven and earth pass away” (see Matthew 5:17-20).

So our mindset must become something like this: “if what the media says agrees with what God says, it’s okay. If what the media says goes against God’s perspective, it’s not okay.”

No really—It Is Better!

I can imagine some of you squirming or getting defensive about now. What if Jesus wouldn’t watch your favorite show? What if God would throw your favorite CD away?

Good questions. But, even if that were the case, wouldn’t that mean that giving those things up would be for the best? Isn’t “the best” what we want in life?

Remember, too, that God isn’t mean. I can tell you from experience that He will replace anything He tells us to give up with something far better.

We just need to trust Him. Those of us who are Christians also need to remember that Jesus is our Lord as well as our Savior. He’s the Boss of our lives now. We belong to Him and need to give what He wants priority over what we want.

Practicing What I Preach

Let's put this whole concept of renewing our minds into practice.

Let's take a closer look at some of the messages the media sends us about different areas of life, and then compare those to what God tells us in the Bible about the same topics.

Ready?

Chapter 7: Sex from Commercialism's Perspective

Note: in this chapter I won't be inappropriately explicit in the issues I discuss, but I am going to address things like pornography addiction and rape, as well as the psychological problems behind those issues. If, at any point, you become uncomfortable or feel it may be best for you to skip ahead to the next chapter (for whatever reason), please don't hesitate to do so.

Let's begin with the topic that is, quite obviously, the most prevalent thing we see in today's advertising: sex.

It is estimated that, by the time the average American is 18 years old, he/she has seen somewhere between ½ million and 1.5 million “sexual taunt”¹ in the media. 1.5 million!

(I guarantee that you aren't going to see that many reverent references to God on the average television station in a year—or anything else, probably!)

Why is sex such a big deal? Why is it that advertisers try to use it to sell almost everything, including things that have nothing to do with sex (like fast food, for example)?

Simple: because—as they say—“sex sells.” Sex is a powerful thing, and it certainly does get our attention.

Let's be real: guys, we find it difficult to look away from that girl wearing clothes that are three sizes too small for her, don't we? And, girls, you don't mind if that big hunk shows off his muscles in the final scenes of that new movie, do you? It feels good to us. Just thinking about sex for one second can set off a chain reaction of chemicals in our brains that gives us a pleasurable “zing”.

Now, think about that in terms of what we talked about a couple of chapters ago concerning self-gratification. If it's self-gratification the media is trying to promote, isn't sex the perfect element to exploit? All advertisers have to do is show a sexy picture, or say something erotic, and we're “all ears” (or, in some cases, “all eyes”).

More Psychology

So—for men—corporations make commercials that show girls in tight, skimpy outfits to “get our motors running” so to speak, then advertisers quickly switch our attention over to a product they want to sell. That way, the product sticks in our minds and we equate it with those good sex-related feelings, even if it makes no sense to do so.

You’ve probably seen it before. Think about when a television station returns from a commercial break to a stadium sports game. What do the producers show in the background while they flash logos for car companies and beer across the screen? The cheerleaders! Why? Because they’re doing exactly what I’m talking about.

Telling Us Who We Are

Producers sometimes do similar things in their efforts to get the attention of women. However, women tend not to be as visually-oriented as men. So, ads aimed at women try a different tactic many times.

Though, oddly enough, the *message* that advertisers often send to women isn’t that different from the one they send to men: “women are sex objects.”

“What?!” we may say. “But that’s offensive! How on earth would that sell anything to women?” Simple: they try to tell women that being sexy is supposedly a part of their identity.

...That, if you’re a woman, that’s who are “supposed” to be.

...That, if you’re a woman, you’re “supposed to” dress, and act, like those underwear models do.

...And, that if you *don’t* dress sexy, as one of my female classmates in college expressed it, “you’ll die old, lonely, and ugly.”

“Side Effects May Include...”

Make no mistake either: those sex-related ads *are* having an impact on our minds and our lives in the process of all of this advertising.

For one thing, sexual teases can be addictive. The more sexual references I take into my mind, the more my mind begins to crave *more* sexual references. If what got my attention before is “old news”, I’ll have to find something a little sexier next time. (The media is always there to help us with that, of course.)

The danger, however, is that our brains can begin to restructure themselves around all of that sensuality, which

can lead to an addiction of sorts, as a scientist acquaintance of mine once explained. As is no surprise, it's a slippery slope from that point to a pornography addiction. (Half of what we see in ads *already is*, basically, soft-core pornography, isn't it?)

According to author and researcher Dr. Judith Reisman, many of *Playboy's* consumers “are easily trained to believe that they are being cheated if they have a love life with one woman.” As she also says, “the need for *Playboy* to [go against] Judeo-Christian ways was, and still is, a critical component for [their] success.” Reisman concludes by saying that, “economically it is necessary for the sex industry to do two things: first, it must poison men against the love of one woman; and secondly, it needs to sexually disable men.”

Isn't that exactly what we see happening more and more in our culture? Just look around and listen to young men talk about the opposite gender.

Even Worse

Now imagine putting all of the messages together that we've talked about so far, and putting them in the “wrong guy's” head, over and over.

“Look at all those pretty, flawless women—those sex objects. Wouldn’t you like to have one of those? Too bad there’s something *wrong* with you, and you can’t. Too bad you don’t look like those hot guys in the movies. If you did, those women wouldn’t reject you.”

Do you think that the combination of lust and anger that would produce could possibly lead the “wrong guy” to do something terrible? Like rape someone perhaps?

I’m not saying that every guy out there is going to do that. But research does tell us that rape isn’t just about self-gratification. Interview a rapist and you might hear him say something like this: “the way she was dressing, she was asking for it.” As horrible as that is, rapists actually believe that they’re punishing women.

For what? For not making the man’s life like the one he saw on TV, perhaps? For not helping him to be who he was “supposed” to be as a man, and not letting him have what he was “supposed” to “go out and get” for himself?

The alarming connection is worth a thought.

Disposable

Sexy ads can also affect how we view other people, training us to see them as nothing more than objects to be used for gratification. Some people even seem to have the

perspective of “use them once and throw them away”, like a disposable camera or other product.

Let's Get Real

But what else do those “side effects” look like in real life?

Do they look like the young man who can't stop thinking about those images he saw in that commercial or magazine, no matter how much he tries?

Perhaps they look like that teen who can't see females as anything more than “objects” because of how he's let his mind be trained by the messages the media sends.

Or maybe they look like the newly married man who can't stop comparing his wife's body to all those pornographic models he used to look at, and—as a result—can't seem to really “connect” with his bride in a deeply loving way.

I wonder if the side effects also look like that teen girl who can't ever seem to feel pretty enough; who always compares herself to digitally enhanced magazine photographs and unrealistic expectations presented to her on her favorite television shows.

Maybe it even looks like those girls who do everything from make themselves dangerously thin, to sleeping with a

different guy every week, just so they'll finally feel like they're loved and worth something.

Is that what we want? That's what we're getting.

Who Cares?

Who cares?

Obviously not people like Andy Puzer. He was the CEO of Carl's Jr. at the time they released a ridiculously sexy television commercial featuring Paris Hilton washing a car while eating a hamburger.

When some people complained that the ad was inappropriate for television, Puzer responded by saying that it was "an attempt to sell hamburgers. If [the] ad increases sales, I would choose [Hilton] again...It's all about the sales." Puzer also suggested that people who object to the company's ad should "get a life."

(Thanks, Andy; *that* makes me want to go to Carl's Jr....Not!)

Ironically, the commercial did *not* achieve the corporation's goal. After airing it for four weeks, Carl's Jr. hadn't seen *any* significant growth in sales.

In the process, however, guess what they did? They furthered the promotion of all of the mindsets and negative effects we've been talking about, just like all of the

“harmless fun” movies that come out that are loaded with sexual content (be it sex scenes, innuendo, jokes, or whatever), and the radio songs that “heat up the charts.”

...*And Why?*

...Because we keep watching, and listening, and buying.

But, again I ask: do we really want what we’re getting for the money we give to people like Andy Puzer and the producers of *Playboy*? People who only make the products and commercials they do because they care about taking your money, not because they care about you?

You heard it straight from the Carl’s Jr. CEO himself. He might as well have said something like this: “Who cares if it destroys you in the process? At least we’ll be rich.”

Are those the kinds of people we want to give money to?

Do we really want the emotional and physical effects that come with the gratification they try to sell us?

Not me. Call me crazy, but I’d like a better deal.

Thankfully, God has one for us.

Chapter 8: Sex from God's Perspective

So, how does God feel about sex? What does He think about all of this?

Well, first of all, it's quite clear that God wants us to know that we are *not* the "sex objects" that pop culture often tries to tell us we are. God has a far better identity for us.

Take a look at a couple of the things God says about you and me:

1. You are a lovingly-created human being with a mind, a heart, a soul, created in the image of God Himself:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

– Genesis 1:27

For you [God] created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful,

I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together...your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

– Psalm 139:14-16

2. You are valuable—worth everything to God:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

– John 3:16

Think about how huge that is! First God points out that you are a work of art, then He shows you how much you're worth.

As anyone in the art world can tell you, the value of any piece of artwork is determined by two main things: (1) who created it, and (2) how much someone will pay for it.

Apply that standard to yourself.

Who created you? God! You can't get much higher than that.

How much did “Someone” pay for you? God paid for you with His Son’s life! He let His one and only Son die a horrible death, and suffer the equivalent of an eternity in hell, in your place so you don’t have to.

That’s how much you’re worth to Him. And what God says, goes. So that’s what you’re worth, period.

Don’t let media networks convince you otherwise. Don’t let them train you to fit their definitions of a “real man” or “real woman.” Live out the identity God has given you. Remember what you’re worth.¹ Act, dress, and live like the valuable person God says you are.

God Created Sex

Secondly, we must remember that God *created* sex.

He doesn’t look down from Heaven each day and say “oh no! What on earth are those humans doing?! What a horrible thing!”

Actually, there is a lot of sex that the Bible says is very much “okay” with God. Look at what God Himself said to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, just after it talks about Him creating them:

God blessed (Adam and Eve) and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

- Genesis 1:28

Did you catch something in that verse by the way? Not only did God create sex, but He also *commanded* Adam and Eve to engage in it! (And people say Christianity is boring.) Sex, in and of itself, is not an evil thing; and it obviously is not a sin...

...as long as we use it as God intended.

Orange Juice and Hair Dryers

Imagine for a moment that you're taking a bath when, all of a sudden, a thought comes to mind: this bath is boring. What you want is a Jacuzzi! Yeah, that's it!

But then the reality of your budget hits you. No way that's gonna happen anytime soon.

Suddenly another idea pops into your head: "I'll just make my own Jacuzzi!" Immediately your eyes scan the bathroom for something—anything—that could successfully trouble the water. Then you see it...right there, within reach even: the hairdryer!

Right?

No?

What about this scenario: let's say you run out of gas on the way home from the grocery store. Oh sure, you've read the car's instruction manual and know what kind of fuel your car was designed for. And you see that there's a gas station within reach.

Yet, something inside you feels adventurous. You live by your own rules.

So, you pop the trunk and look for ideas. Suddenly you see the jug of orange juice you just purchased. "That's close enough," you say to yourself. Into the gas tank it goes!

Yes?

No?

Why not?

I know, I know—because orange juice wasn't bottled to make your vehicle run any more than hairdryers were made to turn bathtubs into Jacuzzi's. Any time a person uses something for a purpose it wasn't created to fulfill, it ruins things (and can even kill the user).

God's Design for Sex

The same principle applies to sex. God created it for a specific use, within specific boundaries. If we try to use

sex outside of what it was designed for, the result will be pain and destruction.

But God doesn't want pain and destruction for us. He tells us what His boundaries are for sex: it is meant only be used between one man and one woman who are in a committed marriage. That's what it was meant for when He invented it. As the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church in a place called Corinth:

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have

received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

- 1 Corinthians 6:13b-20

And in a different letter to an Ephesian church, Paul wrote this:

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.

- Ephesians 5:3

Plus, consider what Jesus Himself said as part of His Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” - Matthew 5:27-30

Clearly, sexual purity is something that God takes very seriously.

But that makes perfect sense if we stop and think about it. Really: how romantic would it be to save that special part of life—that special part of yourself—for the person you marry?

To save it now, to save it even after you meet that person and date him/her, to save it through your dating relationship, and even through your engagement time...

...And then, on your wedding day, to say something like this to the person you marry: “you are the first and only person I will ever give this part of myself to, because I truly loved you enough to save it for you alone.” Can you imagine how romantic and awesome that would be?

Let me tell you: I don't *have to* imagine, and neither does my wife. We both committed to wait until marriage to have sex, and we were both virgins when we exchanged vows.

That's not to say it's always easy to wait (especially in today's culture). But it *is* romantic, it *is* awesome, and it *is* worth it, for so many reasons.

To Name Just a Few...

There's no fear that this person I've given myself to may move on to someone else tomorrow.

There's a confidence and a trust in my relationship with my wife at a level that we couldn't have had apart from keeping ourselves pure until we got married.

Plus it feels *good* to have that purity in our marriage. It's like winning a race you've trained hard for and receiving a prize that no one can ever take away from you.

It's knowing that our relationship is based on a deep, committed love for each other, not a momentary lust for our own gratification.

