



"He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."—1 John 2:4-6

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Is Liberty a God-Given Right?

By Don Hooser

Is every individual born with great personal freedom as a gift from our Creator God? It's a topic that most people have not tried to analyze, and it is a little confusing. (This is the first article in a series on the God-given rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.")



THE AMERICAN DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, adopted on July 4, 1776, contains these famous words: "We hold these *truths* to be *self-evident*: That all men are created equal; that they are *endowed by their Creator* with certain *unalienable rights*; that among these are life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness" (emphasis added).

Today, many other countries have similar statements in their governing documents. If these are "truths," they are true for *everyone*, not just Americans. But if these are "truths," what evidence supports them?

Some people deny that these are truths, and even more people deny that they are "self-evident," which means so logically and obviously true that no proof or explanation is required.

And how should we understand the phrases "all men are created equal" and "unalienable rights"?

"Truths" are derived from the Bible

Jesus Christ said to God, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). What is all-important to understand about the founders of the United States of America is that many of them believed the Bible to be the infallible revelation of God, so what they considered to be "truths" were derived from their understanding of the Bible. They considered these truths to be especially "self-evident" to all who shared their belief in the Bible.

Stating that every individual has unalienable rights further emphasizes the importance of the individual as compared to the importance of the state.

Believe it or not, the Bible is the premier authority on personal liberty! It has been the world's greatest force for freedom, inspiring people for millennia to

seek freedom for themselves and their nations.

The greatest freedoms are spiritual—freedom from slavery to sin and human nature, from the burdens of guilt, from bad habits and addictions and eventually even freedom from the limitations of our mortal human bodies!

However, the Bible also makes clear that God favors great civil liberties and personal freedoms for all people.

Therefore, let's analyze the Declaration's famous words to see how biblically accurate they are.

How are people “created equal”?

God's creation displays awesome variety, including variety in humanity. People are born with many different characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. But the Bible clearly teaches that every single human being is important to God.

God “desires *all* men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The Bible compares God to a “good shepherd” who cares not just for the flock as a whole, but also for every single sheep in the flock (Matthew 18:10-14; John 10:10-15).

God will eventually offer every human being the *equal opportunity* for eternal life in His family! In fact, “God so loved the world [meaning every single person in the world] that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

God also judges every person equally according to His laws. “God shows personal favoritism to no man” (Galatians 2:6). What is sin for one person is a sin for the next person.

Therefore, people are “created equal” in that they have the same *spiritual potential* and *ultimate opportunity*, and God judges all in the same way.

This also means that governments should follow the example of God in showing great respect for every citizen and treating everyone fairly and equally under the law. No one should be “above the law,” not even the highest officials in the government. And the freedoms of the weakest members of society should be guarded as zealously as the freedoms of the strongest members.

What are “unalienable rights”? They are the permanent rights of each individual that he or she cannot be alienated, or separated, from. Stating that every individual has unalienable rights further emphasizes the importance of the *individual* as compared to the importance of the *state*. The Bible in no way supports the idea of statism. Instead of government “for the people,” statism sacrifices the welfare of the people *for the state*.

So how are people born free?

“God created man in His own image” (Genesis 1:27), giving us incredible honor, potential and abilities!

God gives us a huge amount of freedom, and Satan tries to rob us of freedom. He gave humans “dominion,” or rule, “over all the earth” (verse 26). God delegated to us stewardship of planet Earth. That’s a lot of freedom and responsibility! In a sense, God was saying, “I’m giving you this whole planet to enjoy and use in any way that you think is beneficial. I’ll give you guidelines, but I won’t be micromanaging. You’ll have the freedom to manage it as you think best.”

Humans are born free because they have incredible minds. Non-human creatures are not born free—they are strictly governed by their instincts.

Humans, on the other hand, are free to think, learn, speak, reason, imagine, dream, set goals, be creative and artistic, develop tools that multiply the power of human energy, change their environments and change themselves, invent, develop personality, love, worship, nurture relationships and make decisions and choices.

We were born free. Another person or group of people can restrict, restrain and rob you of freedom—they can tie you up and gag you, rob you of your resources, injure you and kill you. But governments can’t *give* you freedoms that you already have from birth, and a government is defying the will of God when it takes away those God-given freedoms.

Free moral agency is clearly taught in the Bible. God defines good and evil, announces rewards and punishments, and proclaims warnings and pleas. But God leaves people free to “choose” between the options (Deuteronomy 30:19). This freedom is absolutely essential to character development and spiritual growth. People must be free to make choices and to experience both the good and bad consequences of their choices.

Believe it or not, the Bible is the premier authority on personal liberty!

When tyrants and tyrannical governments take away people’s personal freedoms, it should be obvious that this interferes with God’s plan for mankind.

In contrast, most pagan religions teach fatalism—that the gods predetermine your fate. As a result, when people think they are being controlled by the gods, they think it would be futile—and perhaps against the will of the gods—to try to better themselves and improve their world. This is but one of many ways that religious beliefs have major affects on the attitudes and actions of a nation’s people.

