

In the late 80s and early 90s, up in the city of Seattle, a new kind of music was developing. It raged against the glam rock that had ruled the 80s, with its elaborate costumes and heavy makeup. These new rockers preferred to wear flannel and jeans, to play raw, unpolished music that felt more authentic than the polished, produced tracks of the glam bands.

This movement was catalyzed in 1991 with the release of an album called *Nevermind* by, of course, Nirvana [[find a picture of the band](#)]. And what propelled *Nevermind* to the top of the Billboard charts was the lead single "Smells Like Teen Spirit".

Within a couple of years, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" had become insanely popular - dominating MTV and winning countless awards and accolades. Many were hailing it as the "song of a generation". This despite the fact that, at first, many radio stations and even MTV refused to play it because most of the lyrics were nonsensical and border-line incomprehensible (thanks to Kurt Cobain's distinctive growl).

If you know the song, then what probably sticks out to you is that strange chorus:

**Here we are, now entertain us.** I feel stupid and contagious. Here we are now, entertain us.

The deep irony of the song is how much Nirvana's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, came to hate "Smells Like Teen Spirit". According to those close to him, he'd never wanted the mega-fame the song brought him and the band. At live shows later in the band's career, he often butchered the song when performing it - changing lyrics, singing in a different key or altering the tempo erratically.

Apparently, Cobain hated that grunge - the movement Nirvana had accidentally spearheaded - had become cool. He hated that "grunge" had become fashionable and trendy - that was the exactly what they'd rebelled against in the first place.

Knowing where Cobain ended up, his deep loathing for what Nirvana became, it's hard not to hear the song as a sad prophecy: Here we are, now entertain us.

The very mindless pop culture consumption Nirvana had railed against, they became. Their protest song was embraced by the very people they were protesting.

I have a deep and abiding love affair with pop culture. I love movies. I love TV. I love music. I read probably an unhealthy amount of books and magazines. I love going to a ball game (it really doesn't matter what kind of ball, as long as it's not soccer – sorry soccer fans!).

And because I spend so much time in the Entertainment culture, I often wonder if I'm part of the problem. I wonder how many of us are among those Nirvana protested. How many of us mindlessly consume entertainment? How many of us blindly demand of our leisure activities - Here we are, now entertain us!

Because Cobain was right to protest that. We shouldn't blindly consume. Our entertainment should never be mindless. Mindless entertainment can actually be toxic.

That sounds strange, doesn't it? To claim that entertainment can be dangerous? That the music we listen to, the TV and movies we watch, the way we play on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the sports we watch or play, the books we read - how could those things be dangerous?

When we're talking about leisure, we're talking about what we do in our down time. What we do when we're off. When we think Entertainment, we think about how we unwind. Decompress. Unplug. Relax.

Here we are. Now entertain us.

That's *why* Entertainment can be dangerous: when we relax, our defenses tend to drop. When we're decompressing, we *want* something we don't have to be thinking about, so we shut off our brains (or at least put them on low) and we don't critically evaluate what's coming into our souls.

We accidentally give ourselves to the god of Entertainment, who wants to shape us in ways that are good for him, but bad for us.

That's the false god we're investigating together today: the God of Leisure. The God of Entertainment. If you've been with us, you know that we're in the season of Lent, a period in the Church we set aside to examine our lives, to find the subtle and not-so-subtle ways we have walked away from God. This year, our series is called American Gods, and we're looking at several institutions in our American culture that most often become idols for us.

When we hear idol, we think of a little statue that people worship. [a picture of an Oscar] So it can be challenging to think of Entertainment of an idol – or maybe not. But let's look again at the way author Andy Crouch describes what an idol is in his book *Playing God*. He says:

[An idol] advances a claim about the ultimate nature of reality that is ultimately mistaken. And since the Creator God is the ultimate meaning of the world, an idol is a representation of a false god. Implicitly or explicitly, all idols represent a challenge and counterclaim to the identity and character of the true Creator God. Like the serpent in the Garden, they all raise the question of the Creator God's truthfulness and goodness, subtly or directly suggesting that the Creator God is neither true nor good. -- Andy Crouch, *Playing God*

An idol is something that makes us question – subtly or directly – God's truthfulness and goodness. It's a good thing we give an improper amount of weight in our lives [Entertainment gravity well]. During this series, we've met some of the less-subtle idols, like work and family. But Entertainment is one of the subtle gods. It doesn't come right out and challenge who God is, what God says. Rather, the challenges come in under our radars (and because we're already sort of checked out, it slips in even easier).