Best of all, it's wonderful to experience how God has kept this promise in this areas of our lives: "The Lord, the God of Israel declares:...those who honor me, I will honor" (1 Samuel 2:30b). When you honor Him with purity, He will bless you for it! Guaranteed. He will bless that relationship more than you could ever dream.

Too Late?

"But Matt," you may say, "it's too late for me." Not necessarily.

Actually, there are a variety of Christian books available that can counsel you and walk you through the process for whatever your need may be.

Whether you're wishing for a general "second chance", wanting a "second virginity", needing freedom from a pornography addiction, or seeking a healthier marriage, you have but to seek the resources out and partake of them.

I pray you will.

Chapter 9: Relationships from Commercialism's Perspective

Next, let's consider what commercialism often says about relationships in general.

Here, once again, we can easily see corporate TV trying to promote a lifestyle of self-gratification. "Put yourself first; it's all about you!" is what they love to tell us—when, of course, for them it's *actually* "all about" getting your money. They want us to think that we deserve anything we want to buy, then go out and buy it.

But how does that affect the way they often portray relationships in the media? Simple: pop culture often shows us relationships where the "main characters" or the "heroes" put themselves first and, as a result, get to dominate other people or "win" in some way.

King of [My] World!

It goes back to what we looked at a few chapters ago concerning how we can know that media affects us. The mindset goes something like this:

- a. If the “hero” of a song or TV show (whom, of course, “everyone” likes and wants to emulate) acts like that, then *I* want to act like that.
- b. I’m the “hero”/“main character” of my life story, so that’s what I should act like.
- c. Therefore, I’ll put myself first. I deserve to have whatever I want.

We may not consciously think or say it as plainly as that, but that’s essentially what a lot of us live out everyday, isn’t it?

Family “Fun”

With that kind of mindset for a basis, the commercial media often tries to tell us how our relationships should look.

Pop culture likes to tell us that a family relationship is really little more than a constant struggle between wives and husbands. “Over what?” you ask? Big surprise: a

struggle over each family member trying to get what he/she wants.

Perhaps the whole point of an episode would be that the husband snuck out behind his wife's back to "hang out with the guys" when she originally had other plans for them. When his behavior is discovered, the husband and wife then engage in throwing a series of "funny" insults at each other, as if to see who can make the audience laugh harder.

It is "funny" after all...isn't it?

...or is it?

The Damage is Done

Now, true: as I write this, many of the "family" sitcoms I grew up with have been cancelled and replaced with more serious police-type dramas. Nevertheless, those "family" sitcoms still had a good long run over the course of many years, and no doubt had plenty of influence on our American view of what a family is.

Rebels with a (Financial) Cause

Media often also shows us that there's "supposed" to be a constant struggle between children and parents. Over what? Same as usual: trying to get what they want. Commercialism says that kids and teenagers should get

what they want, no matter who tries to stop them or who gets in their way.

Parents do “get in the way” many times, don’t they (supposedly). Not because parents care about their kids or have any wisdom, of course—according to pop culture. It doesn’t necessarily even matter why parents sometimes say “no.” The only thing that a lot of corporations want kids and teens to think about is the item they desire to buy, and the parents that stand between that item and their possession of it.

This ongoing struggle can also sometimes morph into a more general “young people vs. the elderly” conflict, as we’ll look at more in-depth in Chapter 17.

Friendly Insults

Commercialism likes to tell us that, to a considerable degree at least, friendships are also supposed to be about insulting each other and competing with each other over—you guessed it—“getting what you want.” When best friends on a sitcom call each other names like “stupid,” or make fun of each other in what, really, are harsh ways, it’s supposedly funny.

I wonder how many friends I’d have if I did that in real life.

Stuff: A Great Ice Breaker

Oh, and when you try to strike up a conversation with someone—be it friend or relative—“talk about stuff,” pop culture encourages. Be it stuff you have, stuff you recently bought, or stuff you plan to buy next. Talking about material possessions is promoted as a great way to get to know someone.

And, should you want to “hang out” with your friends, the ideal location, commercial corporations want us to believe, is the local mall. Why would we go anywhere else?

Talk about possessions and hang out where you can buy more.

You are what you buy, after all.

Telling Us Who We Are...Again

Speaking of that “identity” concept...

In the process of all of this, the media *is*, certainly, telling us a lot about who *we* are “meant” to be too.

Many times men have been portrayed on sitcoms (and even some other TV shows) as people who care only about sex, as the “dumb” ones, or the “harsh” ones who always

end up needing their wives to forgive them and get them out of a situation.

(The wives usually then get to insult the men, who have no role other than to stand there and look stupid once again).

And, indeed, women do end up being portrayed as the “smart”/correct ones many times on TV. But—at the same time—the implication can sometimes be that that’s a “ball and chain” to be avoided. The women these men have committed their lives to are supposedly keeping the men from truly “enjoying” life by doing whatever the men want.

All the while, the women are, many times, portrayed as sex objects, too (because of how they act and/or dress).

So, let’s review. According to the commercial media, guys are nothing more than stupid people who just think about sex all the time, and women are smart, sex objects that also serve as hindrances to “fun” if you commit your life to one.

How flattering.

...And Why Do They Tell Us These Things?

You know the reason by now: to make money.

If, as a man, I think “who I’m supposed to be” is someone who is constantly interested in sex, then I’ll

purposely look at, and for, sex to be a “real man.” When a sexy ad shows up, I’ll take it in and end up more likely to go buy the product.

Would I ever change or stop to think very deeply about anything? Nah. It’s okay to be “dumb.” According what I saw on TV, that’s part of being a guy.

Ladies, if you begin to think that “who you’re supposed to be” is a sex object, you may find yourself staring at a mirror while never feeling pretty enough. Or perhaps you’d be staring at your closet thinking your clothes aren’t “modern” or “sexy” enough. Perhaps, as a result, you’ll find yourself staring at a big credit card bill after acting on those feelings and buying countless beauty products and outfits.

...Countless products that all promised to make you the person you’re “supposed” to be. Until they tell you that you’re *still* not pretty enough, and you go buy another product, that is.

Kids Will Be Kids...Like Corporations Want Them To

The kids and teens watching may begin to try to imitate the things they see kids and teens doing on TV.

“Oh, that would never happen” some people say. It wouldn’t? Then why, any time you go to see a superhero

movie at the theater, do you see kids kicking and punching each other afterwards?

Let's say kids see other children getting away with all sorts of mischief, and teens see teens being promiscuous and drinking, all of it with *no negative consequences*. In addition to sending the message to young people that “acting like this is part of who you're ‘supposed’ to be”, doesn't that also say that the viewer could potentially do the same things and nothing negative will happen to them either?

Are those the messages we want our youth to listen to?

Some of the things kids and teens are shown doing are by no means “normal!” Just 100 years ago, a lot of it would have been seen as highly shameful to our culture. But today we don't even seem to think twice about it. Disrespecting teachers and disobeying parents is shown to be “funny”, the media tells us. “It's fun to just do whatever you want.”

Are we sure that's true?

“It's All Fun Until Someone Gets Hurt”

All of these perspectives point us toward becoming so self-focused—so *selfish*—that we end up not even noticing

the degree to which we sometimes hurt the people we communicate with.

We don't see it when *we're* the ones who are wrong and *we're* the ones who need someone else's forgiveness. We fall for commercialism's lie that "it's all about me".

Then, when we try to, say, reenact what we saw happen on TV that everyone laughed at, and we say the same "funny" insulting thing to one of our friends, he doesn't laugh because he takes it personally.

Or we get into a fight.

Or, perhaps, he does laugh. The media has, of course, told him that he's "supposed to"—even though my comment actually hurt him deeply.

Yet we go through life wondering why our relationships are so messed up—if we have any good, deep relationships in the first place—and why there's so much "drama" in our church youth groups.

After all, that's not what happened on TV.

Of course it's not. Life isn't scripted like those shows are. Nor should it be. People should be free to feel the emotions God has given them, and learn to appropriately work through them.

Maybe there *is* so much drama and pain, and things aren't working right in our relationships, because we've

fallen for the lies that the media is telling us. Maybe we *are* letting them tell us how to live, without even realizing it. Maybe we *have* bought their lifestyles along with their products, just like they wanted.

Interior Design

There's no way that life is going to work correctly if we do things the way the media tells us to, because they didn't design life. They don't even really care about you or what happens to you, nor do they care about honesty. They'll send you whatever messages they think they have to, just to make money.

That makes me wonder.

I mean, if I'm going to communicate well with someone else, I need to care about the person I'm talking with—at least to some degree. I also need to be honest with him. Yet the media throws those two principles out the window. So why on earth would we let *them* tell us how we should communicate “properly” with others?

I'll take my example from the One Who *did* design life, Who *does* care about me, and Who *is* Truth, thank you very much. Let's see what *He* has to say about relationships.

Chapter 10: Relationships from God's Perspective

What would our relationships look like if they were lived out as God designed them to be? What does God want for us in terms of our acquaintances, friendships and marriages?

Well, whereas the media often tells us to put ourselves first, the Bible encourages us to live with a very different perspective. Consider this passage, from the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian church:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- Philippians 2:3-11, NIV

That's the *complete opposite* of what pop culture tells us, isn't it. Consider also these words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel:

Jesus called (the disciples) together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

- Matthew 20:25-28, NIV

No doubt, pop culture would look at those passages and say “What?! That makes no sense!” Some of us Christians might even think the same. But we must remember that God is the One Who designed life, and it will only work correctly if we follow His instructions.

Besides, have you ever noticed how life goes when we do things pop culture’s way? Does living selfishly make anyone feel truly fulfilled? Does it give any of us a deep, satisfying sense of purpose? No way. (And it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that it certainly won’t bring you very many deep friendships.)

If we want the best in life, we must follow God’s design, as revealed to us in His Bible.

More Specifically...

So, what does God say—more specifically—about each of the relationships we discussed in the last chapter?

As far as the husband-wife relationship, I think a good place to start looking is Genesis 2:18. In context, God has recently created almost everything, including the first man. Yet, God notices a problem:

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" ... So the Lord

God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman, for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

- Genesis 2:18, 20b-24, NIV

I think that's so neat! God lovingly creates the first woman for the first man, and the two are meant to "become one flesh."

Get that! God's original design for marriage was for the husband and wife to have a deep unity, not to be competitors living in the same house. The plan wasn't for them to be constantly trying to see who can "win" and get his/her way against the other person's will. A husband and wife are supposed to be a team. They're supposed to be two people *working together* for a common good, facing the problems of life, and enjoying the happy times, as one.

The New Testament instructs us to live like that too: "Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church

and gave himself up for her to make her holy...Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies” (Ephesians 5:25-26a, 28a).

1 Peter 3:7 even makes the point that if a husband is mistreating his wife, the husband’s prayers will be hindered! Obviously, God wants there to be harmony in marriages.

Marriage is supposed to be a wonderful thing in God’s plan, not a “ball and chain” of some kind. Proverbs 18:22 says that “He who finds a wife finds what is good, and receives favor from the Lord.” Marriage is a special, sacred, amazing blessing from God!

It’s so special, in fact, that God says in Malachi 2:16 that He *hates* divorce.

We must renew our minds about marriage, especially surrounded by today’s commercial culture.

The Child-Parent Relationship

Scripture also has much to say about the relationship between children and parents. The fifth of the Ten Commandments, for example, tells us to “honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you”¹.

Honor them. Not “view them as the enemy.” Not “view them as the obstacle to getting what you want.” Honor them.

And obey them: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord”².

“But what if my parents tell me to do something that goes against what God says to do?” you may ask. In that case, God commands that we follow Him (which can even end up being a good witness to our moms and dads). We are not to disrespect our parents in the process, however.

And we must be sure to use a good measure of maturity with that principle. Assuming that our parents love us (as is usually the case), we can figure that, most of the time, they won’t ask us to do anything harmful or wrong. If in question, we need to ask ourselves: “is what my parents are asking me to do *really* a sin, or am I just trying to use God as a cop-out?”³

R-E-S-P-E-C-T...

The Bible also teaches us to respect people who are older than us, and to listen to them. They have wisdom! They’ve been around much longer than us, had far more experiences than we have, and have learned more than we currently know.

The Bible also instructs us to respect our leaders, whether a teacher, president, office boss, police officer, or whomever applicable. We must remember what Paul teaches us in his letter to the Romans: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.”⁴.

That’s not to say that, in God’s sight, authorities can somehow do whatever they want with no consequences. God keeps them accountable, and will deal with them according to His perfect justice. The point I want us to see, however, is that people aren’t our automatic “enemies” *just because* they’re our teachers or bosses.

And parents aren’t the “enemy” *just because* they are our parents. The Bible makes it clear that God wants families to be in unity, under Jesus.

Good Friends

God also wants us to have good, deep friendships.

Not just a flood of acquaintances where we ask “how are you?”, get the response “I’m fine”, and move on to our next project of the day.

Not lives full of disconnection from other people.

God wants us to have *good, deep* friendships. The Bible says friendship is a very good thing! Check out Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 for example:

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their work.

If one falls down
his friend can help him up.

But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Understand: the part about “two [laying] down together” isn’t necessarily just in reference to sex/marriage (though, certainly, it would include that). It also applies simply to the fact that they didn’t have electric heaters at the time Solomon wrote. So, from his perspective, when it was cold, it was good to have friends to sleep near, so a person could keep warm and stay healthy.

But the main point there is this: friendship is important. It's a good thing. It's something God wants us to have. And, if we don't have any good, deep, godly friendships in which we're free to be ourselves and share our hearts, we can ask God to bring us some. As I can tell you from experience, He will!