Liberty based on law

True freedom is based on right laws, and God also is the great Lawgiver. Since God created all “nature,” the “natural laws” or laws of nature are the laws of God. Just as God instituted laws of physics, chemistry and mathematics, He instituted absolute spiritual laws. Just as breaking a law of “science” has automatic penalties, breaking a spiritual law has automatic penalties as well.

People don’t think laws of physics, chemistry and math are robbing them of freedom. Actually, they enable freedom, whereas unpredictable chaos would destroy freedom. Understanding natural law provides predictability and reliability that is essential for scientific progress.

Likewise, God's spiritual laws enable and preserve freedom. God's law is the perfect "law of liberty" (James 1:25; 2:12).

True enduring freedom is not absolute liberty; licentiousness or license to do anything one wishes or lusts to do. One's freedoms must not intrude into another person's life in a way that takes away from his own freedom. Good laws, such as the Ten Commandments, protect everyone's freedoms equally.

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, Israel was to be His model nation founded on a covenant (a *charter* or *constitution*!) including laws that David said were "perfect" (Psalm 19:7). All of God's laws and instructions were to be written down and regularly read by or to the people. It was also important for parents to teach them to their children (Deuteronomy 6:7).



Thus, we see that for freedom to thrive, there must be a *written* constitution that restrains government rather than restraining the people. The constitution should apply to all the citizens equally and be available for *all to read*. Therefore, it is important for the citizens to be *educated*, to be able to *read*, and to be familiar with their rights and responsibilities according to their constitution.

The Ten Commandments have been criticized for sounding negative—most saying, "You shall *not*." But that kind of law is exactly what a nation needs—laws that restrain evil! These are not restraining the countless way to do good! They keep people free to unleash their creative imaginations and energies to be productive. God is positive! The Ten Commandments imply that God is saying *yes* to everything that He is not saying *no* to.

Beware of many positive-*sounding* laws (making all kinds of promises), which are interventionist efforts of a welfare state to manipulate and micromanage the people and the economy—thereby creating more problems than solutions in the long run.

Think how tiny our Bibles are compared to the enormous law libraries of today's large nations! And yet, the laws contained in only a small part of the Bible were all that was necessary for national governance. Good laws are a blessing; bad laws and too many laws are a curse.

God offers freedom—Satan offers slavery

God created us to enjoy freedom and to use it for good purposes. But to fulfill His ingenious plan for mankind, God has allowed Satan to temporarily be the god and ruler of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4; John 12:31).

One of the temptations of human nature is to lust for power over others. And Satan pours fuel on the fire, inciting people to become despots and tyrants.

To illustrate how much freedom God offers us, consider the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve that they had the freedom to enjoy all the many kinds of trees in the garden—except for one.

But they abused their freedom at Satan's prompting and ate of the one forbidden tree. Here is the point: God gives us a huge amount of freedom, and Satan tries to rob us of freedom.

Notice how Jesus Christ summed up the difference between Him and Satan: "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief [Satan] does not come except to steal, to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly (John 10:9-10).

Indeed, it is true: All people are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights—one of those being *liberty*. Future articles will explain the gift of life and the gift of the pursuit of happiness.

Enjoy God's gift of liberty. Don't abuse it. Use it well. And be very, very thankful.

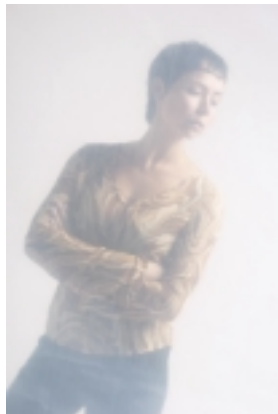
Further reading

To read more articles regarding liberty, check out ["There's More Than a Crack on the Bell"](#) and ["America's Revolution and the Bible"](#).

Humility and Pride

By Dale Schurter

Reflections on the differences between the contrasting attitudes of pride and humility.



I AM CONVINCED IT TAKES HUMILITY to recognize humility. And it also takes humility to recognize pride. Pride sees fault in others, while humility recognizes faults within. Pride accuses others of pride and sees humility as weakness.

Humility contains the power to conquer pride.

Humility is loved and has many friends.

Understanding pride is an important key to self-control; in the presence of pride, self-control will flee. Another truism is that self-control is a friend of humility. In fact, it is a loving friendship producing righteousness.

Pride sees fault in others, while humility recognizes faults within.

Pride is alone and often contains fear, while humility is a tower of peaceful strength.

I have observed a conclusion of the matter. Humility spawns kindness, gentleness, self-control, love and righteousness while pride spawns conceit, jealousy, fear and blame. It accuses and condemns, supports lying, greed, hate, and unrighteousness.

“Everyone proud in heart is an abomination [detestable] to the LORD” (Proverbs 16:5). “The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts” (Psalm 10:4). “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).

“The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4, English Standard Version). “Blessed [happy] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed [happy] are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:3, 5).

