

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, July 19, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **MATTHEW 6:22,23**

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good,  
your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes  
are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.”

### **HOW TO OUTSMART YOUR TV**

#### **1. How Television influences us.**

TV is the most powerful medium in America today. Let me give you some facts concerning television;

- 98% of all American homes have a TV. More homes in America have a TV than have a flushing toilet.
- Nearly one-half of all homes in America have more than one TV.
- 85% of Americans watch TV every day.
- In the average home, the TV is turned on for seven hours and two minutes a day.
- Next to working and sleeping, Americans spend more time watching television than they do anything else.

These are some facts taken from the Wall Street Journal. And in the light of all this, surely, we need to outsmart the TV set, because if we don't control the TV, it will control us. It dominates the lives of millions of people across this country, and they build their lives around it.

Notice what Jesus said in Matthew 6:22,23, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.”

What is Jesus talking about here? He's not giving us a lesson in ophthalmology. He's talking about a spiritual principle that says our vision determines our values. What we watch determines what we are. And somehow, what we see shapes our spirit. There is a connection between character and the cornea. Now, if that's true, we're in a lot of trouble. Would you agree that television influences us a lot? Look at 1 Corinthians 15:33 (King James Version): “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good character.” Look at some of the things TV can do;

a. TV can shape my values. Madison Avenue has a way of turning luxuries into necessities on TV. We're bombarded with commercials until we say, “I've got to have that, and

I've got to have it now!" And all this inevitably influences our values. Edwin Newman has said that people used to get their values from church, the home, and the school; now we get them from TV. Someone said recently that Russia imparts values through forced education; China imparts values through propaganda; America promotes values through advertising.

b. TV causes unrealistic expectations. It blurs your perception of reality, because on TV any problem can be solved in 30 minutes! But there are very few problems in life that have instant solutions.

c. TV numbs my sensitivity to suffering. How? By overexposure. In the days before TV most of our problems were simply local problems. But now you turn on the tube and you face the whole world's problems. Every night you are bombarded with graphic scenes of devastation around the world. Studies have shown that people who watch TV have greater fears than those who don't. And the more we watch all this devastation, the more callous we become to it.

d. TV can reduce my resistance to sin. How? By glamorizing it. It looks so good on TV. And the implication is that everybody's doing it (which, of course, is not true). Television never shows us the grim consequences of sin. Sin just doesn't seem so bad on TV. The greatest source of sex-miseducation is the television screen. They always seem to show sex as fun outside of marriage. You seldom see a healthy married couple in love with each other. All sex on TV is either premarital or extramarital. Why is this so? Because TV shows us a different and a purposely ungodly world.

**3. TV can replace my relationships in a very subtle way.** Studies have shown that 51% of all women watch at least one "soap." One lady said, "I know more about their lives than I do about my own!" They know more about "How the stomach turns" than they do about their own family! A lot of children today have three parents: Mommy, Daddy and TV. And guess which one is doing the most child care? They did a survey of children four to six years old, and they asked them: "Which do you like better, Daddy or TV?" 41% of them said, "I like TV better!" Can watching TV at night keep couples from communicating? Absolutely. It's a good excuse not to talk. It's a phony form of intimacy. And it's all so chummy! We watch the weird shows with Phil and Oprah and Jay and Geraldo and Arsenio! It's the only thing in the world where 100 million people can watch the same thing at the same time, and all be lonely. It replaces relationships; and if you don't watch out, it ruins interaction in your family.

a. TV can make me passive. Have you noticed how hypnotic TV can be? It's very powerful. It can keep a person glued to a chair for hours on end. There's only one other thing in society that can make people so passive as TV – it's drugs. It was not an accident that Marie Wynn wrote a book entitled Television – the Plug-in Drug.

A while back Good Housekeeping did a research project on addiction to TV. In Detroit 120 families were offered \$500 each if they would agree not to watch TV for a month! Do you know how many turned that offer down? - 93. And the result was all kinds of withdrawal symptoms in those who did sign up. One lady started talking incessantly to her cat! There were withdrawal symptoms because it is an addiction. If I were to ask you never to turn on your TV for three weeks, I wonder how long you would last! It has a greater influence on us than we

think.

b. And then, TV wastes my time. Have you ever felt cheated at the end of an evening? You think, “What in the world did I do that for? There are so many more worthwhile things I could have been doing!”

The bottom line is: We’ve got to learn to control television or it’s going to control us. So, let me give you now five suggestions as to how to cope with television mania.