Friendship is important.

It's not at all supposed to be what we've seen for so many years on television sit-coms. It's not about constantly putting the other person down through various comments and actions. On the contrary, Ephesians 4:29 tells us “[not to] let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, *but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*”⁵.

Smiling Hearts

Consider Hebrews 10:25 too: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Let us *encourage* one another, the author says.

Don't wait until a loved one's funeral to say nice things about her; tell her today, to her face. There's enough

negativity and discouragement in this world. When there's something you appreciate about someone, tell him.

Building each other up and helping each other grow are important parts of a friendship. Encouragement makes a heart smile. It can even change a life.

Other verses

Consider these other Bible verses about friendships too:

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another
(Proverbs 27:17)

Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others (1 Corinthians 10:24)

Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2)

Confess your sins to each other (James 5:16)

Pray for each other (James 5:16)

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness (1 John 2:9)

[Jesus said], “Love each other as I have loved you”
(John 15:12)

May we all learn to view relationships the way God
wants us to see them.

Chapter 11: Violence from Commercialism's Perspective

Next, let's consider the violence we see in the media. We know it inhabits a well-established corner of our pop culture, but what messages about it does commercialism culture often send us?

Good Guy, Bad Guy

It seems that we Americans like to think that violence is okay as long as the one *doing* the violence is the “good guy”, and the one *receiving* the violence is the “bad guy”.

That's what the media likes to show us, anyway.

I mean, have you ever seen a so-called “blockbuster action movie” on the big screen where the villain sees no harm come whatsoever? Or where the villain is merely arrested without a fight? Or where the villain escapes at the end with no “final battle” scene?

Isn't the whole point of the movie to find out how the hero will defeat (and usually kill) the main malefactor?

Other Types

That's not to say that that's *all* we see as far as violent content goes, though. Let us not forget about the ever-growing list of big-screen thrillers and television dramas. Sometimes, it seems that the idea is "the more gore the better."

Oh, sure, there may not always be a big fight scene finale, but along the way of the main heroes solving a case or surviving a threat, there are plenty of scenes (some of them "flashbacks") with blood and guts for all to see. I can't help but wonder if the "crimes" the heroes solve and experience on such shows, and in such films, actually give certain people ideas of committing similar atrocities in real life.

Then there are today's extremely violent video games, which are becoming increasingly realistic, as technology improvements allow. (And to think Nintendo's "Duck Hunt" was controversial when it was first released back in the 1980s.)

The Impact

Think about all of that violence in light of what we have discussed concerning media's impact on our minds. Drama appeals to our sense of self. In the "movie" of my life, I'm the main hero/character. I seek to identify with the main character I see in that movie I'm watching—including "action"/"slasher" films and TV shows.

The problem is that we can start to lose a healthy perspective of violence in the process of that. We start to fall into a mindset of "I'm always the good guy."

"...And, as such, it's my job to stop the bad guy."

It feels good to be the hero, after all.

But what happens when you live in a world where *everyone* thinks he or she is the hero?

Think About It...

People we commonly call "terrorists" sometimes think they're doing God's work by harming Americans. In their minds, we are the "bad guys."

Yet, in our American minds, "terrorists" are the "bad guys."

So who is correct?

"Well, we're the good guys of course," we may instantly think. But are we sure about that? I wonder what

would happen for us if we took a look at America from the other side of the ocean. What if we walked in a Middle Easterner's shoes for awhile? What would we see when we looked at the USA?

One thing that terrorists from the Middle East apparently think is bad about our culture is how much sex we allow to be in our media. Honestly, I can't say I disagree with them on that point. Can you?

Let's say you, as a civilian doing your best to carry on an everyday life, saw American troops come into town and accidentally hit your house with a bomb, killing your (innocent) family. It surely has happened from time to time—we've heard about it on the news. It was a genuine accident, of course. But that fact doesn't bring your family back in our example.

How would you feel toward us in that circumstance? I can't imagine that I'd have a very favorable picture of Americans in my mind.

Now—please hear me—I'm not *at all* saying that I think Middle Eastern terrorists have it correct and we should all go join them. No way, no how, never! I want to be clear on that.

My point is this: maybe it's not always as simple and clear cut as we'd like to think it is when it comes to

identifying who the “good guys” and the “bad guys” are in real life.

Identifying the “Bad Guys”

When we let commercial corporations lead us through a self-gratification-focused life, we end up so constantly focused on how other people are wronging us that we fail to notice the times when *we’re* the “bad guy”, so to speak. We just notice when someone else is.

“Well, *she’s* the one gossiping about me” we say. That may be true. But tell me this: have *you* ever gossiped about someone else? And, if so, did *you* admit that *you* were wrong to do so at that time?

“But *he’s* the one who cheated to get ahead.” I’m sorry to hear that. At the same time, though, have *you* ever done anything dishonest?

What’s also interesting to me is how Hollywood producers will sometimes use a film or TV show episode to point to someone we’re “supposed” to view as “the bad guys.” Oddly enough—many times—it seems they focus on two groups: politicians and Christians.

(Hm...and what two groups seem to usually struggle against the immoral things the media would like to

promote? Think there's a connection? Like "get the public on our side, using the power we have"?)

At the time of me writing this, for example, I can think of at least two recently released films—and one upcoming—in which Christians are portrayed as mean, miserable, and even *thee* "bad guys" that are necessary to defeat in order to pursue what's "right." How sad!

What's even sadder, however, is when we listen to those producers.

Are You Sure?

But are we really sure that our real-life "enemies" are just like the ones we see on the big and small screens? Are we sure that they do the things that hurt us, just to be "evil" people? That, perhaps, they woke up this morning with the sole purpose of ruining your day and being the "bad guy" in their "movie"?

Don't get me wrong: there are probably people in this world who *do* actually pursue that goal.

Most of us, on the other hand, *are* trying to be good people in society, though (to some extent at least)...aren't we?

We miss that when we're self-gratification motivated. Whenever people are "in the way" between me and what I

want or where I'm going, those people become the "bad guys" in my mind. "It *is* all about me," of course, and they're interfering with that.

Since—in my mind—they're (a) the bad guy and (b) in my way, I end up thinking that it's okay to do whatever I need to in order to get them out of my way. That's what I see on TV for four hours a day. So that's what I'll do.

From Desensitized to Destructive

What we get as a result ranges from arguments to murder. "Real-life stories are plentiful," says Teen Mania Ministries' President Ron Luce in his book *Battle Cry for a Generation*¹:

In November 2002, an Ohio girl was beaten to death by a 15-year-old boy with one of the posts from the victim's bed. (Investigators later discovered that the boy's favorite way to kill in the video game Grand Theft Auto was to use a baseball bat). The boy then stole her car, as players do in the game. Witnesses say the murderer played the game for hours, turning into a "zombie" when he played.

Remember what we discussed in chapter 4 about the nature of TV watching as it relates to the media's impact on us? People's minds go into a passive and highly suggestible pre-hypnotic state when they watch TV. (Sounds kind of like being a "zombie" to me.) How sad that the results of that can look like the story we just read.

Here's another one:

In Michigan, during the Christmas season of 2003, witnesses say three Grand Theft Auto 3 devotees played the game for hours, then hopped into their car and purposely ran over a man they didn't know (as players do in the game), went to breakfast, came back and stomped him into a coma (as players do in the game), and then went home and played the game some more.

And another one:

On January 31, 2003, police in Oakland, California arrested a group of young men, known as the "Nut Case" gang, for dozens of car jackings, robberies, and murders. Police say they were using Grand Theft Auto 3 to train for these crimes and to get fired up to do them. Said one

perpetrator: “We played the game by day and lived the game by night.”

And another:

In Ft. Lauderdale, Florida on February 10, 2002, 17-year-old Gorman Roberts was accused of pushing 5-year-old Jordan Payne into a canal and letting him drown. Roberts walked away laughing and told police later that he, Payne, and a third child had watched a World Wrestling Entertainment program featuring The Rock three days before the incident. Roberts’ attorney, Ellis Rubin, said, “Little boys imitate what they see on television. If they hadn’t been watching wrestling, none of this might have happened”

And on and on it goes.

Let us also not forget about the tragic events in 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado, where two students went on a shooting rampage before turning the guns on themselves. It was later discovered that the two students had enjoyed playing the violent video game *Doom* and watching films like *The Matrix*—which they obviously

mimicked by donning the long, dark trench coats they wore.

I can't help but cringe a little bit whenever I'm at a movie theater where the latest superhero movie is playing and I see children "play fighting" as they walk out of having just seen it.

I admit, I used to do the same thing. I wanted to be "cool" like the hero in the movie I just watched. And, in my young mind, the main thing that defined him as a hero was that he beat up the bad guys in such a cool way.

Maybe that's why it concerns me today.

What is Happening Here?

What is all of this violence in the media doing to the current generation of teenagers and young adults?

And for what purpose?

So corporations can make money? It breaks my heart!

"That is sad, Matt," you may say, "but not everyone is going to go out and do something as drastic as those stories you shared." I hope that's true.

At the same time, though—even though most of us won't go out and cause physical harm to someone else as a result of the violence we watch—we must remember that

violence in the media does still affect our behavior in other ways.

Like when someone is “in your way” as we discussed earlier. You may not beat them up, but do you lash out in other ways? Do you lose your temper? Yell at them? Use *verbal* violence?

I’m sure none of us is guilty of road rage (even if only “internal”), right?

Yeah...right.

Change, Please

How can we *not* think that the violence in the media affects us? I, for one, have seen and experienced far too much to think otherwise.

The question in my mind now is simply this: when will we step up and do something practical to change things? When will we take Romans 12:2 so seriously that we not only read it, but live it out, so that positive change can follow?

Chapter 12: Violence from God's Perspective

Remember the story of Noah's Ark, from Genesis 6-9? Not long after creating the world, God decides to bring a major flood upon the earth in order to "put an end to all people...

"...because", as God says, "the earth is filled with *violence* because of them."¹

Wow. Does God really dislike violence *that much*?

According to Psalm 11:15 He doesn't just "dislike" it, He *hates* it: "The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates."

Speaking of people who are "wicked," check out what Psalm 73:6 says about them: "pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence."

Proverbs 3:31-32 advises us against following in their footsteps: "Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his

ways, for the Lord detests a perverse man but takes the upright into his confidence.”

Consider these other verses too (emphasis mine on each one):

This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. *Do no wrong or violence* to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

- Jeremiah 22:3

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and *I hate a man's covering himself with violence* as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

- Malachi 2:16

Since an overseer [in the church] is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, *not violent*, not pursuing dishonest gain.

- Titus 1:7

The psalmist even asks God for His protection from violence (which we can do, too):

Rescue me, O LORD, from evil men; protect me from men of violence

- Psalm 140:1

Clearly, violence is not okay with God.

Seeing Through God's Eyes

It seems to me that the reason He doesn't like it is that violence goes against the value He has given to human beings. As we mentioned a few chapters ago, *every* human being on this planet was (a) lovingly created by God, (b) created in His image, and (c) bought with His one and only Son's perfect life. What an amazing value God has given each of us!

And what a tragedy when we don't realize that *every* human being has that value—even those who hurt us and act in some very evil ways. We must remember that, in God's sight, those are still God-created human beings with thoughts, feelings, a soul that needs to be saved, and the same value put on them by God that He put on us.

The Bible makes it very clear that God wants us to understand that. Look at what Jesus says to us in Matthew 5, for example:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- Matthew 5:43-48

Can't get much clearer than that, can you? “*Pray* for your enemies” Jesus says; *care* about them; “love them” like God does. Learn to see them through God's eyes. Learn to love them like God does. And when they *still* do things that hurt you, Jesus has a solution for that too: forgive them.

Forgiveness isn't about saying that the harmful things someone did to you was somehow “right” or “okay.” Nor

is it saying that you shouldn't learn from it and, perhaps, seek healthy ways of avoiding hurtful situations in the future.

But forgiveness *is* about leaving what that person did with God. It's about letting go of it in your heart and not letting bitterness consume you. It's about giving up your right to get revenge.

Difficult, but not impossible

Is it difficult to forgive like that? For some of us, absolutely! (Me included.)

But is it impossible? Jesus doesn't think so. He's the one who commanded us to do it:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him [millions of dollars] was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the

master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him [a few dollars]. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

- Matthew 18:21-35

Paul echoes the lesson here in his letter to the Colossian Christians, too:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

- Colossians 3:12-14

Are you having trouble forgiving someone else? The Bible commands us to remember how much Someone else has forgiven us. When we keep that perspective, it’ll be easier to forgive the hurtful things other people do to us, and to experience a freedom from God that won’t come to us any other way.

And if we still need help, God will help us. We have but to ask Him.

Who knows—we may even begin to see our “enemies” as fellow hurting human beings as we take the time to understand their pasts and *why* they behave the way they do.

Maybe we’ll even find that—sometimes—they don’t even mean to hurt us as deeply as they do.

A God of Justice

“But Matt,” you may ask, “what about all of the violence in the Bible? What about the wars and the punishments and all of that?”

A valid point there. We do need to remember that, while God is certainly a God of forgiveness and love, He is also a God of justice. And, while it is clear that He doesn’t like violence, He does show us that it is sometimes *necessary* to stop evil.