Further reading

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The Difficult and Narrow Highway of Life

By Walter Zamonsky

The road of life can be a difficult one. What's the best path to take, and how can you keep yourself on it?



JESUS SAID, “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

There is much food for thought in that brief statement!

The King James Version translates this as the “strait” gate. Strait is a Middle English word meaning narrow and difficult. Many people confuse this word with “straight,” but *straight* would imply *easy*. The godly path of life is often not straight. It has many surprising and challenging twists and turns.

But what is meant by the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3, which says, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God”? The verse also says, “Prepare the way of the LORD.” This pictures people expecting a visit from a great ruler, so they do everything possible to prepare the road for his arrival. “Prepare” means to clear away the obstacles (Isaiah 57:14; 62:10).

The godly path of life is often not straight. It has many surprising and challenging twists and turns.

That prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist clearing the way for Christ’s first coming (Luke 3:2-4). Today, God’s Church is fulfilling that prophecy by preparing the way for Christ’s second coming.

Back to the subject of the difficult “way” (or highway) that leads to “life.” Twists and turns in a highway make it more difficult for a driver to stay on the highway and not veer or slide off. He must constantly keep his eye on the road and concentrate on steering, braking and accelerating.

As we travel life’s highway, many veer off into the ditch on the right or the ditch on the left. Remember, for every mile of road we travel there are two miles of ditch (one on each side).

Think of the ditches as representing sin. A major definition of sin is the breaking of any law of God (1 John 3:4).

Keep in mind this scripture: “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deuteronomy 4:2). So, one ditch can represent forgetting or neglecting a law of God—taking away. The other ditch can represent putting our own ideas, habits and traditions ahead of God’s law—adding to.

One Way

Life is quite confusing. Many churches that claim to be Christian regularly add to God’s law and take away from God’s law. And many of those same churches claim that there are many highways to heaven and that it doesn’t matter which highway you take as long as you are trying to head toward God.



There is only one way to eternal life in God’s Kingdom. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

How vulnerable are we to being misled by unbiblical claims? Some may be appealing because they would permit us to give in to our weaknesses and temptations. Do we hate sin as we should or are we tolerant of sin?

Traveling the highway of life is dangerous! Being surrounded by so many false “Christian” beliefs is like having many, many side roads. Will we stay on the main highways—God’s highway—or will we make some wrong turns?

The politically correct gospel is that we must be tolerant—including tolerant of all lifestyles and religious beliefs. But what they really mean is that we must condone all lifestyles and beliefs as all being equal. When they say that no one has the right to pass judgment on anyone else, they mean that we should not say there is absolute right and wrong.

We are to know what right and wrong is from God’s Word—how to understand the holy and profane from God’s viewpoint. That is the only path that pleases God.

The excuse is made that they are all nice, good guys, meaning no harm. But so what? That doesn't mean they are on God's highway. And look around; see for yourself where differing religions, countries, societies and people are today. The fruits are not good. And Jesus said that we should know people by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20).

We are to know what right and wrong is from God's Word—how to understand the holy and profane from God's viewpoint.

But another temptation we face is being too hard on our neighbors, calling them down, not respecting them because of how they live, acting smug, avoiding being friendly toward them. Both ditches are distracting and destructive; we must not judge and condemn others or try to force obedience to God. We can, however, set a good example by being "good drivers" and making sure our vehicle stays on the road.

Stay Alert

We also tend to get sidetracked by the tugs and pulls of our own human nature, which draws us in various directions. Because we all have free moral agency, we can easily abuse that freedom to do our own thing. Be very aware of this: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12).

Our human nature tends to pull us off one side of the highway or the other. Life is full of distractions that would cause us to end up in one ditch or another. This is what Jesus meant when He spoke of the seed sown among thorns and weeds (Matthew 13:22).

In traveling a highway, drivers need to be on guard against sleepiness, distractions within the car like the radio or passengers, bad road conditions like ice, things lying on the road or broken pavement, other traffic using the same road, and possible mechanical problems. Any of these could put us into one ditch or the other. Likewise, there are many spiritual perils in traveling the highway of life that we must be on guard against.



Human nature also has a seemingly built-in resistance to anyone telling us what to do. Our raw human nature is described in Romans 8:7—"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." We must overcome that rebelliousness by the power of God's Holy Spirit (verses 8 and 14).

How can one obtain God's Holy Spirit? It is summarized in the sermon Peter gave at Pentecost in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 2. In Acts 2:38, we read that Peter encouraged those who were stricken in conscience to "repent, and be baptized."

Jesus Christ is our driving instructor, and He has promised to always be with us.

Peter knew that God's law defines sin and that Jesus' shed blood erases the penalty for those who repent and are baptized. Then, after our sins have been forgiven, we still must struggle for the rest of our lives to overcome the wrong habits and tendencies to sin.

