

JOHN MACARTHUR

AND THE LEADERSHIP TEAM AT GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH

RIGHT  
THINKING  
IN A  
WORLD  
GONE  
WRONG



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## **RIGHT THINKING IN A WORLD GONE WRONG**

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## GLORIFYING GOD IN THE GRAY AREAS

### *Christian Liberty and the World of Entertainment*<sup>1</sup>

JOHN MACARTHUR

As a pastor, I have the privilege of guiding people through God's Word, explaining its implications in their lives by clarifying a passage of Scripture or a point of doctrine. Among the concerns people raise, however, I can't remember anyone ever asking me if it was wrong to cheat, steal, lie, commit murder, commit adultery, or covet. I can't recall a time when someone wanted to know whether a Christian should read the Bible, pray, worship, love, or tell others about salvation in Jesus Christ. God's Word is unmistakably clear about those things.

There is, however, one class of questions that I often receive, and it is with regard to issues or activities that are not specifically addressed in Scripture, and thus fall somewhere between what is obviously right and obviously wrong. Being neither "black or white," these issues involve aspects of Christian freedom that fall into what has been dubbed "the gray areas." What entertainment is acceptable? What kind of music is okay? What about what you wear, where you go, or how you spend your free time? How does the Bible speak to those things?

Some would say, "The Bible doesn't address them. You can do what

you want to do. You're free in Christ!" Though it is true that the Bible doesn't specifically mention every possible decision you might face in life, it does address all choices with general *principles* and *parameters* that govern Christian freedom. When you run your choices in the gray areas through the following grid of seven biblical principles (drawn primarily from the book of 1 Corinthians, in which the apostle Paul gave detailed instructions on liberty issues), I trust you will find both clarity and true freedom to live your life to God's glory.

## Principles for Living to God's Glory

### 1. *The Edification Principle:*

*Will this activity produce spiritual benefit?*

In 1 Corinthians 10:23, Paul explained that "all things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify." Some people in the Corinthian congregation were exercising their Christian liberty without any regard for the spiritual good of others, or even the good of themselves. Paul corrected that thinking by reminding them that, unless something is spiritually profitable, it's not worth doing. Something that is *profitable* is useful, helpful, or advantageous; and that which *edifies* builds up spiritually. So based on this verse, believers should ask themselves, "Will doing this activity enhance my spiritual life and the spiritual lives of others? Will it cultivate godliness in me and in them? Will it build us up spiritually?" If not, then is it really a wise choice?

There are a plethora of ways, of course, in which we can build up others in the faith, and in which we ourselves can "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). But at a foundational level, edification comes from studying the Word and listening to it taught (cf. Acts 20:32; Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17); from showing true love to fellow believers as you fellowship with them (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:1; Hebrews 10:24); and from obediently serving within the context of the local church (cf. Ephesians 4:12). When it comes to the gray areas of life, we should begin by asking

if the choice we are about to make is spiritually profitable, both for ourselves and for those around us.

## 2. *The Enslavement Principle:*

*Will this activity lead to spiritual bondage?*

Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul had already told his readers, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Again, the apostle underscored the fact that he wanted to do only those things that are spiritually profitable. Part of that entails avoiding those temptations or activities that might result in personal enslavement. Paul knew that his only Master was Jesus Christ; thus he would not allow himself to be mastered by anything or anyone else.

The immediate context in 1 Corinthians 6 refers to sexual sin, which is uniquely enslaving. However, the principle extends beyond sensuality to any habit or behavior that might become life-dominating or Spirit-quenching. In Ephesians 5:18, speaking of alcoholism, Paul commanded, “Do not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit.” Though the context there is different, the idea is similar. Don’t allow yourself to become addicted or enslaved to that which is sinful or even just potentially destructive. If what you are considering can be habit-forming, why pursue it? Don’t allow yourself to be in bondage to anything or anyone. You are a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Him alone.

## 3. *The Exposure Principle:*

*Will this activity expose my mind or body to defilement?*

Speaking specifically of sexual immorality, Paul commanded the Corinthians to avoid anything that might defile them. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Elsewhere, he told the Ephesians to reprove and avoid the sensual deeds that characterize the wicked, “for it is

disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret” (Ephesians 5:12). Instead, believers are to dwell on those things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, excellent, praiseworthy, and of good repute (Philippians 4:8).