## **2. The “S.M.A.R.T.” way to watch TV.**

a. SELECT what you watch BEFORE turning it on. TV seduces you, because once it’s on, it usually stays on. Have you ever played “Flip,” where you sit down all evening and just keep flipping back and forth between channels because nothing’s worth watching?! Don’t do it! Proverbs 15:14 (Living Bible) says, “A wise man is hungry for truth. The fool feeds on (what?) trash.” Don’t tell me the Bible isn’t contemporary! What feeds our mind is just as important as what feeds our bodies.

Could you exist on a diet of “Twinkies”? Or perhaps I should ask, “Would it be healthy to exist on a diet of ‘Twinkies’?” Absolutely not. Folks network TV is the moral equivalent of “Twinkies.” Psalm 119:37 (Good News Bible) says, “Keep me from paying attention to what is worthless.” So, get a TV Guide and read about the programs that are being offered. Find out in advance where a show is going. Select carefully what you propose to watch.

Now what should I watch? Philippians 4:8 gives us the filter — “Whatever is true...noble...right...pure...lovely...admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.” You say, “That doesn’t leave much for us to watch on TV!” And you’re dead right! It doesn’t. But that’s the filter. And you just look at the TV offerings any night and see how many of them pass Philippians 4:8.

b. MANAGE your TV with a VCR. Probably 80% of you have a VCR, and that’s good, because it is a machine with which you can control the TV rather than have it control you. Don’t stay up late to watch an instructive late show, and then be washed up the next day. Who is in control when that happens – you or the TV? So, tape it and watch the show at a time appropriate to you.

Ephesians 5:16 (Phillips) says, “Make the best use of your time, despite all the evils of these days.” So, get your TV Guide at the beginning of the week, circle the things that are worth watching, and don’t watch anything else. Tape some of them so that you can watch them on your schedule. And when you tape, you don’t end up watching the show after it! Have you ever sat down at 6 p.m. and all of a sudden, it’s 11 p.m., and you say, “Where did the evening go?” So, manage your time with a VCR.

c. ACTIVELY EVALUATE what you see and what you hear. Proverbs 14:15 (Good News Bible) says, “A fool will believe anything.” That’s a pretty clear statement, isn’t it?! Folks, TV is not your authority; the Bible is your authority for life. Because something is on TV doesn’t

make it true. When I see the end of the ABC News and hear them say, “ABC, where more Americans get their news than from any other source,” I think, “That is frightening!” — because television cannot deal in depth with subjects. You must go to print. TV can only do images and stories and vignettes. It cannot deal with details. And you must get details from other sources -- books, magazines, newspapers, conversations, and things like that. And if you’re getting all your news simply from images and vignettes, you’re missing the complete story. You cannot be a “deep” person based simply on television.

So, you’ve got to be careful to actively evaluate what you see and what you hear. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:21,22, “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” Underline that word “test.” What are we supposed to test? – everything. Does that mean TV? Absolutely. When you watch a program, you need to watch it with a critical eye. We need to challenge the validity of what we’re seeing; because every program has an underlying point of view, and it is your job to discern what that underlying point of view is and challenge it. Is this true or is it not? It’s scary to realize that there are perhaps nine men in this country called “network executives” who are basically deciding what is going to be the moral agenda for 100 million Americans who sit down every evening in front of a box. I don’t want them deciding my moral agenda. We need to ask ourselves, “What is this program really saying? Why are they saying it? What ideas are really being promoted here?” And remember -- we need to teach and train our children to assess and evaluate programs too.

d. REGULATE how many hours you watch TV. Most people greatly underestimate how much TV they watch. During this coming week, keep a log of how much time you spend watching the tube — you’ll be amazed! The average child aged two to eleven watches 25 1/2 hours a week. That means that by the time a preschooler begins kindergarten, he has already spent more time in front of the TV than he will spend in earning a college degree! By the time a young person has finished high school he has spent a total of 12,000 hours in the classroom. In the same time that young person has spent more than 20,000 hours in front of the TV. Now you tell me where they’re getting their values. The average teenager watches 22 1/2 hours a week. Now here’s a really scary statistic -- the average American spends nine and a half years of his life watching television!

Let’s do a comparison. If you attended church every Sunday of your life until you’re 65, that would amount to only four and a half months of Bible teaching. Would you say that there’s a tiny imbalance here – nine and a half years of TV – four and a half months of Bible teaching? Where are we getting our values?