It is the blood of Christ that frees us from the penalty, but it is adherence to the law of God that reflects the appreciation and love we have for the precious gift of His blood and the offer of eternal life. We must "walk [or drive] in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

Jesus Christ is our driving instructor, and He has promised to always be with us. Always listen to Him, do what He says, keep your eye on the road, and keep your life on God's true highway of life.

Further reading

Request or download our free booklet [Making Life Work](#).

Amusement Addiction: Society's Unhealthy Obsession With Entertainment

By Becky Sweat

Our society is obsessed with entertainment. Kids and adults alike seem attached to their MP3 players, PDAs, remote controls and other electronic devices. Newscasters and college lecturers have replaced "newsy" messages with more entertaining approaches. Is that bad? What steps can we take to keep from becoming addicted to entertainment?



“MOM, I CAN'T FIND MY MP3 PLAYER!” shouts the 12-year-old from her bedroom.

It is a school morning, and the girl is just minutes away from missing her bus. Mom races in to the room and discovers her daughter frantically rummaging through dresser drawers and piles of clothes on the floor in a desperate search.

“I can't go to school without my music!” the girl shrieks when she sees her mother.

It was true—the girl brought it to school every day. The school district allowed middle and high school students to listen to music on their MP3 players during lunch periods and while doing independent work in classes, as long as the students weren't disruptive.

For these students, MP3 players had become part of the school experience. They would sit on the bus, work on assignments in class, go through cafeteria lines and eat their lunches—music being pumped into their ears the whole time. Nearly all students carry an MP3 player in their backpack, along with cell phones, PDAs (personal digital assistants) and portable games. They have access to games, music and videos, and wireless Internet. If study halls, assemblies, or long bus rides to and from school got too dull, these students were prepared with multiple electronic diversions.

It is a sign of our times. "Kids today, and really adults too, expect to be entertained all the time—even when they're at school and work," observes Gregory Bloom, lecturer and author of *Overcoming Entertainment Addiction: How to Cure Your Children of the Need to be Constantly Entertained* (Action Publishing Group, 2006).

Of course, not all schools allow entertainment devices on campus, but many do. And even if schools prohibit cell phones, a lot of students sneak them in anyway, just so they can text message friends during classes. As one tenth grader admitted, "It helps me stay awake during boring class discussions."



Adults do the same things on the job. They bring MP3 players with them to the office so they can listen to music or podcasts while they work—just to make their jobs a little more bearable. When in meetings, they might play games on their PDAs or send text messages rather than pay attention to the person speaking.

After a day at school or work, kids and adults alike head home to their televisions and computers. Typically, with the younger set, they're playing video games on their TVs, or using their computers to message friends on social network websites, download video clips, or just "surf the web" for fun. A lot of adults are drawn to these activities too. Or, they may just plop down in front of their big screen televisions and watch a sitcom or order a movie on demand. When it is time to do homework or eat dinner, chances are the TV is on in the background, and it stays on all evening.

In one sense, this is nothing new. People have always enjoyed having fun. But unquestionably society has taken its pursuit of pleasure to new levels. Many sociologists believe that modern society is actually addicted to entertainment. This is due largely to the technological innovations in electronic media that have been developed in the last 10-15 years.

"There simply are a lot more ways to be entertained today than there used to be, and it's really hard not to be taken in by it all," says Cynthia King, Ph.D., director of the Center for Entertainment and Tourism Studies at California State University at Fullerton and co-author of *Entertainment and Society* (2008).

Back in the 1970s, the only electronic entertainment owned by the typical American family was probably a TV, radio, phonograph, and cassette player. They had access to 3 or 4 television

stations, and programming often ended at midnight. Television was certainly part of American home life, but it was not available 24 hours a day.

Today, we are overloaded with entertainment options. An American family might own any number of electronic “toys”—from HD-TVs, DVD players, cell phones and home theater systems to video game consoles, computers, PDAs and MP3 players. Many of these devices are portable (unlike the large console TVs and pinball machines from earlier times), so you can take them with you wherever you go, creating more possibilities for entertainment. According to the Consumer Electronics Association, the average U.S. household has 25 of these kinds of products. Most households are hooked into Wi-Fi Internet technology, and either cable, fiber optic or satellite TV, providing access to hundreds of TV channels and around-the-clock programming. It is the same in most other industrialized nations as well.

But our world’s obsession with entertainment is not limited to consumer electronic products. This desire to be amused can be seen in every facet of life. TV news channels and newspapers often forego coverage of serious “hard news” stories and devote most of their time and space to the personal lives of entertainers and sensationalistic crime stories. Mega-churches are popping up all over the country, promising “feel good” messages and electrifying musical performances. College professors have had to replace old-fashioned college lectures with humor-laden Power Point presentations.

“Kids today, and really adults too, expect to be entertained all the time...”

“People want more entertainment, and they want everything that’s not entertainment to become entertainment,” Bloom says. “If they have to do something that seems challenging or mundane, they want to make it fun.”

Not all bad

There is nothing wrong with wanting to enjoy oneself, to a point. Entertainment, as long as it is not promoting immoral behavior, can be a very positive thing. The Bible states in Ecclesiastes 12:12 that “much study is wearisome to the flesh.” Mankind needs relaxation and entertainment.