So ask yourself if the decision you are about to make will expose you to the sinful, lewd, and debauched elements of fallen society. If it will, then stay away from it. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul wrote, “I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” How you choose to use your body, along with what you choose to put into your mind, should always reflect your concern to honor Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 6:12-13). Thus anything that defiles your body or pollutes your mind ought to be avoided.

#### *4. The Esteem Principle:*

*Will this activity benefit others, or cause them to stumble?*

Regarding the eating of food offered to idols, a gray area in the early church, Paul wrote, “Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:8-9). In exercising our Christian liberty, we must be sensitive to weaker believers who might have more sensitive consciences. When we esteem them as more important than ourselves, putting their spiritual interests above our own freedom, we are following the example of Christ (Philippians 2:1-5).

This is the principle of love. As Romans 13:10 says, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” If you know that your choice—what you consider “in bounds” and approved by God—will cause another Christian to stumble and sin, love that brother or sister enough to restrict your own freedom. That is not very popular in our self-absorbed society, but it is biblical. In



fact, to cause a fellow Christian to violate his or her conscience is ultimately to sin against the Lord. For “by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore,” Paul said, “if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I will not cause my brother to stumble” (1 Corinthians 8:12-13).

### 5. *The Evangelism Principle:*

*Will this activity further the cause of the gospel?*

As those seeking to live out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), Christians should always consider how their actions will affect their witness to a watching world. Speaking of his own evangelistic ministry, Paul wrote, “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, that they may be saved” (1 Corinthians 10:32-33). Paul was far more concerned with seeing sinners embrace Christ than he was with the exercise of his liberty. Thus he was willing to set his freedom aside for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Whether or not you are aware of it, what you allow or disallow in your behavior affects your witness for Christ. It is an issue of *testimony*—what your life says about God—to the friends, relatives, coworkers, neighbors, or even strangers who might be watching you. Your testimony either tells the truth about God, or it tells a lie. The choices you make in the gray areas should reflect your concern not to bring offense to God’s reputation but to bring Him praise instead.

### 6. *The Ethics Principle:*

*Will this activity violate my conscience?*

In a parallel passage to 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul gave the Romans similar instructions regarding food offered to idols. In so doing, he made one point very clear—it is dangerous to do anything that violates your conscience and causes you to doubt your actions, even if other Christians feel free to so act. “He who doubts is condemned if he eats,

because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). We sin if we act in any way that goes contrary to the convictions of our own faith and good conscience.

First Corinthians 10:25-29 contains three references to abstaining from certain practices “for conscience’ sake.” Never train yourself to violate your conscience. If your conscience is troubled by what you are thinking about doing, don’t do it. If you are not sure about it, don’t do it. It is hard to overstate the value of a clear conscience, and it is definitely worth keeping your conscience clear so that your relationship with God will not be hindered (cf. Psalm 66:18). If you will keep yourself in prayer and the study of God’s Word, you will rightly inform your conscience so you can “walk as children of Light...trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8,10).

### ***7. The Exaltation Principle:***

***Will this activity bring glory to God?***

The summary and goal of the aforementioned six principles is found in this one. Paul declared, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). We were created to glorify God and worship Him forever. As those who have been transformed by His grace and transferred into His kingdom, pleasing Him is both our highest aim and our greatest delight (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Our heart’s cry is to glorify our Lord and Savior with our lives. So when it comes to the gray areas, think about your decision. Will God be glorified, praised, and exalted? We genuinely honor Him when we make choices that are consistent with the principles found in His Word. On the flip side, when we make foolish and sinful choices, our actions dishonor Him. If an activity will glorify God, then do it. If it won’t, or if it is questionable, then do something else.

### **A Few More Thoughts About the World of Entertainment**

The seven principles we’ve examined can apply to every gray area in life, including those related to entertainment, amusement, and leisure.

At the same time, however, there are some additional principles that are specifically helpful in considering how we choose to be entertained. Having pastored for four decades a church ten miles from Hollywood, I am well aware of how entertainment media saturates our culture. During my lifetime, I have noticed the cultural shift away from active and intellectual pastimes (including recreations such as sports and reading) to passive and less stimulating amusements (such as television, movies, video games, and computer media). Technological advancements have improved our society in many ways, yet they have also introduced a host of powerful new temptations. Though sin is still sin at its root (cf. 1 John 2:16), some of its forms have never before been so accessible.