I’m not telling you how much TV to watch, but I suspect that you are wasting more time than you think you are. Look at this verse, 1 Corinthians 10:23, “Everything is permissible -- but not everything is beneficial... or constructive.” God has given you a free choice as to how you spend your time. He will let you watch TV 20 hours a day if you want to. I don’t think TV is inherently evil. It can be used for good or evil. But the point I want to make is that just because you can do something doesn’t mean that you should. The issue is not always a matter of right or wrong. Sometimes it’s a matter of the good, the better, and the best. All things are permissible, but not everything is beneficial or constructive.

Now let me ask you - what could you do with an extra two or three hours a day? Would that make a difference in your life? The easiest way to find more time is to turn off the TV. What's the hobby you've always wanted to enjoy -- that book you've wanted to read, that skill you've always wanted to develop? Turn off the box! My old grandmother called the TV set "the thief" — the thief of time! I'm so glad there was no TV when I was growing up - when I think of the sports I enjoyed, and the dozens of great books I had read by the time I was thirteen...!

Now I want to make this very practical. I want to ask you: What do you think would be a reasonable amount of time for you to watch TV this next week? I want you to write that down on your outline under "R" - regulate how many hours you watch.

e. Turn the channel when offended. Many people consider TV to be a giant monster that is controlling and degrading our families. But remember -- it is a monster that can be killed with one push of a finger! Turn the channel when you become offended. Indeed, you don't even have to get out of your chair any more -- you can use one of these things — the greatest invention since sliced bread. It doesn't take any energy at all to rid yourself of something you don't like. Listen to Proverbs 19:27 (Living Bible): "Stop listening to teaching that contradicts what you know is right."

The point is simply this: You only see what you want to see. So, don't blame anybody else. If you're filling your mind with trash it's because you want to. Don't blame the network people or the sponsors. It's a free country -- you can turn it off or change the channel. However, I will add this: As Christians we ought not to purchase the products of companies that sponsor raunchy and morally offensive programs.

People say, "But Pastor, we need to watch what the world presents in order to know how to relate to them. We need to know how the other side thinks." And the theological response to that is, "Baloney!" Romans 16:19 says, "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." God wants you to be innocent, not streetwise about what is evil. Why? Because what we watch is what we become. It inevitably affects our character. It wears down and erodes our resistance to sin.

When bank employees are being trained to recognize counterfeit money, they don't give them counterfeit bills to study. They give them genuine bills; and they live with those bills; they feel their texture; they study the colors and the grains, and all of the details. And they get to know the real thing, so that when a phony comes along, they can say, "That is obviously counterfeit." Why? Because they know the real thing.

You don't have to study all sorts of bizarre religions in order to know how to deal with them. No. You get to know the real thing, and then when the phony comes along, you say, "That couldn't be right because..." And you share the truth.

A. W. Tozer once said, "America has lost its ability to blush." I think that is true. You would not stand around and passively watch someone get murdered. Nor would you be a silent witness to gross immorality. My question then is: If these things happen in the middle of a TV show, would you turn the channel? When was the last time you changed channels when

something vulgar and sordid came on the screen?

You see, TV is a form of fellowship. When you sit down with TV, it is like inviting someone into your home. Now you wouldn't invite people to your home for an evening and allow them to spill out all their immoralities in lurid detail. You don't associate with people like that. But, if a show comes on TV and tells the same kind of thing in graphic detail, what's the difference? None whatsoever. And I can't help but think that one of the reasons so many marriages are falling apart is because there's so much on TV that shows marriages falling apart. And everybody's doing it. No! Everybody's not. That's just not true.

I want to challenge you to go a step farther in your discipleship as a Christian this morning. I want to see you challenge the culture you're in. It may not cost you as much as it cost Vice President Quayle when he courageously challenged Murphy Brown. But will you make a vow similar to the one David made in Psalm 101:3, "I will set before my eyes no vile thing"? "I'm not going to violate my soul by participating in other people's wrongdoing, be it Murphy Brown or any other sordid thing."

Do you know that one third of all the occupations shown on TV are crime related? Those are great models, aren't they? Think on things that are noble, and right, and pure, things that build you up and don't tear you down.

Frankly I'm shocked that some people, even Christians, let their children see movies that I wouldn't look at as an adult. They just don't realize what they're doing to their kids.

Some of you need to go home and reevaluate what you're going to allow into your mind. Am I going to allow the world to just trample through it? Or am I going to develop a filter, because I want what is best for my life. "I make a covenant with my eyes that I will set no vile thing before them." That's what it means to challenge your culture.

**AMEN.**