When King Saul felt overwhelmed and anguished, David played music on his harp to soothe him (1 Samuel 16:23). It helped Saul feel refreshed, and the evil spirit that was troubling him departed. We may not find ourselves in the same kind of situations Saul did, but we still become weary and disheartened. Listening to music or enjoying other kinds of entertainment can help us feel re-energized and uplifted.

For some, entertainment can simply serve as a pleasant diversion from typically very busy lives. It might be an activity you do for limited amounts of time to take your mind off more routine or arduous tasks. That may mean playing a few video games, watching a good movie or television program, or reading a humorous book.

So much of entertainment does seek to make people laugh, and laughter can be good for our mental and physical health. Proverbs 17:22 tells us “A merry heart does good, like medicine.”

Entertainment becomes a problem, or an addiction, when it becomes too high of a priority. When one seeks to be entertained all the time, rather than in moderation, and electronic “toys” have

taken over his or her life, there is a problem. If one cannot go anywhere without an MP3 player and PDA, and spends more time surfing the Internet and watching TV than interacting with one's family, there is a problem. It may very well be getting in the way of his or her spiritual life. The apostle Paul warns against those who are "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4).

One way to put things in perspective is to think of your daily life in terms of a pie chart. What piece of the pie would you want to be devoted to media entertainment and what piece would you want to be for family and friends? "Theoretically, most everyone would want the big piece of pie to be family and friends," contends Patricia Leavy, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, with a special interest in the role of entertainment in society. "But if you look at how people actually spend their time, I think you'd see the reverse—that they're spending their time with all this media entertainment. I don't think that's actually what people really want, but I do think that we fall into habits that are difficult to break."

The negatives

The issue, though, is not just how much time people are spending in the "entertainment zone," but the type of entertainment that they are seeking. We're all familiar with the so-called "Hollywood values," like violence, profanity and sexual immorality with which many of today's movies, television shows, music, video games and websites are saturated. If you bring this kind of entertainment into your home, those are the kinds of standards you and your children will be soaking up.

"The sad thing about this entertainment is that it is not value-neutral. It's very much backed by people with agendas, and it's not all innocent," Bloom says. "We let this media come into our homes and we review things that we would never dream of teaching our kids as acceptable, whether it's violence, teen sex or disrespect for elders—but that's what's modeled for them, and we watch it because it's funny." There is some "clean" family entertainment out there too, Bloom notes, but unfortunately that's not the kind of entertainment most of society is opting for.

But there's another more insidious aspect of most of today's entertainment which is just as damaging: it isolates people rather than bringing people together.

"It used to be that people played more cards and board games and participated in recreational activities together, and that was how they entertained themselves," Leavy observes. "Now it's primarily all this passive entertainment where you're listening to your iPod or surfing the Internet and you're by yourself."



Active forms of entertainment can build relationships, as people interact with each other and share positive experiences, according to Leavy. In contrast, when someone uses passive entertainment, he or she is tuning everyone else out. This can generate a mentality of only seeking to appease the self, and becoming oblivious to the needs of others (since they've been shut out). While it is true that some Internet time is spent on social

networking sites and chat rooms, that is a participatory activity on only a very minimal level, Leavy says.

All this passive entertainment is doing great harm to family life. “There’s not a lot of time for family members to talk with each other anymore because it’s consumed by all the entertainment devices that we have,” Bloom says.

It is not uncommon for family members to spend their weeknights and weekends each with their own electronic devices—Dad might be in one room watching TV, Mom is at the laptop in another room, one child is playing video games and the other child is listening to their MP3 player. Sadly, when these kids grow up, they’re going to rebel, Bloom says, because “there’s no relationship there to anchor them to Mom and Dad, since they were really raised by their iPods.” Chances are, marital relationships aren’t what they should be either, he adds, if Mom and Dad are interacting more with their electronic “toys” than they are with each other.

For kids in particular, all the passive entertainment is a problem because it hinders their development of appropriate interpersonal skills, Leavy says. “They’re learning how to interact with others, including how to making friends and date, largely by a technological means as opposed to face-to-face interaction,” she says. “Yet there’s a big difference between communicating with a thousand people you don’t really know on MySpace or Facebook versus what it means to meet people face-to-face, read people’s gestures, learn to get to know each other and communicate verbally.” With “virtual relationships,” people just exchange bite-sized tidbits of information—definitely not the building blocks of solid relationships.

Entertainment

*becomes a problem,
or an addiction,
when it becomes too
high of a priority.*

There’s another negative lesson kids are learning too, Leavy says, and that is, “that it’s normal to walk down the street with your iPod on so you’re in your own little world, and normal to be at the dinner table sending text messages with your cell phone and ignoring everyone at the table.” She believes many kids today are not interacting with people even when they are face-to-face with others. Her concern is that these kids are going to model that kind of behavior for their own kids someday, perpetuating the behavior. Some sociologists are also concerned about how much these kids are actually getting out of school—if they are always plugged into their music when they are doing their homework.

