

# Half A Poison Pill Won't Kill Me:

Thoughts on Worldliness and the Media  
that Promote It

*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 who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)*

Dear Friend,

In 2001 Covenant Life Church heard a series of sermons on the Bible's teaching on "worldliness." We were concerned that the world was having more influence on us that we realized. We especially wanted to examine how the media—in all its forms—affects the ways we think and live.

Those sermons made a big impression on us. We heard people saying "I didn't realize how much time I wasted browsing the Internet," or "I'm watching less TV news and spending more time studying the Bible," or "Music has been an idol in my life, I'm learning to use it for God's glory."

You can still hear these sermons by going to the Sovereign Grace Ministries web store at:  
<http://www.sovereigngracestore.com/ProductInfo.aspx?productid=A1170-00-21>.

This booklet features quotes, both from quoted authors and from the speakers in the series—CJ Mahaney, Bob Kauflin and myself. We had many requests for these quotes so that our people could continue to be aware of our calling to be "in the world but not of the world." We hope it will help you develop and maintain convictions that will allow you to live a life pleasing to God.

In Grace,

Joshua Harris  
Senior Pastor  
Covenant Life Church

## **Worldliness Defined**

"Worldliness is departing from God. It is a man-centered way of thinking; it proposes objectives which demand no radical breach with man's fallen nature; it judges the importance of things by the present and material results; it weighs success by numbers; it covets human esteem and wants no unpopularity; it knows no truth for which it is worth suffering; it declines to be a 'fool for Christ's sake'. Worldliness is the mind-set of the unregenerate. It adopts idols and is at war with God." -Iain H. Murray  
*Evangelicalism Divided*

## **In Love With Our Shadow**

"The tragedy of the world is that the echo is mistaken for the Original shout. When our back is to the breathtaking beauty of God, we cast a shadow on the earth and fall in love with it. But it does not satisfy. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust them...For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited." -John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*

## **Everything Has Changed, Nothing Has Changed**

"When John wrote his epistle two thousand years ago he could not have imagined our modern world and its technology. We have television that gives us constant access to entertainment, an internet that provides instant connection to any imaginable content not to mention computer games, movies, books and magazines.

"But even though John couldn't foresee modern media, his warning against loving the world is just as relevant. Because even though technology has advanced, the basic principles of this world have not changed. They're still founded on, 'the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and boasting in what he has and does.' Modern media has simply done a better job of delivering the old, corrupt principles of this world.

"In an age where it is impossible to escape the reach of secular media John's admonition not to love the world is all the more important. Technology allows the world's values and attitudes to influence us nearly every moment of the day."-Joshua Harris

## **Too Much**

"A raft of studies from several decades indicate that Americans consume vast quantities of television—an average of about four to five hours per day, with many taking in much more. Televisions are also becoming nearly omnipresent, imperialistically colonizing automobiles, airports, restaurants, classrooms, bars, daycare centers and computers. They are even being placed on some gasoline pumps...Nearly 100 percent of American homes have at least one television, and three out of four have more than one. Eighty-four percent of households have at least one VCR. Many have elaborate home-theater systems costing thousands of dollars. And half of all Americans say they watch too much television!" —Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay*

## **John Piper's Television Advice**

"Turn it off! It isn't necessary for relevance. It is a deadly place to rest the mind. You are least capable of critical interaction. Its pervasive banality, sexual innuendo and God-ignoring values have no ennobling effect upon the human soul. It kills the Spirit. It drives away God. It quenches prayer. It blanks out the Bible. It cheapens the soul. It destroys spiritual power. It defiles almost everything."—John Piper from a sermon

## **Straight for the Heart**

"Media rarely if ever attempts to reason with us and convince us to love the world. Instead it stirs up feelings and emotions that bypass our minds and grip our affections. The incredibly wicked power of media is that it can make something evil look good or exciting. It can make sin seem harmless and enjoyable. It can sway our hearts to think that we deserve what we crave, that what we see is all that matters."—Joshua Harris

## **Half a Poison Pill Won't Kill Me**

"Trying to figure out how much sinful content from media you can handle and still be 'okay' is like a person who takes half a poison pill every day because 'only half' won't kill you.