The world of entertainment, electronically speaking, is big business. Today's top films gross hundreds of millions of dollars, as do some of the most popular video games. Television shows broadcast to millions of viewers; radio programs reach millions of listeners; and music retailers sell millions (or if you're iTunes, billions) of popular songs. Access to this media is also more convenient than ever before, thanks to the Internet. Since it opened to commercial interests two decades ago, the Internet has grown to roughly one-and-a-half billion users worldwide.

None of these technologies, in and of themselves, are inherently evil. In fact, each of them can be used to dispense God's truth and promote righteousness. Yet the reality is that we live in a fallen world deeply corrupted by sin and under the influence of supernaturally hostile forces. Hence we must not be so naïve as to assume that all entertainment is spiritually neutral and safe, as though we could immerse our minds in everything the world offers and remain spiritually unscathed.

So how can we live a consistent Christian life in our entertainment-saturated culture? Those who claim Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives are called to submit to His authority in all areas of life. Every choice we make, including how we are entertained, must be submitted to His lordship. Here then are four principles to consider in addition to the seven we surveyed earlier in this chapter. These principles presuppose a genuine Christian faith on the part of the reader—a faith that

loves Christ and wants to glorify Him in every area of life, including entertainment choices.

## **Entertainment in Light of Our Submission to Christ**

### *The Lordship of Christ Demands Good Stewardship*

God has given each of us a limited number of resources—in particular, time, money, talents, and energy; and we are commanded to be good stewards of each (cf. Ephesians 5:15; Proverbs 13:11; Ecclesiastes 11:9; Matthew 25:14-34; Mark 12:30). How we use those resources is reflective of our priorities. As Jesus said, speaking specifically of money, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Christians must consider how they can use their resources not for their own leisure and entertainment, but for the work of the gospel.

Recent studies show that the average American watches more than four hours of television per day, which, spread over a 70-year lifespan, amounts to nearly 12 years of viewing time. Some of that may be instructive and diversionary, but such statistics make one wonder what Christ will say to those believers who have spent a sixth of their lives staring at the tube (Romans 14:10-12). (Amazingly, watching television is only *one* of many ways in which people can waste time being entertained. The trend today is to spend nearly as much time on the Internet.)

So ask yourself how much real benefit you receive by watching television and movies or playing video games, and how that compares to the time you spend in spiritual pursuits. How much money do you spend on temporal amusements, and how does that relate to your eternal investments? How hard do you labor not to advance your own agenda but to further the work of Christ’s kingdom? These are heart questions every believer needs to ask. As stewards of the King (Matthew 25:14-30), we have been called to so much more than our own entertainment.

### *The Lordship of Christ Denounces Impurity and Worldliness*

Ephesians 5:3-4 has excellent words in this regard: “Immorality

or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.” Those two verses alone rule out much of what passes as entertainment in our world today—sexual immorality and impurity, dirty jokes and silly talk, and anything that promotes greed or undermines the giving of thanks. That list is a pretty good summary of what is wrong with much of contemporary American media.

Movies, for example, are usually rated according to language, violence, sexual content, and thematic elements. Many of them are not just *non-Christian*, they are *anti-Christian*. I don’t mean that they openly attack the Christian faith. But at least in some cases they might as well. They employ filthy language and lewd humor (Colossians 3:8; Titus 2:6-8); they glorify violence rather than peace (Titus 1:7; 1 John 4:7-8); they glamorize lust and immorality rather than holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5; 1 Peter 1:16); they instill feelings of discontentment and desire rather than thankfulness (Ephesians 5:20; 1 Timothy 6:6); and they promote worldviews that are antithetical to biblical Christianity (2 Corinthians 10:5). Does that mean a Christian should never watch movies? Not necessarily. But we must be discriminating about the things we allow into our minds. We are called to renew our minds (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:16). When we continually fill our minds with the filth of this world, we do ourselves a great spiritual disservice.

### *The Lordship of Christ Determines Right Priorities*

Our media-driven culture has redefined the pursuit of happiness. The American Dream—which used to consist of a loving family, a nice house, and a white picket fence—now includes instant fame, endless riches, easy romance, and the blank-check promise that anyone can achieve his or her dreams. Reality television and the rise of the Internet are perhaps somewhat to blame for this phenomenon. But ultimately the problem lies in the human heart.