Reflect on what the Bible says in Romans 13:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

- Romans 13:1-5

Now, yes, there's the question of "what if the authorities don't obey God?" It seems that, in His justice, He gives them time to repent. If they refuse to do so, however, it's clear that He will remove them from the positions He's given them, and they will face the consequences of their actions.

My main point in bringing up this passage, however, is to point out God's "justice" side. God *is* a God of justice.

His Job, Not Ours

At the same time, we must remember that it is God's job to carry out that justice, not ours. Though, true, He sometimes carries it out through people and the

government, we should remember that—as Romans 13 suggests—only those people whom God selects to be His instruments of justice should be doing the “punishing” (and *that* within God’s boundaries for it).

And should “justice” come to an enemy of ours, we should note what the Bible says in Proverbs 24:

Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him.

- Proverbs 24:17-18

Conclusion

So, if we put all of this together and boil it down to a couple of key points, here’s what I see:

- a. God doesn’t like violence
- b. We can ask Him to protect us from it
- c. Sometimes violence is necessary to stop evil.
- d. We should never enjoy violence
- e. We should avoid it as much as possible.

...That is, we should avoid *doing* it, and avoid putting it into our minds.

Chapter 13: Our Pace in Life from Commercialism's Perspective

“HURRY UP!!!”

Have you ever found yourself saying those words to someone else?

...Or had someone emphatically say them to *you*?

“Of course,” you may say (and I wouldn't be surprised if you did!). Life just tends to move at a pretty fast pace these days.

A recent study even found that “pedestrians are upping their pace at an alarming rate as they scurry from place to place, determined to cram as much as possible into each day.”¹ The article reporting about it goes on to point out that our current pace in life moves about 10 percent faster than it did in 1994—just 13 years ago!

Their diagnosis of the reason? Said Richard Wiseman, a professor of psychology at the University of Hertfordshire who helped conduct the research:

We just have this feeling that we should be producing and active all of the time. That is fueled by the e-mail, text, mobile phone culture. But there has to be an upper limit, because if this trend continues, we will be arriving places before we have set off.¹

A great point there. Many of the “cool” inventions we enjoy today have enabled us to do more, and go faster, than ever before.

Take cell phones, for example. Whereas once we had to speak with someone in person, or at least stay in one place while we spoke with them on the phone, now we have no such restrictions. Now we can talk with friends, do business, agree to be places, and even access the internet anywhere, anytime.

We can even do it while we’re driving in our cars, eating our drive-thru meal, with our portable MP3 player blasting fast music in the background.

What's the Hurry?

We seem almost obsessed with going as fast as we possibly can through each 24 hours.

But why? So we can “get more done”? What’s the hurry?

Why has a fast pace in life become so normal to us that we *do* say “of course” to questions like the ones I opened this chapter with?

Why does the media even *encourage* us to “live life in the fast lane” in the movies and advertisements we see, constantly promoting new gadgets to help people continue to be “on the go”?

Time is Money

And why on earth do we live like that’s a “normal” way of life? Australian people I’ve chatted with don’t think it is. (Oddly enough, Australia was one country that was *not* mentioned in the study as upping their pace.) They look at Americans and think we’re crazy for rushing around and overworking like we do.

I can’t say I disagree with their observation.

We rarely hear the message to “slow down” in the media. Instead, we’re told things like “time is money.”

And make no mistake: that *is* commercialism's reason for telling us to keep a fast pace in life: it makes them money.

It's not difficult to see that. Imagine for a moment that you work at the checkout stand of a store. The faster you work, the more customers you wait on. The more customers you wait on, the more money the store makes.

But, at the same time, you, as a worker, are getting paid too, right? And the more money you make, the more money you have for corporations to take from you. So—for that reason too—they tell us to move fast in life, because the faster we go, the more money we're likely to spend.

"I Just Don't Have Time"

What do I mean? It looks like this:

"Well, I just don't have time to go home and prepare a meal to eat, so I'll zip through the drive-thru instead."

"I don't have the time or the energy to clean every week, so I'll buy an electronic gizmo to do it for me."

“It’s such a [time-consuming] hassle to _____
(fill in the blank), so instead I’ll buy something to make
that easier.”

It’s that simple. The faster we try to go in life, the more
we end up buying to make it happen. *So spend your money
fast*, ads like to tell us: “Hurry up! Sale ends Saturday at
midnight!”

“Instant” Gratification

...Which goes with what we’ve talked about before
concerning gratification vs. satisfaction. Corporations
hardly ever encourage us to slow down and think about
anything too deeply, because they know that if we were to
do so we might not buy products that we really don’t need.
We might even actually discover where true satisfaction is
found.

So, instead, commercials often encourage us to keep the
pace of our lives amplified up and to “keep moving,”
looking ahead to the next thing we want to buy. “We are
what we buy” after all (supposedly). So I guess we’d better
hurry up and go as fast as we can.

If someone takes too long or makes us wait in a line,
shame on them! *The nerve!--making me wait!* Before

long, we find ourselves calling people names because they don't go fast enough.

We also may find ourselves weaving around cars on the freeway (or even just a city street) just so we can keep going faster and faster. Nevermind that the same car I "had to" pass 3 miles ago (because, after all, he *was* going the speed limit) just rolled up next to me at the stoplight I'm now sitting at.. Nevermind that there really was no point in all of the effort I put into dodging other vehicles and speeding a few minutes ago, because it's come out the same now as if I had just gone the speed limit.

Nevermind...because I don't have time to notice. I have to keep going as fast as I can. Even if it's pointless to do so.

Speed Limits

What are we getting for all of our rushing around? What's the payoff for us? Sure, we may get a few more things accomplished in a day. But have we considered the cost of "living life in the fast lane" 24/7?

For one thing, speeding through life hurts our relationships. How can you ever really connect with another person if you're always in a hurry? How can you get to know him if you never take any time to listen to him

for more than a few seconds? How can she get to know you if you never take the time to share your heart with her?

True, there's no gratification in listening to other people, because to listen we have to *give* them some of our attention and our time. But where is the enjoyment in life if all that other people are to me are “obstacles” between me and “what's next”?

Experiencing Now, During Now

And where's the enjoyment in life if I'm always so focused on “what's next” that I never experience the here and now? Speeding through life takes that away from you too, you know. It makes life experiences very shallow.

Imagine that you're going for a walk along the beach. A slow walk. You hear the seagulls, feel the sand as it moves beneath your feet, feel the cool, misty ocean air on your face. You look out toward the horizon and even notice some sea life—perhaps an otter, a crab, or even a whale in the distance. But your focus quickly turns to the beautiful sunset beyond all of that as it lights up the clouds and sinks out of view.

If you're someone who likes the beach, that's a pretty nice thought.

Now imagine that you're at the same beach, but you're in a car. Imagine that your only thought goes something like this: "I have to get to the other end of the beach as fast as I can!" So you do. You floor it! You pass the usual stuff...sand and water. "Big deal." And, indeed, you beat the people who are walking to the other end of that particular beach by half an hour!

But I ask you: who enjoyed the beach more? By rushing, you missed a lot—a lot that no photograph you look at later could compare to.

Running From One Thing to the Next

Speed can also lessen our creativity. Whether you're running from one homework assignment to the next or you're rushing to complete a task at work only to begin another one, hurrying can make it difficult to "get into" any projects you undertake.

Don't get me wrong: that's not completely our fault. School assignments and work projects have deadlines that can sometimes make it very difficult (if not impossible) to spend quality time working on them, and getting much out of them, in the process of completing the assignments.

But, when we do have the opportunity to really invest in a project we undertake, why not seize it? A song that is

written, a painting that is painted, or a story that is penned in haste just won't have as much heart in it as one that has been deeply contemplated over some time. Why "get more done" at the expense of missing meaningful life experiences?

The Bigger Picture

How many of the things that we do every day are really going to matter that much in 100 years anyway?

We need to ask ourselves questions like that, and think deeply about things.

We need to ask ourselves questions like these:

"Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?"

"Does it have something to do with God?"

"Who *is* God? What is He like?"

"Is there more to my life than the things I buy?"

Questions like those are powerful, and possibly even the reason that the media doesn't want us to slow down. If we start asking big questions, we may find big, satisfying answers. If we find satisfaction, we'll stop living for gratification. If we stop living for gratification, we won't spend so much money on things that don't matter.

All the Time You Need

“But I don’t have time to slow down and find the answers to those questions,” we say. Sure we do. You and I have 24 hours each day to use however we decide to use them. Many times we just *choose* not to take time for things that really matter. As a result, we end up so disconnected from life that we don’t even know ourselves or what our purpose in life is.

Ironically...

Speeding through life also damages our health, ironically.

I say “ironically” because if we spend so much time and effort rushing through life “to get more done” that we burnout, we’ll end up so ill that we can’t do *anything at all*. I know because it happened to me.

A few years ago, my schedule was the definition of “busy”: a part-time job took up most of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, college classes saturated my Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the remaining time was filled with church activities and band practices—all by choice on my part.

That lasted for a few months. Then God, and my body, both said “enough!”, and I began to feel ill with odd symptoms.

A number of visits to the doctor and at least one blood test later, the diagnosis seemed obvious enough: I had developed an anxiety problem and burned myself out.

One visit to my pastor for counseling later, the foundation of my issues surfaced: I had fallen for the media’s lies.

Whenever someone approached me to undertake a new project or teach a new class, the word “no” was like forbidden speech in my mind. I was so engaged in trying to earn my value as a human being, and to earn people’s love, by the things I did that I kept doing things until I couldn’t do them at all.

It was then that I found out who my true friends were: the ones who loved me for who I was the whole time, and who were never really fooled by my “I’m a perfect Superman” act. It was also then that my pastor shared the “art” illustration with me that I described back in Chapter 8, and I realized where my value truly came from: God.

Emotional Health

Speaking of our emotional and psychological health, think about how else speeding through life might damage us. If we lose a loved one, for example, but we don't give ourselves the needed time to grieve and process that properly, how could that *not* cause us increasing mental problems, the longer we failed to work through it.

Yet, in our culture, how much time do we often get to do that before we have to get back to our jobs? A week at the most? Clearly, we need to take that time elsewhere.

We need to slow down.

Or Worse...

Back to my own story, consider this too: my symptoms were mild compared to what stress could have done to me.

Just ask a doctor. Stress can cause everything from constrictions in our chests to stomach problems, insomnia, high blood pressure, and heart problems. One research team even discovered recently that “the stress hormone epinephrine causes changes to breast and prostate cancer cells”, meaning that ““emotional stress may contribute to the development of cancer and may also reduce the effectiveness of cancer treatments””².

And—as it was for me—stress can even be addictive in a way. When we’re rushing around, it gets our adrenaline pumping and gives us a kind of “buzz.” It feels good to wear ourselves out and feel like we’re accomplishing a ton of things, even if we’re really not. It feels good...sort of.

That is, it feels good until it feels like we *can't* slow down, and we end up like I did.

You may know the feeling. You’ll be sitting in a meeting or a classroom and it’s almost as if there’s some frustrated “person” inside you who is dying to explode out of your seat and run off to a marathon.

Honestly, that’s a scary thing. Have you and I really lost our ability to be “all here” to that degree? Maybe you’re even sitting there right now, trying to read this book with your mind somewhere else. Maybe you’re thinking about all the things you still have to do before you go to sleep tonight, or the “next big thing” you’re going to do tomorrow.

If so, God has the same two small words for you that He often has to say to me.

...But you’ll have to “wait” until the next chapter to read about them in this book.

Chapter 14: Our Pace in Life from God's Perspective

“Be still!”

I think those are two very important words, straight out of the Bible¹, that God is still saying to us today.

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

Consider this quote from Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God Bible Study*:

We are a “doing” people. We always want to be doing something. Once in awhile someone will say, “Don't just stand there, do something.” I think God is crying out and shouting to us, “Don't just do something. Stand there! Enter into a love relationship with Me. Get to know Me. Adjust your life to Me. Let Me love you and reveal Myself to you as I work through you.” A time will come when the doing will be called for, but we cannot skip the relationship with God. The relationship with God must come first.²

Blackaby has hit the nail on the head there! If we'll just get that—if we'll just take, say, 30-60 minutes a day to “be still” and develop our personal relationships with God—we'll find everything that we've been looking for by rushing around, anyway!

Peace Beyond Our Understanding

One of my friends, who is in ministry, amazes me. Not only does he do all the duties of his job as head pastor of a church (and do it very well), but he also takes care of his three children—two of which are deaf and require a little bit of extra help and attention.

That doesn't stop them, however. They're still active in sports and the arts, requiring my friend to attend numerous soccer games and various events.

Oh, and did I mention that he's a single dad?

Yet my friend does it all with an obvious peace in his heart.

I once asked him how on earth he does it. His answer was simple: “I don't miss my daily time with God.”

Over time, I've found the same to be true in my life. Sure, my situation in life isn't the same as that of my friend, but the principle operates the same. Whatever my

day may demand of me, it's in my daily alone time with God that I find the strength, guidance, wisdom and peace that I need to face those demands.

God promises to give those things to us if we let Him, you know:

[Jesus said,] “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

- Matthew 11:28

[Jesus said,] “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

– John 14:27

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your mind in Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 4:6-7

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be

given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt.

– James 1:5-6a

We have but to “be still” and spend some time with God.

Hang Out with God

What does that daily time with God look like? It’s fairly simple, actually. It has two main parts: prayer and Bible reading, ideally in a quiet place that is free from distractions.