"When it comes to what we watch or read or listen to we shouldn't ask how many halves of poison pills we can take. We need to examine the cumulative effect of our media habits on our attitude toward God and sin and the world." – Joshua Harris

### **TV and Truth**

"A culture that is rooted more in images than in words will find it increasingly difficult to sustain any broad commitment to any truth, since truth is an abstraction requiring language."—Ken Myers, "Image Over the Word: Discourse In Distress"

### **Easily Bored**

"[The] increasingly rapid pace of television's images makes careful evaluation impossible and undesirable for the viewer, thus rendering determinations of truth and falsity difficult if not impossible. With sophisticated video technologies, scenes change at hypervelocities and become the visual equivalent of caffeine or amphetamines. The human mind was not designed by its Creator to accommodate to these visual speeds, and so the sensorium suffers from the pathologies of velocity. This means that one simply absorbs hundreds and thousands of rapidly changing images, with little notion of what they mean or whether they correspond to any reality outside of themselves. The pace of this assault of images is entirely imposed upon us; it bears little if any resemblance to reality.

"Habituation to such imposed velocities tends to make people intellectually impatient and easily bored with anything that is slow moving and undramatic—such as reading books (particularly thoughtful ones), experiencing nature in the raw and engaging in face-to-face conversations with fellow human beings. Hence, the apprehension of difficult and demanding truths suffers and withers. The pace of television's agenda disallows edification, understanding and reflection. Boredom always threatens and must be defended against at all costs. The over-stuffed and over-stimulated soul becomes out-of-sync with God, others and itself. It cannot discern truth; it does not want to. This apathetic attitude makes the apprehension and application of truth totally irrelevant.

The acquisition of knowledge (warranted belief in what is true), requires intellectual patience and fortitude. One must linger on perplexing notions, work them through, compare them to other ideas and attempt to reach conclusions that imply wise and rational actions. Before God, one must shut up, listen and be willing to revolutionize one's life accordingly (see Ecclesiastes 5:1-7). God's word—'be still and know that I am God' (Ps 46:10)—simply cannot be experienced through television, where stillness and silence are only technical mistakes called 'dead air.' Television thus becomes a strategic weapon in the arsenal of postmodernist cynicism and apathy."—Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay*

### **Questions for Self-Evaluation from 1 John**

**Cravings of sinful man:** Are my media habits encouraging me to want my own way? Is what I'm watching, reading or listening to whispering the lie that these desires are natural, good, harmless when God's word says they will destroy my soul?

**Lust of the eyes:** Are my media habits stirring up a covetous desire for more of what this world offers? Is it making me want everything for myself — a beautiful companion, a beautiful home, a beautiful car? Is it leading me to feast my eyes on unlawful sights for the sake of sinful pleasure? Is it causing me to be captivated by the outward and visible with no regard to goodness and virtue?

**Boasting of what he has and does:** Are my media habits encouraging me to exalt myself because of material possessions, fame or athletic achievement? Does it make me want to appear important according to the world's standards of importance?—Joshua Harris

### **Excuses for Sin**

"You may see this deceitfulness [of sin] in the wonderful proneness of men to regard sin as less sinful and dangerous than it is in the sight of God and in their readiness to extenuate it, make excuses for it and minimize its guilt. 'It is but a little one! God is merciful! God is not extreme to mark what is done amiss! We mean well! One cannot be so particular! Where is the mighty harm? We only do as others!' Who is not familiar with this kind of language? You may see it in the long string of smooth words

and phrases which men have coined in order to designate things which God calls downright wicked and ruinous to the soul. What do such expressions as 'fast', 'gay', 'wild', 'unsteady', 'thoughtless', 'loose' mean? They show that men try to cheat themselves into the belief that sin is not quite so sinful as God says it is, and that they are not so bad as they really are. You may see it in the tendency even of believers to indulge their children in questionable practices, and to blind their own eyes to the inevitable result of the love of money, of tampering with temptation and sanctioning a low standard of family religion. I fear we do not sufficiently realize the extreme subtlety of our soul's disease. We are too apt to forget that temptation to sin will rarely present itself to us in its true colors, saying, 'I am your deadly enemy and I want to ruin you for ever in hell.' Oh, no! Sin comes to us, like Judas, with a kiss, and like Joab, with an outstretched hand and flattering words. The forbidden fruit seemed good and desirable to Eve, yet it cast her out of Eden. The walking idly on his palace roof seemed harmless enough to David, yet it ended in adultery and murder. Sin rarely seems sin at its first beginnings. Let us then watch and pray, lest we fall into temptation. We may give wickedness smooth names, but we cannot alter its nature and character in the sight of God. Let us remember St Paul's words: 'Exhort one another daily ...lest any be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin' (Heb. 3:13). It is a wise prayer in our Litany; 'From the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil, good Lord, deliver us.'—J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*

### **A Test for Seeing a Portrayal of Sin**

"A portrayal of sin should never prompt the reader or the listener only to want more of the same. ...the contemporary media specialize in making you an addict to sin—prompting you regularly to ask for even more of the sin you've just witnessed. Every double entendre calls for another that's a bit more daring. Pictures of sin that should produce repulsion instead produce attraction. It's by design—and it's wrong.