We were created to long for satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy, and

those desires are good in and of themselves. But our fallen world tries to meet those desires with money, romance, fame, and other earthly pleasures. Yet temporal things can never bring lasting satisfaction to a heart that was created to find its ultimate joy in God. King Solomon learned this lesson the hard way. After experimenting with everything the world could offer, Solomon finally concluded it was all vanity, and that without God, no one can have true enjoyment (Ecclesiastes 2:25-26; 11:9; 12:13-14).

Christians should not allow entertainment to define their understanding of happiness, romance, modesty, masculinity, success, fulfillment, justice, or anything else. The Word and the Spirit should shape our worldview, not Hollywood. Sadly, however, many Christians today are more affected by the movies they watch than the sermons they hear. They show more enthusiasm for video games or television sporting events than they do for pursuing Christlikeness. They fill their minds with the sounds of talk radio or perhaps the latest hit albums rather than letting the Word of Christ richly dwell within them. Deep down, they enjoy exploring the pleasures of the world—even if only vicariously—as they watch actors play out scenes in which sinful pursuits are seemingly rewarded with happiness. The irony, of course, is that in real life those same actors are just as miserable as everyone else, a sobering reality that keeps supermarket tabloids in business.

Our priorities, passions, plans, and pursuits must be grounded in our love for Jesus Christ. Only in Him can we find true satisfaction (cf. Matthew 11:28; John 7:37). In serving Him we can lay up eternal treasure (Matthew 6:20). In pleasing and glorifying Him we fulfill life's greatest purpose (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:9). He is to be the object of our affections, ambitions, and hopes (cf. Romans 14:7-8; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:20-21). As the author of Hebrews exhorted his readers, "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for

the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

### *The Lordship of Christ Defines a Proper Perspective*

Right priorities and godly passions stem out of a proper perspective—a heavenly mind-set that understands eternal realities and interprets this life accordingly. If this world were all there was, we would be wise to amass treasure and search for happiness in the here and now. But that is not reality. This world is *not* all there is.

Reality, as revealed by the truth of Scripture, encompasses much more than the temporal pleasures, priorities, and pursuits of this world. God is real; His Word is real; heaven and hell are real; the gospel is real; Jesus is real; His death, resurrection, and ascension are all real, as is the fact that He will soon be coming back. The brevity of this life is real; the certainty of death is real; the promise of future reward is real; and the threat of eternal destruction is also real. In contrast, the world of entertainment is not real. In fact, most entertainment is about escaping from reality, not portraying it accurately.

As Christians, our worldview must be grounded in reality, not in the imaginary worlds of Hollywood. People can deny reality, and they can distract themselves with fantasy, but they cannot change the fact that one day they will stand before God (Hebrews 9:27). At that moment, the riches, pleasures, and accomplishments of this world will be of no use to them.

The parable of the rich fool is a striking example of this type of foolhardy shortsightedness. Jesus tells the story in Luke 12:16-21:

The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, “What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.’”

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?”

So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

Jesus’ words ring out as a wake-up call for those who profess to know God and yet live as though God were no more real than whatever movie they watched last. For those who keep hitting the spiritual snooze button, it is time to wake up and focus on what really matters (cf. Romans 13:11). As Christians, our perspective must be eternal in scope. And entertainment, though enjoyable in the moment, is not eternal.

### **Are You Defined by Christ, or Society?**

Movies, television, radio, video games, MP3s, and the Internet—these and other forms of mass media pervade our world. In and of themselves, these technologies are not inherently sinful. Most other forms of leisure and recreation are not inherently sinful either. In fact, fun, happiness, and joy are gifts from God.

But before we wholeheartedly embrace the media-driven entertainment of our culture, we must not forget that we are *Christians*. Our identity is defined by Jesus Christ, not by the society around us. That distinction should be reflected in everything we think, say, and do. We live in a world carried along by ungodly lusts and entertained by sin. Yet we are called to walk in thankful holiness. Though we are in this world, we are not *of* this world (John 17:14-16). That means we can’t watch every movie, laugh at every joke on television, download every new music album, click on every online video, or visit every Internet page. Taking a stand for righteousness in your own life and family is not being legalistic. It’s being Christian.