And, really, that “quiet time” is just a conversation with God. It’s “hang out” time with God where I develop my personal relationship with Him. Through prayer, I talk to God (respectfully and reverently, of course) about *anything* that’s on my heart, as though I’m talking to the loving Father that He truly is. If I’m frustrated, I don’t have to hide it. If I’m happy, I can share that with Him. If I need to cry, He’s there to comfort me.

Through the Bible, He talks to me. Some days I read passages that seem like God just handed me a note that He hand-wrote just for me, specifically about the problem I

was dealing with at that very moment! I have no doubt that you can experience the same as you get into the Bible too.

Through spending time together, God and I grow closer in our relationship. It's a beautiful thing, and it's what being a Christian is all about!

Jesus Himself made that clear in one of His prayers just before He was arrested: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”³. In the original Greek, the word that has been translated into English as “know” there implies a deep, intimate knowledge.

It's not about going through the spiritual motions. It's not even about memorizing the entire Bible. It's about getting to know the God Who wrote it all down for us, and living every moment of every day with Him by our side.

Missing A Lot

If we're constantly rushing around, however, we miss that relationship—the most important relationship we could ever have: our relationship with Him!

We also miss the deeper experiences of the precious life that He's given to each of us.

And we waste a whole lot of time doing things that don't really matter from an eternal perspective.

(But, after all, how could God do the amazing things that He wants to do through us if we never let Him have any time in our schedules?)

Balance

That's not to say that there aren't certain things in life that are urgent. Of course there are. Sharing the Gospel with people is one of them. But if we're *always* rushing around, *always* doing more than God intended for us to do in one day, and we end up ill from burnout, we won't exactly be out there helping anyone at all, will we.

Remember: taking time to "be still" with God doesn't mean that we just sit around all day and do nothing. It just means that we keep a proper balance in our lives, giving priority to where it should be: our relationship with God. As a result, we'll experience a flood of blessings that come with that.

Besides, when we slow down for that time with God, He'll help us know what to spend our time on and what not to bother with. We'll end up accomplishing *more* things that truly matter in the long run with His help than we would have without it. (I've experienced that principle time and time again in my own life, and I can't explain it any other way.)

Plus, our life experiences will be deeper along the way.
“Be still, and know that I am God.”

Don't Worry!

“And”, I think God is also saying to us today, “don't worry.” Check out Jesus' words from Matthew 6:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?...So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

- Matthew 6:25-27, 31-33

I love that passage. If we'll just give God first place in our lives and get into that relationship with Him, He promises to take care of our every need. Trust Him.

Peter assures us that God wants us to “cast all [our] anxiety on him because he cares for [us].”⁴

What precious promises we find in His Word! We have but to put them into practice.

Vertical and Horizontal

Not only is it clear that God want us to spend time with Him, but He also wants us to have good, deep relationships with other people. The first thing mentioned in the Bible that was “not good” was that Adam was alone.⁵ So God created Eve. Similarly, we need like-minded friends that we can share our hearts with and listen to.

Every so often, it hits me in a huge way just how blessed I am to be married to my wife. That's not to say that we never have disagreements or struggles, of course. But there are times when I think about her, or stare at her, and think, “Wow! God entrusted *me* with this relationship. God entrusted *me* with spending the rest of my life getting to know and love this beautiful, complex person more each day.” What a privilege!

That applies to any relationship, too. If you have friends of any kind, you are blessed. Don't take that for granted. And—please!—don't go so fast in life that your relationships never deepen.

If you have three voicemails on your cell phone to call three different friends back, don't fall into that "I have to hurry up" mindset of returning their calls simply to get the task out of the way.

If you have children who long to spend some time playing with you, don't see it as an interruption. Slow down. Make some time for them.

Be "all there" with each person you talk to. Your relationships with people that you care about are treasures from God. Don't miss them.

Should you need some friends, you have but to ask God to meet that need. He will, just like He did for me. Back when I burned out, one thing that my pastor and I found was that I didn't have very many (if any) good, deep relationships. So, he prayed for God to bring me some. Shortly thereafter, I met a few people who have since become some of my best friends, and I praise God for it.

Time and Effort

Though, true: the process of becoming the person God wants us to be takes some time and effort on our parts—which may not be easy for some of us at first. Keeping a fast pace in life can condition us to live for convenience. Before we know it, we're so used to things being made easy and handed to us that when we try something new and it doesn't work on the first attempt, we give up.

But God never said the worthwhile things in life would be easy. He does, however, encourage us not to give up.⁶ And one of the “fruits” of the Holy Spirit that He wants to develop in us is “patience”.⁷

All in Good Time

The Bible tells us that “there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.”⁸ There is a time to work and a time to rest. There's a time to be noisy and jump around, and a time to sit quietly and just listen.

I pray we'll remember that, and “be still” long enough to partake of all the blessings God has for us in life.

Chapter 15: Food from Commercialism’s Perspective

Next let’s consider what commercialism often tells us about food.

“Food?” you may wonder. Absolutely! Have you ever noticed just how many ads that we see are devoted to food?

One recent news article reported that “Children ages 8-12 see the most food ads on TV—an average of 21 a day, or 7,600 a year.”¹ That’s a lot of ads!

Whether for fast food, soda, beer, or a sit-down Italian restaurant, the media is constantly sending us messages about what we eat and drink.

Would You Like Gratification with That?

And, certainly, along commercialism’s often-promoted lines of gratification, food fits well. Advertisements tell us to “eat food that tastes good, and food that makes you feel good”—at least for the moment you’re eating it. Maybe

that's one reason why so many diets are abandoned: we're too psychologically programmed to eat things that are terrible for us without thought of consequences.

They don't spend much time trying to manipulate us into buying things like carrots, potatoes, or broccoli, do they. Usually it's quite the opposite. They tell us that foods like those are boring. "Healthy stuff," they remind us, "doesn't taste good. So don't eat that. Gratify yourself with something that tastes good!"

The news article I mentioned earlier noticed that trend. As they report: "more than 40 percent of the dishes [advertised to children] are candy, snacks and fast food. Nowhere to be found: fresh fruit, vegetables, poultry or seafood."

Our "Friends"

And—make no mistake—the manipulation attempts do begin when we're children. To help us see how much glee junk foods supposedly bring with them, companies often accompany their products with free toys for kids, amazingly cheap prices (for the parents), and even colorful cartoon characters that we grow up thinking are our "friends."

Just like in other areas of advertising, food marketers use psychology to try to get us hooked at an early age so their logos and products register in our minds as “happy memories.” In fact, “American companies spend about \$15 billion a year marketing and advertising to children under age 12.”² The reasoning goes like this: if corporations can hook Americans at an early age, Americans will stay loyal to those corporations (and keep giving them our money) throughout our lives.

They don’t think parents will mind, however. The line of thinking that advertisers present to adults goes like this: “It’s so difficult to get your kids to eat anything, isn’t it. Your kids want our product though! Just buy it and your life will be easier.”

Lest we think their fast food or sugary products are unhealthy for our kids, they reassure us that, amidst all of the sugar and unhealthy stuff, are vitamins and “good choices.” No need to feel guilty. They’re just making life “easier”—easier as far as effort and schedule go, and easier as far as relationships with your kids go.

After all, marketers not only show kids what to buy, they teach kids how to nag their parents for those items. So, they present us a simple solution: buy our products.

Kids will eat it, stop nagging you for it, and you can get on with your life.

It's almost like blackmail, don't you think?

True Colors

Advertisers don't *only* target kids, of course. They're out to get all of us to spend money on their food products. There are plenty of ads on billboards and television that show teens and adults having a fun time at various restaurants, or accomplishing important daily tasks as they eat convenient "on the go" items.

Even the signs and logos that fast food companies display are created with tact behind them. There's a whole psychology behind colors, for example. Simply put, research shows that different colors have different psychological effects on us. Some colors can help us feel calm while others make us feel annoyed. Some lead us to being more productive, others aid us in feeling lethargic.

Now, let me ask you this: which two colors do you see most often in fast food logos? If you said "yellow and red", good job! Know why that is? Yellow gets our attention, and red—psychology tells us—stimulates our appetites.

In fact, can you think of any fast food restaurants that *don't* have at least one of those two colors in their logos?

Me neither.

That's not a coincidence. It is, however, one more way they attempt to manipulate us into buying their products, and to bury the "eat for gratification" mindset a little deeper inside our thinking. Once that happens, if we're not careful, that mindset can affect *how* we eat and *what* we eat in some scary ways.

Don't Miss a Crumb!

Commercials often tell us to eat like animals. They show us people cramming hamburgers into their mouths, dripping sauces and ketchup all over the place. They encourage us to eat as fast as we can, pairing their ideas of food with the pace in life they often try to promote. "Don't have time for a meal? Get new [whatever] on the go!"

Oh, and—while you're eating way too much, way too fast—they also like to tell us to eat alone. Life is "all about us", they say, and if we happen to eat around someone else (like friends or family), we may be asked to share. Should we decide to do so, such giving of ourselves could hurt commercialism's attempts at conditioning us into constant

self-gratifiers. So, they encourage us to protect our food by eating alone.

Eat a lot, eat fast, eat alone.

You Are What You Eat

Then there's *what* they tell us to eat. If our only aim is to eat “fun” things that “taste good” and gratify us, we may overlook some important things that we need to remember.

For one thing: have you ever noticed how much sugar we tend to eat in any given day? Whether in soda, ice cream, candy bars, breakfast cereal, fast food, or coffee, it can add up quickly. Is that good for us?

Not to mention those food items in and of themselves. Some people drink so much soda that it seems like they could sustain a corporation's budget by themselves. Other people eat fast food almost once a day (if not more), filling their bodies with food that—many times—shouldn't even be classified as “real.”

According to Eric Schlosser, author of the book *Fast Food Nation*, there are parts from roughly 1,000, or even “thousands”, of different cattle from around the world in one average fast food hamburger.³ 1,000 or more! That's disgusting.

What's worse is that—to save the fast food corporations money—those animals are often raised in horrible conditions and slaughtered in less-than spotless environments. (I won't go into detail about that here, but the info is easy to find if you'd care to do more research on it.)

Plus, when a fast food restaurant begins to advertise their, say, chicken nuggets as “now made with real chicken” (as I've seen happen), doesn't that make you wonder what you've been eating all these years *before* they made them with “real chicken?”

And what about fast food from any given restaurant that tastes *exactly* the same no matter where you purchase it? If every fry and every burger from a chain tastes exactly the same in California as it does in Ecuador and China, shouldn't that concern us? Real, natural food doesn't behave that way.

Unless, I suppose, it's so pumped full of chemicals that it almost ceases to be able to be labeled as “real food.”

Sodium Benzo-what?!

Don't get me wrong: I'm by no means a trained dietician. But aren't some things just common sense?

I can remember my high school chemistry teacher telling us not to bring food to class so as to avoid contaminating anything we might eat with a chemical that could harm us. (Sounded like good advice to me.) Yet, everyday, we eat and drink tons of chemicals that most of us can barely pronounce the names of.

I wonder just how many chemicals can legally be added to American food, and what effects those chemicals are having on our bodies in the seemingly infinite number of combinations that are possible as we eat different foods throughout our days.

What *are* those “ingredients”, anyway?

Let’s do some research. I looked at the ingredients from three randomly chosen, differently flavored sodas, just to see what chemicals they contained.

One chemical that was listed in the ingredients for all three sodas was something called “sodium benzoate,” a chemical which, as I found, is used as a preservative. It is, however, also poisonous—which is why “the concentration is limited by law to 0.1%”⁴. And—get this!—it is also commonly used as a fuel in whistling fireworks. (Makes you want a soda just thinking about it, doesn’t it.)

Wait—it gets worse. According to [reference.com](#),

In combination with ascorbic acid (vitamin C, E300), sodium and potassium benzoate may form benzene, a known carcinogen. Heat, light and shelf life can affect the rate benzene is formed. The Food and Drug Administration is currently (as of March 2006) performing tests to verify the validity of this claim.

Professor Peter Piper of Sheffield University claims that sodium benzoate by itself can damage and inactivate vital parts of DNA in a cell's mitochondria. "The mitochondria consumes the oxygen to give you energy and if you damage it—as happens in a number of diseased states—the cell starts to malfunction very seriously. And there is a whole array of diseases that are now being tied to damage to this DNA—Parkinson's and quite a lot of neuro-degenerative diseases, but above all the whole process of aging."⁴

Yum. Anyone out there thirsty yet?

Oh, Come on...

I know what some of you are thinking. "Come on, Matt. We have rules for food in America. They wouldn't let people sell us anything that could harm us." Maybe not

on purpose, no. But there are only so many people available to check so many products. Consider what a recent news article reported about some of the foods that are imported into the U.S.:

Billions of dollars' worth of foreign ingredients that Americans eat in everything from salad dressing to ice cream get a pass from overwhelmed inspectors, despite a rising tide of imports from countries with spotty records, according to an Associated Press analysis of federal trade and food data.”

The article goes on to report that “when U.S. Food and Drug Administration inspectors at ports and border checkpoints look, they find shipments that are filthy or otherwise contaminated. They rarely bother [to do anything about it], however, in part because ingredients aren't a priority.” One former FDA worker was even quoted as saying that working on ingredients was “the lowest priority.”

As a result, the article also points out, it's left up to us—the consumers—to be wise about what we eat.⁵

From Dangerous to Disgusting

Speaking of imported ingredients, consider the chemical “carmine.”