"In close proximity to the portrayal of sin should always be a portrayal of redemption. Sin is real, and there's nothing wrong with portraying its reality. But the good news from God is that we don't have to live forever with the burdens of sin. Christians always have a responsibility to say that. The story of sin is only half the story, and the grungy half at that. To tell that part

without also regularly pointing to the deliverance from sin that God offers is dishonest, cynical, and cruel.

"If God's Spirit is not to be grieved, you should be able honestly to give thanks to God for the portrayal in its totality. This is not a simplistic test, but wholesomely biblical. If you can't bow your head and sincerely thank God for a movie or a symphony or a newscast or a novel—or *WORLD* magazine, for that matter—then for you that activity is wrong. Stop arguing with yourself, and move on to something else."—Joel Belz, *WORLD* magazine, Sept. 28, 1996

### **Sowing to the Flesh**

"[The flesh is that] lower nature that is in each of us and remains in us even after conversion and baptism. It is one of the fields of our human estate in which we may sow.

"To 'sow to the flesh' is to pander to it, to cosset, cuddle and stroke it, instead of crucifying it. The seeds we sow are largely thoughts and deeds. Every time we allow our minds to harbor a grudge, nurse a grievance, entertain an impure fantasy, or wallow in self-pity, we are sowing to the flesh. Every time we linger in bad company whose insidious influence we know we cannot resist, every time we lie in bed when we ought to be up and praying, every time we read pornographic literature, every time we take a risk which strains our self-control, we are sowing, sowing, sowing to the flesh. Some Christians sow to the flesh every day and wonder why they do not reap holiness. Holiness is a harvest; whether we reap it or not depends almost entirely on what and where we sow." —John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*

### **Letter From a Prisoner**

Ted Baehr challenges the assumption that simply by viewing sinful media content we are left unaffected. "Too often," he writes, "[Christians] believe that a violent movie or television program will not affect them, although they know that it will affect others."

He shares an excerpt from a letter that a prison inmate wrote him. The inmate describes the violent, sexual movies the wardens foolishly choose to show to the inmates and the negative effect viewing them has on the men. "There is not a man in here who can watch that on the screen without being affected by it in a manner that is



emotionally and spiritually detrimental," the inmate writes.

"Allow me to be blunt," he continues. "It is an absurdity to believe that the effect of sex and violence in movies is any different upon you and your children than it is upon me and my fellow inmates. A short while ago many of us stood in the same ticket lines as you. We've rented videos from the same video stores as you. The world system touches every life, and every person is led into sin in the same ways, through the lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and sinful pride of life (1 John 2:15-17)."—Ted Baehr, *The Media Wise Family*

## **Biblical Principles of Conduct**

CJ Mahaney compiled the following questions and Scripture support to help in determining whether or not a certain activity is glorifying to God.

### **1. Does it present a temptation to sin?**

Romans 13:14 "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

2 Timothy 2:22 "Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

### **2. Is it beneficial?**

1 Corinthians 6:12a "'Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is beneficial."

1 Corinthians 10:23 "'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive."

### **3. Is it enslaving?**

1 Corinthians 6:12b "'Everything is permissible for me'—but I will not be mastered by anything."

### **4. Does it honor and glorify God?**

1 Corinthians 10:31 "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

### **5. Does it promote the good of others?**

1 Corinthians 10:33 "even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved."

6. **Does it cause anyone to stumble?**

1 Corinthians 10:32 "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God"

7. **Does it arise from a pure motive?**

Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

### **Putting Themselves Upon Temptation**

"In nothing does the folly of the hearts of men show itself more openly, in the days wherein we live, than in this cursed boldness, after so many warnings from God, and so many sad experiences every day under their eyes, of running into and putting themselves upon temptations." -John Owen

### **Three Encouragements to Changing Media Habits**

1. Change the set-up of your home—don't make media omnipresent or central in it.
2. Look for places in your schedule where media is becoming the default activity and do something else.
3. Periodically fast from different forms of media.  
-Joshua Harris