Unfortunately, adults are developing the same bad habits. They are wrapped up in their own entertainment worlds too, often alienating friends and family around them. And as was already mentioned, they are even letting their need for entertainment take over their work lives. Not only can this result in job loss, it can also lead to some serious consequences for others who are relying on them to focus on their jobs. Just this past September, a commuter train conductor in California was preoccupied, sending text messages with his cell phone. He wasn’t paying attention to where the train was headed. It crashed, killing 25 people.

There is also concern over what our fixation on entertainment is doing to our minds. “As a society, we have an inability to get interested in major social problems that really do affect a large portion of the world’s population, like what’s happening in Darfur for example, with the genocide of hundreds of thousands of people,” asserts Karen Sternheimer, Ph.D., sociology professor at the University of Southern California and one of the country’s leading researchers in the area of pop culture.

According to Sternheimer, we're becoming passive about these kinds of very serious issues, because "It's just not fun to think about these things. We're so used to being entertained all the time that we just don't want to wrap our minds around something that isn't going to give us some enjoyment. We don't want to hear about these major issues that might make us feel helpless or depressed." Instead, the public is drawn to gossipy little news clips about celebrities, and the media panders to that.

But in fairness to the public, Sternheimer continues, "with the Darfur story you do need to have some background information to understand what's happening. Many of us do not have time to educate ourselves about all of these issues, so it's hard for us to get into news stories about them. But even if you don't really know who Britney Spears is, you can get, 'Oh, she looks like she's a bad mom,' or 'Oh, I can't believe she shaved her head!' We don't really need a lot of other information to watch that story."

When the media does need to report a somber incident in the news, perhaps a shooting or a natural disaster, they generally try to find some way to make it exciting. Usually that means sensationalizing the facts, or searching for a news angle that has some shock value. That way a sad news story can at least be told in an entertaining way, and the viewing audience will be more likely to pay attention.

One other issue worth noting is that the constant influence of passive entertainment may also be stifling our creative abilities. "People don't learn how to fill boredom in their lives in productive ways anymore. We're used to having some kind of passive entertainment flashing at us all the time," Leavy says.

For example, children don't know what to do with their free time if the batteries go dead on their hand-held entertainment devices. Adults can get just as uncomfortable. "A lot of people think they have to be hooked into their media entertainment devices 24/7," says Leavy. If we are at a coffee shop and supposedly relaxing, we might sit there furiously text messaging on our cell phones the whole time. In the car, we can listen to CDs or talk radio. At home, the TV may be on constantly.

"Many people rely on their technology so much to keep themselves occupied, that if they were ever without it, they wouldn't know how to entertain themselves," asserts Leavy. "They're just not used to creating their own activities."

Pitfalls to avoid

As with all addictions, people who are truly hooked on entertainment do not even realize they are addicted. They are just doing what most everyone else in society is doing. They have let themselves fall into that mode of behavior, without even thinking about why they are doing it or what the consequences might be.

"Our lives are so busy, we have so much going on, and we're exhausted when we come home from work. The media becomes a really easy way to relax at the end of a long day—it doesn't require us to exert a lot of energy to use it, it's always available, and we just get accustomed to it," says King.

If there are children in the house, they will follow their parents' examples. "If you're watching television all night, your kids are going to do the same thing," Bloom states. Many times, he adds, "Parents are so tired in the evening, they don't feel like they have any energy left to deal with their

kids, so they just let them (or even encourage them) to watch TV or play video games.” That way, Mom and Dad feel no guilt crashing in front of the TV themselves.

For some, all this mediated entertainment is an attempt at escaping—sometimes subconsciously—the realities of life. “They’re engaging in the media as a distraction from what they’re facing in their own life,” King says.

If a man is unemployed, he might watch a drama every week featuring a wealthy businessman. If a woman is in a faltering relationship, she might find herself drawn to a TV show featuring a couple with a seemingly perfect marriage. Even kids may plug into their MP3 players the minute they get on the bus at the end of the school day, if for no other reason than to try to “escape” thinking about being teased at school that day, or to block out taunting from the bully a few seats back. The trouble is, King warns, “Sometimes people get so wrapped up in their ‘make-believe’ worlds that they’re not confronting personal problems that really need to be dealt with.”

Are you trying to escape your own problems and avoid dealing with them? Are you buying electronic equipment you don't need or can't afford, primarily because everyone else is doing it?

For others, all this new entertainment technology is purchased and embraced because it is simply too enticing to resist. “You can’t go anywhere without seeing advertisements for all these great technologies,” says Leavy. “They’re thrown in our faces and kids especially always want to have what other kids have. I think people have become really focused on those things. That’s really one of the main reasons people work so hard—to buy all these expensive technologies that they can then enjoy when they’re tired from working so much.”

What’s the solution?

You can break free from the entertainment pitfalls just mentioned, but it requires an honest assessment of your lifestyle, and the commitment and determination to make necessary changes.