So what is the lie the god of Leisure would have us believe? How does the god of Entertainment lead us to question God's goodness? [Let's picture each of these in turn] There are actually several lies. You know as well as I do that our entertainment options idolize a number of things that are not healthy. We have an unhealthy obsession with youth (with looking young, acting young, dressing young). We celebrate and glamorize unrealistic standards of beauty (which is crazy - every picture you see in a magazine is airbrushed. How completely insane is it that even the most beautiful among us aren't beautiful enough?). We know our culture drives the idolatry of technology [I'm thinking a line of people waiting outside an apple store]. And we could go on and on.

When we pause for a moment, we can see the toxic beliefs and behaviors Entertainment wants to teach us if we'll give ourselves to it. The idea for this American Gods series came from an excellent novel called *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. The whole story is about all these new gods of America, like work

and technology and media. The main character is a guy named Shadow, and he has as hard a time as we all do believing that any of those things could be gods.

There's a particularly insightful scene where Shadow's in a hotel room, watching old reruns of "I Love Lucy" when suddenly the god of TV (we might call her the god of Entertainment) speaks to Shadow from the TV, through Lucy's mouth. Their conversation gives us some insight into how we worship Entertainment:

She tells Shadow,

"I'm the idiot box. I'm the TV. I'm the all-seeing eye and the world. I'm the boob tube. I'm the little shrine the family gathers to adore."

Shadow asks, 'You're the television? Or someone in the television?'

Lucy responds, 'The TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to.'

'What do they sacrifice?' asked Shadow.

'Their time, mostly,' said Lucy. 'Sometimes each other.' Then she winked, a big old I Love Lucy wink.

'You're a God?' said Shadow.

Lucy smirked, and took a ladylike puff of her cigarette and said, 'You could say that.'

We don't think about Entertainment as a god until we frame it in these terms: What do we gather around, what gets our time?

[bring back the Gravity Well] Statistically, we know that for a lot of us it's TV. Or the internet or our phones - we could call them all the Screens. For others, maybe it's music - our speakers. And still for others it's Sports. Are any of them bad in and of themselves? No, of course not - no idols begin as bad things. But in our culture, Screens, Speakers and Sports are the things that get an inordinate amount of our time, things we adore more than we ought to.

These are the things we surrender our minds to, that we adore often thoughtlessly. And that's dangerous.

Now you're probably thinking, oh man. What did I get myself into? Is this one of those "TV is evil" sermons? Is the take-away going to be "Don't go see movies and don't watch sports?"

No. If you know me, you know I love entertainment. I love tv and movies, I've got a March Madness bracket like the rest of you do (It's not doing so hot, but I have one). I firmly believe these are good things - or at least that they can be. That there's nothing inherently wrong with our Screens, Speakers and Sports.

They become idols when we engage them mindlessly. When we give ourselves to them thoughtlessly. We end up idolizing these things mostly because we don't think about how we consume our Entertainment. No one sets out to worship an unrealistic standard of beauty. But we disengage during commercials or as we flip through magazines, as we mindlessly hum along to music in the car.

And so these messages creep in. Under the radar, unobserved. And because we're not paying attention, they begin to influence us, subtly reshaping our lives away from a people who look like Jesus and toward people who worship youth, beauty, technology, achievement, etc.

That's what happened to the Israelites in the day of Amos. If you have a bible with you, turn to Amos 4. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, you can find Amos 4 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, you're free to keep that one.

Here's what you need to know about Amos as you're turning to Amos 4: Amos was one of God's prophets who lived in 750 BC. Of course, in Amos' day they didn't have Screens or Speakers or very many Sports. But (at least the wealthy among them) still had leisure time. And it still mattered to God how they spent it. Listen to how God criticizes them in these first two verses:

*Listen to me, you fat cows living in Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy, and who are always calling to your husbands, "Bring us another drink!"*

*The Sovereign Lord has sworn this by his holiness: "The time will come when you will be led away with hooks in your noses. Every last one of you will be dragged away like a fish on a hook! -- Amos 4:1-2*

Now, don't worry, God isn't only mad at the women. He takes the men to task several other places in the book. But look at the picture God painted: you have these wealthy people who lounge around drinking all day, relaxing and enjoying their lives. And God compares them to fat cows.