Carmine is used to give foods and drinks a bright red color. I’ve found it included in things like grapefruit juice and yogurt, for example.

There’s nothing necessarily dangerous about consuming it. But let me ask you this: how many of you like to eat bugs?

(I can see some of you thinking of skipping ahead right now, anticipating where I’m going with this.)

If you’re like me, and don’t particularly have very deep cravings to dine on insects, you might consider avoiding carmine. As reference.com reports,

Carmine may be prepared from cochineal, by boiling dried insects in water to extract the carminic acid and then treating the clear solution with [various chemicals]...the coloring and animal matters present in the liquid are thus precipitated. Other methods are in use; sometimes egg white, fish glue, or gelatin are added before the precipitation.

Oh, and “good carmine,” the website also tells us, “should crumble readily between the fingers when dry.”⁶

One word: *yuck!*

Choose Wisely

Carmine and Sodium Benzoate are just two out of thousands of different ingredients that companies add to our foods every day. Ingredients which, by the way, aren’t even there for any nutritional reason. They’re just preservatives, colors, and fake flavors, added to make the food more attractive so you and I will buy it.

Pop culture doesn’t want us to think about that, of course. According to commercialism, we should just eat what tastes good and gratifies us. Don’t worry about what it’s made of.

I wonder how many pounds of odd chemicals we consume each year by “not thinking about it.”

And I wonder how many of us even really *want* to consume them. Those are chemicals after all, right?

Let’s see what God’s definition of a “good meal deal” is.

Chapter 16: Food from God's Perspective

The main Bible passage that comes to mind for me, as applying to the topic of food, is 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. True, in context the passage is specifically addressing sexual sin. But I think we can apply it here as well. Check it out:

Do you not know that your body [if you're a Christian] is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, NIV

We need to remember that our bodies are precious gifts from God. For Christians, they're where His Holy Spirit lives! And God wants us to take care of our bodies so we can use them in service to Him.

Now think of that in terms of food and nutrition. God made our bodies to need things like fruits, vegetables, vitamins, and a considerable amount of water. If we're not putting enough of those things into our bodies, *of course* we're going to feel tired and get sick.

Psychology even tells us that we can become depressed without proper nutrition.

It's similar to a car. If you don't give it the right kind of oil, gasoline, and other fluids it needs, it's not going to run properly. If we don't give our bodies what they need, they won't "run" properly either.

"You Are What You Eat"

That's one thing that I noticed about myself when I burned out a few years ago (as I mentioned a couple chapters back had happened to me): I hadn't been eating healthy for a long time. No doubt that was a considerable contribution to the day when my body basically said "enough!", and I had to change some things if I wanted to have a good quality of life.

Why that potential result of my habits didn't occur to me before it happened, I don't know. I guess I was too hung up on "doing things."

Maybe you're like I was.

When you're feeling tired—meaning, “when your body is using its natural, designed-by-God response to alert you that it's time to get some rest”—do you keep drinking your favorite caffeinated beverage to stay awake and “keep going”? If so, please consider: does that really seem like what's best for you?

(Not to mention that you may have fallen for pop culture's lie that you *have to* “keep going” and “move fast” in life, as we discussed a couple of chapters ago.)

What about all of the sugar we take in? Is that truly in our best interests?

How about consuming so much of the meat that is served at a lot of fast-food restaurants? Is that what God wants for us?

Honestly, I don't think so. Our bodies are His temples. We need to take care of them and be careful about what we put in them.

The (Truly) Good Stuff

We need to seek out the good stuff. (There *is* good stuff out there, you know—plenty of it!) All it takes is slowing down a little and pausing to read the ingredients before we buy and eat something.

And please understand—that doesn't mean eating a bunch of tasteless fat-free food all the time. In fact, I challenge you to compare the ingredients that make up “low fat” foods with their “regular” counterparts.

In the case of potato chips, for example, I found that the “regular” ones usually had three simple ingredients: potatoes, salt, and some sort of oil. Their “healthier, low fat” versions, however, contained a laundry list of chemicals.

That makes me wonder: which one, really, *is* better for us? Personally, I'd rather eat a little less of something made of “real food” than a whole lot of some odd laboratory concoction. “Regular” chips seem like the better choice to me.

So—again—“seeking out the good stuff” doesn't necessarily mean eating things that don't taste good. It just means we look for the *real* food.

Real *Good*

It means that if you're going to eat ice cream, you choose the ice cream that's made mainly with milk, sugar and cream, instead of twenty chemicals you can't even pronounce.

It could also mean that, instead of eating strawberry-flavored candy, you eat a real strawberry. The fruit aisle *is* usually in the same market as the candy aisle, you know—sometimes just one or two aisles away! And, at the checkout stand, the cost comes out about the same.

You can even seek real food when you're in a hurry. It just means that, when you do eat fast food, you make the wisest choices available to you, and you try to avoid odd, chemically-altered, processed items. Good, real food *does* exist under those glowing signs. It doesn't have to be terrible for you.

Home-Cooked Goodness

But why not just take the extra five minutes before you leave for your day to make a healthy lunch? I guarantee your body will thank you for it. Seek out the good stuff for God's temple. Remember: He loves us more than we can comprehend! He values us and wants the best for us in every area of life:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

- Jeremiah 29:11

My guess is that He doesn't want to see harm come to us because of what you eat.

Chew, Swallow, Talk, Enjoy

Oh, and when you do eat, please slow down. God created us to need each other, remember? Don't let the media sell you their "eat like an animal" perspective. Eat like the valuable human being God created you to be. Make it a priority to eat with your family. Take some time to share a meal with your friends. It's important!

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to get a snack.

Chapter 17: Aging From Commercialism's Perspective

“You’re *old!*”

Excuse me? As I write this, I’m only 27 years of age. I’ve only been out of college and involved in full-time youth ministry for about 2 years. And I’m only about 12 years older than the “average” age of the teens who attend our church.

Yet, every so often, some of them say those words—to *me!*

“You’re *old!*”

As if (a) that’s true (27 is “old”?!), and (b) that’s a bad thing.

But I know where they picked up that perspective: pop culture.

Don’t believe me? Consider this:

Senior Trip

So often, our media's stereotypical portrayal of older people is a very unattractive one. Whether in a movie, TV show, commercial, or even a music video, it seems the media is out to make us find "old people" detestable.

Pop culture shows us older people who are annoying, nasty, constantly complaining. Senior citizen characters may not even make it through one scene of a film or sit com without yelling about something ridiculous or offering a heap of discouragement to the "hero" of the program.

"Who would want to be around someone like that?" the shows imply.

Powerless and Purposeless

However, the media often shows us that elderly are essentially powerless at the same time. Senior characters may rant and rave, but they're also portrayed as not really being able to "do" anything. (They are "old," after all—weak and frail, according to pop culture media.) If seniors aren't shown staying in bed all day, they're out walking along the sidewalk, hunched over, and supported by a walker.

...And walking very, very slow...

...*And*, not contributing anything of value to us.

It's even implied at times that older people are just plain "in the way." In a culture where it's "all about me", that's a pretty negative thing. Wouldn't it just be more convenient for us to get rid of them, or ignore that they're there at all?

Seniors certainly aren't worth getting to know personally, pop culture would tell us. Older adults can't see well, hear well, or remember things well. Maybe we could even view them as stupid. (They *have* "lost their marbles," of course.)

Were I to attempt to build a relationship with a senior citizen, I might actually have to take some *time* with them. I might have to have some patience with them. That could infringe on my self-gratifying lifestyle. So I'd better not bother, commercialism says.

The only thing old people *do* have to offer us, media says, is a temporary laugh.

The Joke's On Them, Sadly

As awful as it is, our pop culture seems to stare us right in the face and declare things like these:

"It's funny to watch an old man walk down the street with his cane"

“It’s funny to watch an older woman in her home say ‘I’ve fallen and I can’t get up’”

“It’s funny when older people have ‘lost their marbles’”

“It’s funny,” the media tells us. “Old people should be the butt of jokes!”

They should? What, really, is so funny about that?

Historical Context

As far as history goes, this kind of thinking is insane. Look at any ancient culture, whether Bible-related or not. Look at our own American history up until about 1960 or so. Look across the ocean *today* at cultures different than ours. Pay attention to what you find: the elderly are highly revered and respected.

They’re the role models. *They’re* looked to for wisdom. *They’re* the high status people in the culture!

So why not ours in today’s society?

What made our culture change perspectives so drastically—and not even that long ago? Why is our commercial culture so bent on painting such an ugly picture of the elderly?

You know the answer by now. It's the same reason they overload us with sex, saturate us with violence, and tell us to keep rushing through life while eating chemically-enhanced food: money.

Huh?

“What on earth could money have to do with it, Matt?” you ask. Allow me to explain.

Older people tend not to spend a lot of money. They've learned their lessons and purchased their “stuff.” They already own a home, a car, a sofa, a TV, a bed, etc. They have little desire to buy more. They don't *need* to buy much more.

They're one of commercialism's worst nightmares.

But younger people like me (despite what my youth group says) don't have all of our “stuff” yet. My wife and I are just getting started in the “real world.” We currently live in an apartment, with furniture and cars that we're highly likely to replace someday.

We're one of commercialism's best dreams, from a financial perspective.

So, commercial companies try this angle on us: “look how awful those old people are. Don't be like them. Be young. Young people buy things—that's who you are!

You are what you buy. Do everything you can to stay young! Buy these products!”

They even send us the message that older adults themselves long to be young again. That’s also meant to make us laugh at times, as senior citizens dress and behave like, say, a teenager in a commercial or movie. But the message is clear: being young and spending money is good, and being old isn’t. It’s all about money.

Very...Not Me

Once again, pop culture is trying to mess with our sense of identity to get us to buy products. Supposedly, part of being “who I am” as a “modern day, independent, twenty-something” is being someone who spends lots of money on things I don’t really need. That will, supposedly, make me happy.

Yeah, right.

As if blindly doing what commercials tell me to do is making me more independent. (Am I the only one who thinks that’s one of the most ridiculous contradictions in history?) All the media tries to *do* is manipulate me!

I remember one pamphlet I saw for a credit card back when I was in college. It advertised the card as something like this: “very now; very cool; very you.” Could that *be* a

much more obvious attempt to get me to apply for their card by appealing to my sense of who I am? It stinks!

I need some fresh air.

Let's take a breath of God's perspective about this.

Chapter 18: Aging From God’s Perspective

God’s perspective about aging is the complete opposite of American pop culture’s.

For one thing, the Bible tells us that growing old should be a desirable thing: “The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old.”¹

Heroes of the Bible like Abraham, Isaac, Job and others were described as “old and full of years” when they passed away, the implication being that it’s a good thing, and something to be sought after.

Even the fifth of the Ten Commandments, “Honor your father and your mother,” comes with a “promise”, as the Apostle Paul points out in the New Testament: that if we obey that command we will “live long”²—yet *again* implying that a long life is a positive thing.

Respecting our Elders

Speaking of honoring people, consider also what God says in Leviticus 19:32: “[The Lord said,] ‘Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.’” From the Bible’s point of view, older people are to be highly respected.

It’s interesting to me, too, that in the same verse that God commands us to show the elderly that respect, He immediately afterward says “and revere your God.” Perhaps the two go together in more ways that we usually recognize. Perhaps in showing older people respect, we are also respecting God.

The Bible often connects how we treat our fellow human beings with how we treat God. In God’s sight, we can’t honor and love Him without also honoring and loving those made in His image.³ The two can’t be separated.

Going even further, the apostle Peter wrote this in one of his letters: “Young men, be submissive to those who are older”⁴ Don’t laugh at them and make fun of them. Respect them. Honor them.

Listening and Learning

The Bible also encourages us to listen to the elderly in verses like Job 12:12: “Is not wisdom found among the

aged? Does not long life bring understanding?” Amen!
(And why on earth would we ever think otherwise?)

Maybe we just don’t take the time to think about it at all.

The elderly in our communities have lived long lives—much longer than I have, certainly. They’ve been places and experienced things I never will. They have a lot of wisdom that we can learn from. They might even be able to help us avoid some major errors in life.

That is, if we’ll take the time to listen to them.

I guarantee you that it’s worth it to do so. It’s amazing to talk with older people and hear them share their hearts. It’s awesome to take in the answers they give to questions we might ask them about what their first job was like, how they were treated there, what their favorite places to visit have been, how they made it through difficult times in life, and more.

Role Models, Roles in Life

Older people are certainly not useless objects that are nothing more than “in the way.” They’re human beings, with value to God just like you and me.

They aren’t annoying, cranky, or mean any more often than you and I are from time to time. Everyone has bad

days. All of us have times when our aches and pains get the best of our attitude. (And I *know* we've all complained at some point about things we don't like.) Why should we get a "free pass" to do that in society, but the elderly can't?

Though, true, the elderly may sometimes need some extra help. But that's okay. God has commanded a certain group of people to provide that help: us. Check out Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:1-4:

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all

to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.

God's perspective seems pretty clear to me: respect the elderly. Honor them. Care for them. Help them when they need it.

Going Against the Flow

Despite what the media shows us, the elderly do have *plenty* they can offer us—especially the wisdom we mentioned. America had the right perspective until around 1960 or so. Other cultures still have it right today.

I hope Christians will be among them.

In fact, allow me submit a challenge to you. If you don't have any considerably deep relationships with anyone who is a senior citizen, seek out some of those friendships.

And, no—despite what the teens in our youth ministry say, I'm *not* old enough to qualify for that.