“Think about how much time you use the media, versus spending time with family and friends,” urges Bloom. “Do you really want to be spending so much time in front of the television, or would you really rather being going on a walk with your spouse? This life doesn’t last forever, and we need to treat our days as such and be careful how we use our time.” Put another way, we need to “Number our days,” as we’re admonished to do in Psalm 90:12.

If you have children at home, you need to be especially aware of your example. “You can’t be sitting in front of the television all night and expect your kids to go do something else,” says King. If that is your situation, you should initiate some family activities you can all do together.

Plan a weekly family game night (and play board or card games), play a game of soccer or go bike riding together, take up some hobbies as a family (crafts, cooking, gardening, etc.), or plan a family outing (to the zoo, museum, park, hiking trails, community recreation center, etc.). These are all active ways to entertain yourselves, rather than passive.

Your kids may protest at first, Leavy says, but “after they get into it, they’re sure to like it, and so will you. True, you might be tired yourself, but these kinds of activities are actually more invigorating and re-energizing than if you just lie on the couch and watch television.”

You do not have to give up passive, mediated entertainment altogether, but you should limit how much of this you allow, and make careful choices regarding what you watch and listen to. It is possible to cultivate a taste in ourselves and our children for high quality music, movies and books that do more than amuse us, but also educate, edify and build us up.

If there are particular television shows your children like, you can watch them together, and afterwards talk about what you saw. This makes it more of an activity and not just passive entertainment. The same can be done with music. Rather than your teens always listening to their music in isolation, have them play it on a CD player so everyone can hear it (this will, of course, dictate that you try to foster a discriminating taste in music in your teens!). That way the music becomes a shared experience.

Whether or not you have kids, you still need to be aware of what kinds of entertainment you are selecting. To put this in biblical terms, “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 these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Remember too, that in some cases, there can be more to a person’s entertainment addiction than just following societal trends. Think about why you are seeking media entertainment. Are you trying to escape your own problems and avoid dealing with them? Are you buying electronic equipment you don’t need or can’t afford, primarily because everyone else is doing it? Are you so preoccupied with entertaining yourself that you are forgetting what others may need? Are you trying to fill a hole in your life that cannot truly be filled by “things”? Don’t make the mistake of changing the external (limiting TV usage, etc.) without addressing what may also be going on internally.

To sum up, entertainment, like so many things in life, is not something that is inherently good or bad. It all depends on how it is used. The key is to try to seek a balance.

“We have to have some responsibility, not only for ourselves, but for our communities and the world around us. Enjoyed in moderation, entertainment does not take away from that,” Sternheimer concludes. “But if you are constantly seeking to be entertained, you will become totally ... absorbed in seeking your own pleasures, and you will miss out on the joy that comes from helping others.”

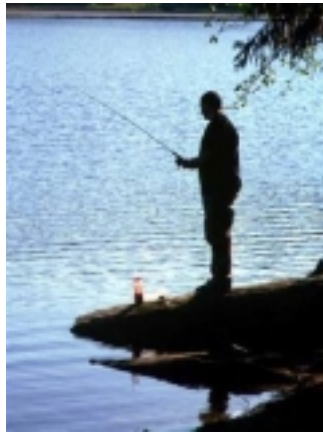
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God Knows Fishing!

By Robert Berendt

Fishing and fishermen make repeated appearances in the pages of the Bible. What do we stand to learn from God's illustrative use of this pastime?



THE BIBLE INFORMS US THAT GOD created the fish of the sea. He created everything and that means every conceivable kind of fish. He created trout, salmon, halibut, cod; He created sharks, octopuses and whales. What God did not create were fishermen—they seem to have developed naturally and somehow a huge number of people love to fish. That is quite a phenomenon and when we see the extent to which people will travel to be able to catch a fish, one wonders if some sort of addiction has occurred.

It is evident that the cost per ounce of fish caught by the average fisherman is far greater than the cost per ounce to buy that same fish in the supermarket. Yet, we call it recreation and even regulations that prevent a person from taking a fish home to cook and eat have not had much of an impact on the number of people who love to fish. Catch and release is the latest regulation for maintaining the fish population and keeping those who love to fish happy.

There is a remarkable connection between God and the art of fishing. He seems to really appreciate and love the sport and those who enjoy it. We live at a time when humans have polluted most of the fresh water rivers and lakes in the world. Given enough time, they would all be polluted. God has foreseen this and made a couple of incredible promises for the future. He promises a river of pure clean water, with “swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows” (see Ezekiel 47:9-10, New Living Translation). Fish will abound in this river and it will not be catch and release.

There is a remarkable connection between God and the art of fishing

Knowing Where to Fish

The life of Jesus Christ revolved around fishing in many ways. Many of the disciples God chose were fishermen. Simon, Andrew, James and John are named (Mark 1:16-20).