In case you were confused, that's not meant to be a compliment. We've all seen a cow, right? They're dumb. They just stand there, mindlessly chewing cud, watching the world pass them by. *That's* what God compares his people to. [pic]

In their leisure, they're not acting like God's people. They're oppressing the poor, crushing the needy. And there's nothing that necessarily implies they're doing it on purpose. You get the sense here that they're just sort of fat, dumb and happy, enjoying life while people are suffering outside their doors.

*That's* what God has a problem with. God is not anti-fun. God is not anti-party (Jesus went to parties *all the time*.) And God is not anti-leisure. Remember at the beginning of the series we talked about Sabbath: God created us for rest, for enjoyment, not for work.

What God warns us is that when we mindlessly allow our leisure to form us, it will turn us into people who aren't like Jesus.

And that's as true today as it was in Amos' day. Movies and TV and magazines and music, it's all created by someone with a bottom line. TV shows get canceled if they're not being watched, no matter how good they are (all my Firefly fans said *That's* right!). Why? Because TV is about selling advertisements.

And advertising is all about keeping you dissatisfied. It's about creating false expectations about your body, your family, your job, your health. Because they want you to want their product. If you're content, if you're happy and satisfied, you won't buy, and that's bad for business.

Discontentment is at the heart of advertising, which is at the heart of most of our media. That's a dangerous god to give yourself mindlessly to. Mindlessly consuming entertainment breeds dissatisfaction. Discontentment.

So is the answer to turn off all our media? To say No to the god of Entertainment?

Some Christians would tell you yes. But I don't think that's the answer. The answer is to do everything we do mindfully. Look at the advice Paul gives us in Ephesians 5:

Be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. -- Ephesians 5:15-17

[maybe a cow vs. a lightbulb?] Live like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity. Don't act thoughtlessly. That can apply to your media too. It should apply to our entertainment, too.

Have you ever stopped to consider how your entertainment choices form you? Whether the stories they're telling you are truly life-affirming?

You can (and should!) do that with anything - the books you read, the TV shows and movies you watch, the activities you choose to participate in for fun.

Examine those activities to see how they seek to form you. What do they say about God? About people? About how we should treat each other?

Engage your entertainment thoughtfully. Choose to keep the good messages and reject the bad ones. But do it mindfully.

This is what God calls us to: we were created to be faithful pictures of Jesus, and that means we take responsibility for understanding the forces that seek to shape us into pictures of something else.

We don't want to show up and blindly demand, Here we are. Now entertain us. When we give ourselves to these false gods, it poisons our souls. We end up dissatisfied, discontent.

That's not how we want to be formed. We want to be formed by the God of Life.

### **Planner Examine**

Hopefully as you came in, you received a bulletin. Inside you should find a page from a week-at-a-glance planner. I want to invite you to spend a few minutes considering an average week in your life. What things do you (or your family) engage in as leisure? Do you watch TV and movies? Go for runs or walks? Play sports? Listen to music?

I'm not asking you to quit any of that (though that may happen). I'm asking you to prayerfully consider what it looks like to engage in that entertainment *mindfully*. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see how these activities shape you.

[Examine Prayer]

### **Communion Set-Up**

The Bible talks about God's Glory quite a lot when discussing idols. The word "glory" in Hebrew literally means "heavy" or "weighty". God says the problem with idols is that we give them too much weight in our lives, too much importance.

Today, we might replace the word glory with fame. Isn't that what we do with those at the center of our entertainment? We give them importance, we adopt their styles, we give their opinions on things more weight?

We might ask at the close of our gathering today, Is God the most famous in your life?

We close today with an opportunity to come to Jesus' table, to receive his meal. This bread and juice represent Jesus' body broken, his blood poured out for us. This meal represents Jesus' death and resurrection.

In John's record of Jesus' life, Jesus talks specifically about his death. He says,

**The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. -- John 3:14-16**

There was a time when Jesus was raised up, when he was made famous. It was at his death, when he was raised up on a Cross, when he was killed in front of an entire nation of people.

This is what the communion meal reminds us of. While the false gods of entertainment tell us that what will make us valuable and whole is looking younger or being more beautiful or strong, or having the latest gadget or achieving more than the person next to us, God tells us that what makes us valuable is that we were created in his image, that an infinite creator gave up his infinite life to purchase our freedom.

**[Communion Slide]** You don't have to be a member of Beaver Creek Nazarene to receive this meal. This table belongs to Jesus, not to us. So if you hear his call on you today, if you're willing to engage even in your leisure mindfully, to take care that you are being formed into the Image of Jesus, not the image of our culture, then you're invited to participate in this meal.

Let's pray together.