Though, someday I will be, God willing.

May I look forward to it, through Biblical eyes.

Chapter 19: Death from Commercialism's Perspective

Death.

It's not our favorite topic to discuss, is it. But it's an important one to discuss. Whether we like it or not—unless Jesus comes back beforehand—some day, death will happen to every one of us.

It's the one thing you and I can't escape. No matter how many vitamins we take, how much we exercise, how many surgeries we have, or how many lotions we use, you and I will still die some day. It's on the schedule of our lives in permanent ink.

And, true, that can be a very scary thought. Or, it can be a not-so-scary thought, as we'll see.

First, though: what does the pop culture media often show and tell us about death?

The End...?

Well—again—remember that pretty much everything you see in our commercial media is there to make some corporation rich. A company’s primary goal is to use advertisements and TV shows to get money from your pockets to theirs. They don’t care much about you as an individual, nor do they care much about honesty. It’s all about money.

The topic of death is no exception. If life is all about the things you buy, death is a terrible thing from a materialistic perspective! “You can’t take your stuff with you”, as the saying goes. And, once you die, you can’t buy anything else. Once the funeral is over and they bury you, corporations usually stop making money off of you.¹

So, corporate pop culture media tells us that death is bad. They encourage us to do all we can to stay young, and to buy all we can while we’re still alive. You’ve heard that old phrase, “whoever dies with the most toys wins”, right? That’s a perfect example.

Scary Stuff

To help us maintain those mindsets, pop culture also likes to remind us that death is scary. They know that

there's a fear of dying deep inside all of us. So they exploit it to sell more products.

If I'm the average "afraid to die" American, and buying that new car will supposedly keep it from happening on the road, I'll buy that car. If buying that vitamin will keep it from happening, I'll buy that vitamin. And that treadmill. And that surgery. And that nasty-tasting "health food." And that vacation. And that "whatever"! I just don't want to die!

Truth, Please

Should we dare to ask our corporate media something like this: "well, maybe death isn't that scary; what happens after you die?"—oh, look out! One poll showed that, if you're asking Hollywood, you're asking a bunch of producers—93 percent to be exact²—who "seldom or never go to any kind of worship services."

(...And we're looking to *them* for advice about what the afterlife is like?)

But they do make some attempt to be our spiritual guides, I suppose. Some tell us we should figure that "all roads lead to God." It doesn't matter if you're Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Scientologist, or whatever. Everyone gets to go to heaven.

“How could a loving God send anyone to hell, anyway?” they figure. (That is, unless the person was “really bad” like Hitler or something.) After all, that’s a very “nice” answer, as far as producers can tell. It’s a response that can make everyone feel good.

Except me, that is. Call me crazy, but I don’t want to just “feel good” if what I feel good about isn’t true. I want the truth. This is my eternity we’re talking about here!

If I were buying a house, I wouldn’t just want to “feel good” that the builders were probably nice people. I want to know *for certain* that it’s not going to come crashing down on me as soon as I close the door.

If I spend a ton of money on a new car, I don’t want to just “feel good” because it’s a pretty color. I want to know *for certain* that it actually has an engine in it and that it’s going to work properly.

Wouldn’t you agree?

Then why would our perspective on eternity be any different?

Besides, as we said, most of the people who make ads and shows don’t necessarily care much about the truth. They care about who’s paying them. So I’m not even really sure I can trust anything they tell me. And I want to know *for sure* if I’m going to heaven or not. I want to

know if there even *is* some way to be sure. (Is anyone “with me” out there?)

Confused

But it seems that pop culture gets so confused, with a mindset where everyone can do whatever he or she wants “as long as it doesn’t hurt someone else”, that they just give up and say “I don’t think there’s any way to really know which religion is right.”

... Which, in turn, leads to people everywhere repeating that same thing in spiritual conversations. I’ve heard it before. And maybe that is truly the best-guess answer of a confused world.

Or perhaps it isn’t.

Just a thought, but *what if* it’s yet another way of manipulating us?

What if corporate pop culture tells us things like “all roads lead to God” and “there’s no way to really know” to get our attention off that topic? See, whether “everyone gets to go to heaven” or “there’s no way to know which religion is right”, either way it excuses me from having to do anything about, or think deeply about, anything spiritual.

As a result, I can focus all that spare attention of mine on the next thing I want to buy.

Plus, if I'm not actively seeking out anything spiritual, I'll never find the satisfaction that only God can offer. If I never find satisfaction (or figure it doesn't exist), I'll keep living for gratification and spending money on things I really don't need.

Get it?

It always comes back to money. How sad.

Thinking Deeply Anyway

But wait a minute. What if we did take a step back and think about the things they tell us? What would we find?

For example: how *can* "all roads lead to heaven?" How can all those religions be correct if Christianity says that Jesus is the Only Way to get there, but Islam says Jesus is just a prophet and our Bibles are unintentionally flawed?

How can all the religions fit together when Hinduism says that after we die we'll be reincarnated over and over until we do the right thing enough times to be reunited with what they may call "God", but Christianity says we only get one shot at life and then we're judged and sent to our eternal destination?

What about people who practice witchcraft, who believe that what they're doing is totally fine, but the Bible quotes God as saying that it's not?

I know, I know: that's when someone may come in and say "well, see, there's no way to really know which religion is the 'right one'."

There's not? That's not what God says in the Bible.

Let's check it out.

Chapter 20: Death from God's Perspective

First of all, what does the Bible say about how many shots we get at life? Do we “only go around once,” or is reincarnation in our destiny? Thankfully, Hebrews 9:27 clears that question up for us in one verse: “...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” So there it is: we get one life. One chance. After that, we'll face God's Judgment.

So, knowing that, how should we view death—scary or not?

I suppose it depends upon your situation. If you're going to spend eternity with God, there's nothing to be afraid of. If you're on your way to eternal torment, you can fear death with good reason.

But how can you know *for sure* where you're going? What does God say about it?

“Which Floor?”

Many times if our pop culture does talk about heaven, it’s what I call “the Tom & Jerry syndrome.” Remember them? Tom would die in an episode and, because he’d been bad, take an elevator “down” to hell where he was then tortured. Jerry, however, because he’d been good, took an elevator “up” to heaven. Thus, we’re left with the idea that “bad” people go to hell and “good” people go to heaven.

And, according to the Bible, pop culture *sort of* has that correct. God makes it clear in Scripture that He loves us and wants us to be with Him forever. But, the Bible also tells us, we have a problem.

God is holy. He’s perfect. To be around Him, you and I have to be perfect too. And God does tell us how to be perfect. He gave us His rules and said that if we’ll follow them, we can enjoy a peaceful relationship with Him.

“Well, I’ve kept the 10 Commandments,” you and I may say; “no problem!”

Really?

How about a quick test? Let’s go down the list of 10, as found in Exodus 20:1-17, and see if you’ve broken any. Let’s pretend this is Judgment day and you’re standing

before God, and He says this: “based on how you’ve lived your life, let’s see if you get into heaven.”

In fact, take a moment to grab a pencil or pen. As you read, put a checkmark in the margin next to any of the commands that you’ve broken.

Ready? Here we go.

Commandments 1 and 2

Commandment #1: God says “I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me.”

Commandment #2: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

Obviously, if you’ve ever worshipped a god other than the God of the Bible, or if you’ve ever made and/or bowed down to an idol, you’ve broken these commandments.

But consider these questions too:

Have you ever given someone or something priority over God?

Have you ever decided to give your time and focus to a sport, material possession, or a person you love more than to God?

Or have you ever done what you wanted to do instead of what God desired in a given situation?

If so, you can put a checkmark by commandments 1 and 2.

Commandment #3

Commandment #3: “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”

Have you ever said “God,” or the precious Name of “Jesus Christ” when you weren’t actually talking about, or to, Him? Have you ever said them in an empty, meaningless way? What about used them in combination with a swear word, or even *substituted* them for a swear word? Have you ever called them out when you really meant “wow!” or “I can’t believe it!”?

Or what about this: have you ever called yourself a Christian—a “Christ-follower”—but done things in life that deny that Jesus is your Master? What about claimed that God was “okay” with certain things He said were wrong?

Have you ever misused His Name? If so, put a checkmark by Commandment #3.

Commandment #4

Commandment #4: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...

In context, the “Sabbath” was (and, technically, still is) Saturday. So this one should be easy: have you ever done any work on a Saturday? Yard work, housework, career work, homework...you name it. *Any* work at all?

If you didn’t reserve the day for rest and focus on God, as a reminder that you belong to Him and not to your work, you’ve broken this command. Put a checkmark by Commandment #4.

Commandment #5

Commandment #5: Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

That one’s pretty self-explanatory. Despite how your parents may have treated you, God calls you to a high standard. Have you ever failed to honor your parents? Have you *ever* disrespected them?

If so, put a check mark by #5.

Commandment #6

Commandment #6: You shall not murder.

Have you ever murdered another human being? If so, put a check mark by #6.

“Whew!” a lot of you are probably saying; “*Finally*, a commandment I haven’t broken!” Maybe not in the literal, physical sense. But what about this: have you ever hated someone?

I don’t mean hating the evil *actions* of someone else. The Bible tells us to “hate what is evil” and “cling to what is good”¹. I’m talking about hating the person himself or herself, which the Bible tells us is the same as murder in God’s sight:

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

- 1 John 3:15

Have you ever had hate in your heart for another human being? If so, you’ve broken commandment #6.

Commandment #7

Commandment 7: You shall not commit adultery.

Have you ever had sex with another person's spouse? If so, you've broken this commandment.

If not, consider Jesus' explanation of the heart of this command, found in Matthew's Gospel:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

- Matthew 5:27-28

That doesn't need much more interpretation, does it. Have you ever had lust in your heart when looking at someone to whom you weren't married? If so—by God's standards—you've broken this command.

Commandment #8

Commandment #8: You shall not steal.

Have you ever stolen anything—whether \$1,000,000, or office supplies, or a piece of candy from the store?

Have you ever stolen from producers and music artists by illegally copying the music by which they make their living?

Have you ever wasted time at work, stealing pay from the company who hired you by accepting some of their money for an amount of time in which you did *nothing* in return?

Have you ever failed to report a wrong total at a store, when someone didn't charge you enough for the items you purchased? That's stealing too.

Have you ever *not* given God back a portion of the income He's blessed you with? Consider what He once said to Israel about that through the prophet Malachi:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,”

says the Lord Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

- Malachi 3:8-12

Have you ever stolen anything, no matter how big or small, in any way? If so, you’ve broken this command.

Commandment #9

Commandment #9: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

Have you ever lied to another person, whether about something concerning your career (including calling in sick when you’re not), or your family, or a golf score? If so, you’ve broken commandment #9.

Commandment #10

And finally, Commandment #10: You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife...or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

I think this is the most commonly misunderstood (or just “not” understood) commandment of the 10. What it

means is simply this: have you ever craved, or longed for, something that belonged to someone else?

Have you ever lusted after what rightfully belonged to another person? Have you fantasized about “if I owned their house,” or “if she was my wife”, or—you fill in the blank—and tossed it around in your head in a way that was obviously beyond a complimentary “that’s a nice boat; good for them”?

We’re not talking about wanting a TV or car *like* your neighbor’s and planning to go buy one. We’re talking about wanting *your neighbor’s* car, or *your neighbor’s* wife, or *your neighbor’s* boat.

We could even apply this to looking at a famous person and saying “I want *her* looks!” or “I want *her* clothes!” or “I want *her* boyfriend!” (And, sadly, our culture does train us to think that way, as we’ve seen.)

Maybe there’s even a bitterness as a part of it all, as you ask yourself why *they* have that whatever-it-is and you don’t.

Have you ever coveted? If so, you’ve broken Commandment #10.

The Results

So, how did you’d do?

Not too well, eh?

Yeah, me neither.

And those are just ten out of many more commands that God has given us in the Bible. Scary thought, isn't it?

Even scarier is James 2:10. That's where the Bible tells us that, in God's sight, if you've broken one of His commands—even if only one time—you're guilty of breaking all of them.

Let that sink in. If you've broken even *one* of the commands on the previous pages of this book, the Bible tells us that you are guilty of breaking *all* of God's laws.

...which means that you're not perfect.

...which means that you can't be with God unless something changes.

...*and* which means that you have the spiritual death penalty for breaking God's laws. That is, the spiritual death penalty that results in you being separated from God for eternity, in a place called the lake of fire, when God judges your life someday.²

A Long List

But, again, that quick test that we did is just a quick look at whether or not you'd broken any of God's commands "in general." If we had a list of every specific

time that you'd broken one of God's laws, it would be pretty long, wouldn't it.

Imagine someone unrolling that giant scroll in front of you. How long would it go on for? (Mine would be pretty long, for sure!)

No doubt, if that's your situation, death is a very scary thing.

Amazing Love for Those Who Need It—All of Us!

The Bible tells us that that's the situation for every person on this earth right now. It tells us that *everyone* has broken God's laws, and *none* of us have lived perfect lives by God's definition. As a result, all of us deserve to be punished with spiritual death (or, as Revelation calls it, "the lake of fire"²)

Like I mentioned earlier, God is perfect in every way. That includes being a perfect Judge. He can't say, "well, I'll just overlook your wrongs." If He did, He wouldn't be perfect. Someone must pay the penalty for the times we've broken His commands and offended the holy Creator of the Universe.

But the person who pays for our wrongs doesn't have to be us.