Luke records the story of three of these men fishing, and Jesus watching from the shore of Lake Gennesaret (Lake Galilee). They had quit fishing for the day because there seemed to be no fish. Jesus asked to be taken out into the water a short distance in order to speak to the throngs of people who had gathered. After Jesus finished teaching, he told Simon (later called Peter) to go out into the deep water and let down his nets. Simon admitted they had fished all day and caught nothing, but did as Jesus asked. The nets were soon so full of fish, they almost broke and the fishermen were amazed at how many fish they had caught (Luke 5:1-10). How would you like an expert like that on board every day?



There is a delightful story about the disciples who returned to the Sea of Galilee (Sea of Tiberius). When those who love to fish get near water, their mind tends to wander—Peter said: “I am going fishing.” They all said, “We are going with you” (John 21:1-3). This is a typical scene among fellows who have an opportunity to put a line or net in the water.

Once they were out and just offshore, Jesus appeared to them for the third time since His resurrection (John 21:14). Not only did He tell them which side of the boat to fish from—but also by the time they realized who He was, He had already caught some fish and was cooking them for breakfast (John 21:9). There was no catch and release regulation here! It is obvious to anyone who loves fishing that Jesus had not only caught the fish, but had cleaned them and prepared them for cooking. He knew how to cook fish! If I had a friend like that who said, “Wanna go fishing?” I would jump at the chance! There must be some connection or reason for all the emphasis on the sport.

Most people who love to fish realize that success depends on a whole lot of things. First of all, there need to be fish to catch, and then you need the right equipment, license and bait. You also need a lot of patience and practice. Little children seem to be able to catch fish with a safety pin for a hook—but not us grown folks. Even when everything is perfect, you need fish with an appetite. I have sat in a boat and watched schools of fish below us—with nary a bite. All fishermen have tasted failure in that way.

God created every fish on earth. From the giant 20-ton, 50-foot-long whale shark to the tiniest colorful tropical beauty—they are all His.

Jesus, though, either knew a lot more about fishing than I do or had an edge of some kind. He knew where the fish would be, when to fish, what sort of hook to use and exactly what the fish would look like. He even knew if the fish was carrying anything. Once, Jesus told his disciples to go to the sea, throw a hook in and bring in the first fish that bites. He then said to open the mouth of the fish where they would find a gold coin with which to pay the tax for Himself and for them (Matthew 17:24-27). What a fishing partner He would be. Everyone wanted to go fishing with Jesus. He knew fishing!



God created every fish on earth. From the giant 20-ton, 50-foot-long whale shark to the tiniest colorful tropical beauty—they are all His. Many of the stories of the Bible involve fish. One of the most famous is the story of Jonah when God specially prepared a huge fish to transport the rebellious Jonah to the shores of

Turkey so he could get to the city of Nineveh (Jonah 1:17). Job 41 is a whole chapter devoted to describing a huge Leviathan that no one could catch with a hook. This chapter implies that God can do all of those things—even with this big fish.

There are a number of stories in the Bible in which Jesus used fish or fishing for an example. One touching story is that of the crowd of possibly 10,000 people who Jesus fed with five loaves of bread and two fish (Mark 6:34-44, John 6:4-16). A little boy had five barley loaves and two fish (little boys seem to catch fish easily). This must have been quite a little boy if he would offer up all the food he had brought for himself. No doubt Jesus was pleased, because He knew exactly what He was about to do (John 6:6).

A lot of lessons were learned. The generosity of a boy, the need of thousands for physical and spiritual food, faith and trust in Christ and the responsibility God gives to His servants. Twelve baskets of food fragments were gathered after the thousands were fed. The lesson was that they were to believe in Him (John 6:29).

Real Fishing

Now back to real fishing. Since God can command fish to be in a certain place at a certain time, to bite a hook, to carry money and men—it does not seem fair that God can be called a fisherman. A real fisherman does not command fish, but baits his hook carefully, tries to find out where the fish are and what they are feeding on, and hopes the fish are hungry. There is an element of doubt involved. Everything is prepared, but the fish are left to decide for themselves which lure they will take—if any.

When Jesus drew His disciples to Himself, He said: “I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). There are qualities that a fisherman has which God seems to want in His servants. God knows fishing. That is displayed in Him making His servants fishers of men. God prepares everything just right. He goes to where there are people, attracts them through miracles or teaching, having created a hunger or appetite in humans—so everything is just right—except that God does not program humans to take the bait. He allows them to choose when and if they will bite. That is real fishing!

There are qualities that a fisherman has which God seems to want in His servants. God knows fishing. That is displayed in Him making His servants fishers of men.

Jesus explained this in the story about the marriage supper. Everything was made ready on the part of the host, invitations were sent out, but those invited were allowed to decline (Matthew 22:2-5). Others were then invited, but always allowed to say “yes” or “no.” God has determined not to force humans into conversion. He wants willing followers (Matthew 11:28-30) because what He offers is priceless and precious.

God is indeed a great fisherman. Perhaps when we stand on the banks of the river Ezekiel wrote about, Christ will be there—hoping the fish may bite!

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