### **Defining Worldly Entertainment**

In his book *Worldly Amusements*, Pastor Wayne Wilson describes "worldly entertainment" as that which does at least one or both of the following:

- o "[It] promotes an evil message. It presents evil as good. This can be done by celebrating sins, such as lying, stealing, fornication or adultery. Sin is presented in an attractive way.
- o "[It] uses an evil method. Regardless of the point of the story, the performers are made to behave in ways that are shameless and immoral. A story may lead to the conclusion that adultery is bad, but if we must wallow through a sea of flesh to reach this conclusion, the work qualifies as worldly.

"No matter how excellent the production or acting is; no matter how true the 'moral' of the story, if something

promotes an evil message or uses an evil method, the discerning Christian will avoid it."

### **How Far May a Godly Person Go?**

"A godly man will not go as far as he may, lest he go further than he should."—Thomas Watson, *A Godly Man's Picture*

### **Viewing Violence**

"That some acts of violence are inherently appropriate public viewing is proven by the biblical approval of divine judgment, the execution of civil authority, and military endeavors. While this may be true, it must never be seen as giving blanket acceptance of violence as a means of entertainment. Violence in life, as in drama, can be the corrupt fruit of sheer exploitation, serving the least-noble passions in a person's nature. Many people have an inhuman, perverse attachment to violence for its own sake; that is violent acts utterly removed from the noble qualities of enforcing justice, fighting evil, and demonstrating courage." —Wayne Wilson, *Worldly Amusements*

### **Praying Before Watching**

"Believers are very careful to pray over their food—something which bears only upon the body. Theatrical amusements are food for the soul. How many believers do you know who pray over what they watch? I suggest you never go to a movie or rent a video without asking the Lord Jesus to help you choose well and worthily. Ask Him to bless your choice. Submit your choice to Him. Tell Him that you desire to honor Him by patronizing only that which is wholesome and consistent with the moral principles of His Word. Tell Him that if you choose poorly, you will walk out or turn it off."—Wayne Wilson, *Worldly Amusements*

### **Symptoms of Compromise in Music Listening Habits**

1. Regularly listening to non-Christian radio stations that accept or promote ungodly attitudes and lifestyles without being repelled by the content or culture of the programming.
2. Letting music determine priorities.

3. Allowing music to crowd out prayer, Bible study, fellowship, serving, or other means of glorifying God.
  4. Adjusting my schedule to my music desires.
  5. Lacking spiritual passion and drive outside corporate church contexts.
  6. Looking to non-Christians or worldly Christians to dictate my music listening habits.
  7. Listening to music in contexts which tempt me to compromise my faith.
- Bob Kauflin

### **Three Truths About Music**

1. Music is a gift from God, meant for our enjoyment and benefit. It exists to deepen our love for and enjoyment of God.
  2. Music is a means not an end. Music must never replace God as our source of joy, comfort, and strength.
  3. Discernment and skill increase the benefits of music.
- Bob Kauflin

### **Carelessness After Conquest**

"Never let us reckon that our work in contending against sin, in crucifying, mortifying, and subduing of it, is at an end. The place of its habitation is unsearchable; and when we may think that we have thoroughly won the field, there is still some reserve remaining that we saw not, that we knew not of. Many conquerors have been ruined by their carelessness after a victory, and many have been spiritually wounded after great successes against this enemy...There is no way for us to pursue sin in its unsearchable habitation but by being endless in our pursuit." —John Owen

### **A Prayer**

"Fight for us, O God, that we not drift numb and blind and foolish into vain and empty excitements. Life is too short, too precious, too painful to waste on worldly bubbles that burst. Heaven is too great, hell is too horrible, eternity is too long that we should putter around on the porch of eternity. O God, open our eyes to the vastness of the sufferings of Christ and what they mean for sin and

holiness and hope and heaven. We fear our bent to trifling. Make us awake to the weight of glory—the glory of Christ's incomparable sufferings." —John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*

## Scripture for Meditation and Memorization

Psalm 101:3 "I will set before my eyes no vile thing. The deeds of faithless men I hate; they will not cling to me."

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."

Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

1 Corinthians 15:33 "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"

Ephesians 5:3-12 "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. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret."

Hebrews. 12:14 "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

1 Peter 1:13-16 "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"

Galatians 6:7-9 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his

sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."