The Good News

And the good news is that, in addition to being a perfect Judge, God also loves us far more than we can comprehend! So here's what He did: He took that death penalty in our places.

His Son, Jesus Christ, came to earth as 100%-God and 100%-human at the same time (which, obviously, is beyond our ability to fully understand). Jesus lived a perfect life (never breaking any of God's laws), and then was executed by crucifixion as though he *had* committed a crime. But what He was doing was taking the punishment we deserved so we don't have to, suffering both physically (at the hands of first-century people, including the Romans) and spiritually.

Imagine having the equivalent of the pain of an eternity in that lake of fire compacted into a few moments and dropped on you. But not just one eternity in the lake of fire; imagine one eternity for every person who has ever, and will ever have, lived.

Can we even imagine what that would be like?

That's what Jesus suffered for us. He died a criminal's physical death on a Roman cross, *and* suffered our eternity in the lake of fire, in our places—all so we don't have to.

The story doesn't end there, however. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the grave.

Anyone can say "I'm God" and "I'm going to save you" and die. But how many people can come back to life to prove that everything they said was true? Only One person has in all of history: Jesus Christ.

After spending some time with His first-century followers, Jesus ascended into Heaven, where He is right now. Someday He'll return to earth, and the Judgment I mentioned earlier will come.

God's Invitation to You

But right now, as you read these words, God offers to take that long record of your wrongs, crumple it up, and throw it away forever. He offers to erase your past and let you start over with Him as an adopted member of His family.

Not because of anything you've done, either. He offers it because it's already been paid for by Jesus. Jesus takes our messed up records upon Himself, and give us His perfect record as our own.

A perfect record which—no matter how terribly we mess up—will never cease to be perfect. The Bible assures us of that many times.³ On the cross, Jesus Himself said "it

is finished.”⁴ He paid for *all* of our wrongs—past, present and future. And with those wrongs (or “sins” as the Bible calls them) out of the way, we’re free and able to have the personal relationship with God that He created us to have.

Christianity isn’t a religion where all we do is try to keep a bunch of rules because we’re afraid God is going to “zap” us if we don’t. Christianity is about a relationship with God, where we get to know God so personally that Jesus said to call Him “Father.”⁵ It’s about a relationship where we walk with Him every moment of every day, talk with Him, listen to Him, and experience all of the good things He has for us—things that we can only find in Him like peace, satisfaction, purpose in life, joy, hope, and love in its truest definition. And when we do obey Him, it’s out of our growing love for Him.

God offers us *everything* we need, and—get this—it’s free. Jesus bought it for us with His life simply because that’s how much He loves us. We don’t have to do anything to earn it. In fact, we *can’t* earn it. That’s the point! All we have to do—all we *can* do—is accept the gift God is holding out to us.

Accepting God's Gift

We do that through prayer, admitting our need for God's forgiveness, trusting Him, and repenting. (Repenting simply means "stopping all of the bad things you were doing and replacing them with things God wants you to do.")

Have you ever done that? Has there ever been a point in your life when you said "from now on, I'm giving control of my life to Jesus. I accept God's gift"? If not, or you're not sure, then I invite you to do it right now, wherever you may be. Take a moment to pray and make sure things are right between you and God.

God will hear you. The Bible tells us that "*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord *will be saved*" and that "if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."⁶

In case you'd like some help in what to say, I've written a model prayer below. There's nothing special about the words I've used; what's important is the message. What's important is what's in your heart as you pray it.

Pray something like this:

Father God, I admit that I've sinned and that I need Your forgiveness. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross in my place for the wrong things I've done. I believe He did, and I believe He rose from the grave. Right now I turn away from the wrong things I've done and I turn to You. I repent. Jesus please come into my life and heart, and save me. And take control as my Lord. I accept Your gift. Please forgive my sins and give me eternal life. I thank You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Chapter 21: Renewing Our Minds

So, after looking at the different topics we considered (which, of course, are just a few of the numerous topics we *could* cover), what did you find out about yourself?

“I thought this book was all about the media,” you may say. And you’re right, it is.

But it’s also about you. It’s also about helping you evaluate how many of your thoughts, values and perspectives on life are really *yours*, and how many of them are in your life simply because the media has told them to you so often, for so long, that you don’t even question them.

Higher Standards

It’s something we need to think about. We need to ask tough questions about ourselves so we can grow into all God created us to be in life.

Pop culture may make promises to us and tell us that the things they do are “all about us,” but we know the truth. The things they do are all about our *money*. And, sadly, the messages they send us can have some awful side effects, can't they.

But God wants better things for us. Remember what He said in Jeremiah:

“For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

- Jeremiah 29:11

God's not out to “get us” by ruining our fun or harming us in some way. Quite the opposite. He's out to give us *the best!*

Jesus Himself said that He came to earth to give us life “to the full.”¹ Actually, the original Greek word He used to describe the kind of life He came to bring us was “*perissos*,” which can also be translated as “exceeding, going beyond” or “abundant.”²

God wants us to have *more than* life. *Way* more than life. An “exceeding” life. A “going beyond” life. A life

this world can't offer, no matter what kinds of promises it makes us.

So God calls us to a higher standard, and gives us the antidote for commercial pop culture's manipulation: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."³

"Don't try to conform to the way this world does things," God tells us; "don't try to follow the world and be like pop culture. Renew your mind." Learn to think like the awesome, loving, Everlasting God wants you to think, not the way money-hungry corporations want you to think.

We can't have it both ways, you know. John and James make that pretty clear:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father, but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man [or woman] who does the will of God lives forever.

- 1 John 2:15-17

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do so with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

- James 4:1-5

Those are some strong words, aren't they. Obviously God takes this subject very seriously. We have to choose between the world and God.

That's okay, though. Having God is far better than anything this world could offer us anyway. Haven't we seen that over and over in this book, just in the few examples we examined?

Besides, consider the words of King Solomon, the apostle Paul, and Jesus:

Whoever loves money never has money enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.

This too is meaningless. As good increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?

- Ecclesiastes 5:10-11

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

- 1 Timothy 6:6-10

[Jesus said,] “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

- Matthew 6:19-21, 24

Fill'er up!...with the good stuff

So don't sit in front of a lit-up screen or radio, take in everything they say and believe it simply because they told you that's how life works. Evaluate things, just like we've been doing in this book.

Ask lots of questions. Ask yourself what lifestyles corporations are trying to promote alongside their products and programs. Examine what they're telling you about yourself. Remember why they're saying it.

And don't forget to pose this inquiry: *who says they're right?*

Constantly seek out the truth.

There are, after all, a lot of lies out there. But God gave us the Bible as His precious guidebook for our lives. When a message comes our way, all we have to do is ask ourselves if it lines up with what God says in His Word or not. If it agrees with what He says, we accept it. If the message doesn't agree with God, we reject the message as something harmful to us. It's that simple.

It means seeking to fill our minds with "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...anything [that] is excellent or praiseworthy,"⁴ and living those things out.

And don't get me wrong: there *are* movies, music, websites, and other media—both Christian and secular—that fit into those criteria. My point is simply that we need to evaluate the things we watch according to God's standard, so we can have His best in every area of our lives.

Resources Abound

For those times when we may not know the Bible well enough to quote a verse for a particular circumstance, we can know that there are plenty of topical indexes and other resources available. We have but to seek them out and utilize them.

And as we spend daily time getting to know God better, reading the Bible and praying, we will begin to think like He does. He will help us continue the process of renewing our minds.

“Then,” He promises us, “[we’ll] be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”⁵

Sounds good to me.

It is a process that, by no means, ends with the last words on this page, of course. And it won't always be easy. But I encourage you to stick with it—and, more importantly, *God* encourages you to stick with it—so you

can find yourself immersed deeper and deeper into the full, satisfying life Jesus created you to have.

...Which is something money could never buy in a store.

Notes

Acknowledgements:

1. See Ezekiel 24:16.

Chapter 1.

1. Some of you just gasped in horror at the thought, didn't you.
2. (And, by the way, the world stayed in a "writing culture" for a very long time, as the dates show.)

Chapter 2

1. Found on viacom.com/company_overview.jhtml as of August 9th at 5:35PM Pacific Time.
2. From an article by Richard Corliss, as found on www.time.com in 2000.
3. From an interview on CNN's Showbiz Tonight, September 26, 2006 (www.cnn.com) concerning how the media had been saying Crowe was getting set to play his

very recently deceased friend, “Crocodile Hunter” Steve Irwin, in a new movie.

4. In fact, their license with the FCC actually *prohibits* them from airing any commercials!

Chapter 3

1. Bernays died at the age of 103, by the way – wow!

2. Quotes from Bernays’ obituary as found on <http://partners.nytimes.com/books/98/08/16/specials/bernays-obit.html> on September 18, 2006.

3. Professor Steve Jenkins at California State University, Sacramento.

4. Isaiah 5:20.

Chapter 4

1. Thanks to CSU Sacramento professor Steve Jenkins for passing these 5 points on to *me*!

2. From *Many Babies Get Boob-Tube Time*, accessed at <http://www.kcra.com/family/13275768/detail.html> on May 8, 2007.

3. From “Video game playing may fulfill innate human need by Anne Harding. Source: Motivation and Emotion, December 2006.

4. From <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/hypnotic>, accessed on September 18, 2006.

Chapter 5

1. John 4:13-14.
2. (And only in *that* will we find satisfaction in our work.)

Chapter 6

1. See Psalm 139, for example.
2. See Matthew 10:30.
3. John 10:10.
4. See Isaiah 55:8, for example.

Chapter 7

1. By “sexual taunt” I mean this: anything that you hear or see in the media which relates to sex in a ‘get your attention’/lustful way. It could be a commercial that shows a woman as nothing more than a sex object, for example, or perhaps a commercial that tries to make you insecure in the “sexual” area of your life.

Chapter 8

1. Much thanks to Exter Hardy for helping me to see the same thing—my value—in the same way when I needed to.

Chapter 10

1. Exodus 20:12.

2. Colossians 3:20.

3. Thanks, once again, for Exter Hardy for this wise advice.

4. Romans 13:1.

5. (Emphasis mine.)

Chapter 11

1. From pages 49-51 of *Battle Cry for a Generation* by Ron Luce, Copyright 2005, published by Cook Communications.

Chapter 12

1. Genesis 6:13, emphasis mine.

Chapter 13

1. From *World's cities step up pace of life in fast lane* by Kate Kelland, accessed at http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20070502/od_nm/pedestrians_speed_study_odd_dc on May 2nd, 2007.

2. From *Stress Keeps Cancer Cells Alive, Study Says*, accessed at <http://www.kcra.com/health/11605367/detail.html> on April 10, 2007.

Chapter 14

1. Psalm 46:10.

2. From *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby and Claude V. King, Copyright 1990 by Lifeway Press. 27th printing, June 2004.

3. John 17:3.

4. 1 Peter 5:4.

5. See Genesis 2:18.

6. See Hebrews 10:36 and 2 Thessalonians 3:13, for example.

7. See Galatians 5:22.

8. Ecclesiastes 3:1.

Chapter 15

1. From <http://www.kcra.com/print/11420358/detail.html>, accessed on March 28th, 2007.
2. From Yahoo! News' article "Kellogg to raise nutrition of kids' food", accessed on June 14th, 2007.
3. As stated by Schlosser in the Bonus Features of the documentary *Supersize Me*.
4. Quotes and other info about sodium benzoate found on <http://www.reference.com/search?q=sodium%20benzoate>, accessed on July 17, 2007.
5. Quotes and info are from the article "Report: Food Ingredients Rarely Checked. Low-Cost Components Come From China, Others", accessed at <http://www.kcra.com/print/12915716/detail.html> on April 23, 2007.
6. Accessed at <http://www.reference.com/search?q=carmine> on July 17, 2007.

Chapter 18

1. Proverbs 20:29.
2. See Exodus 20:12 and Ephesians 6:1-3.
3. See 1 John 4:20, for example.
4. 1 Peter 5:5.

Chapter 19

1. (I realize there are exceptions, but 90% of the time [if not more] this is true, of course).

2. From “Violence and Promiscuity Set the Stage for Television’s Moral Collapse,” Issue#: 248
www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=ISO2E4.

Chapter 20

1. Romans 12:9.
2. See Revelation 20:11-15.
3. See Romans 8:1; 1 Peter 3:18; John 10:28-29; 1 John 5:13; 2 Timothy 2:13.
4. John 19:30.
5. See John 17:3 and Matthew 6:9.
6. Romans 10:13 and 10:9, respectively.

Chapter 21

1. John 10:10.

2. (As found in the Greek to English Dictionary (word #4356) of the *Zondervan NIV Exhaustive Concordance, Second Edition*.)

3. Romans 12:2.

4. Philippians 4:8.

5. Romans 12:2b.

Behind the Scenes

Go “*Behind the Scenes*” in a whole new way!

For many Americans, most days are made up of “the same old thing.” In *Behind the Scenes*, however, Matt Abbott encourages us to ponder how much of our daily routines is really *our* idea, and how much of it is a result of the influence of America’s pop culture’s on our lives.

Whether the topic is what we ate for lunch, how busy our schedules are, what we do in our spare time—or simply the way in which we think about those things!—Matt nudges us to take a closer look at the messages commercialism has been sending us, and to compare them (and their results) with God’s design for our lives.



Matt Abbott is a bi-vocational church planter and pastor in the Monterey Bay area of California, where he currently lives with his wife, Amy.