Where Do Christians Draw the Line on Movies?

Ben Giselbach
April 16, 2018

"Don't watch anything you wouldn't watch with Jesus sitting next to you." Most of us have heard advice like this.

And I don't think it's *bad* advice. I've made statements like this (and still do) to middle-schoolers and teenagers who are trying to figure these things out in their formative years. It may be a simplistic answer, but we need to shape the depth of our answers to the spiritual depth of the ones asking the questions. Besides, we *all* need the accountability of remembering that the Lord is watching everything we do (cf. Prov. 15:3).

I do not think, however, that "Jesus sitting next to me" is the end-all criteria. After all, if Jesus really was sitting next to me *physically*, it would drastically affect everything I normally do in my life – including wholesome things. I wouldn't want to eat, take a shower, make coffee, pay my bills, or sleep. Instead, I would want to capitalize every minute I could spare talking to Him, asking Him questions directly, studying His tone and body language, and following His manner of life – all things I can't exactly do by just reading His New Testament.

For me, imagining "Jesus sitting next to me" is helpful, but it still doesn't exhaustively answer all my questions about where *exactly* the line on movies, TV shows, and YouTube videos should be drawn.

And (being brutally honest here) I still don't always know *where* to draw the line on some of things. Without a doubt, I have zero tolerance for sex scenes, f-words, anything that makes a mockery of that which is holy. But what about other stuff? How many cuss words, if any, will I tolerate? And what do I consider a cuss word? At what point is there *too much* immodesty? When does that on-screen kiss become a steamy scene of passion too suggestive for me to watch? What about gory horror movies, or movies about war, violence, and bloodshed? And then there are the movies that depict behavior like alcoholism, drug use, injustice, hatred, and vengeance.

I have yet to find someone who knows where to draw the line on every movie ever made. I honestly, humbly continue to search for an easy solution. I really wish I could find a simple, one-size-fits-all answer for some of these finer-tuned questions. Perhaps I will always find it a struggle to be 100% consistent.

God's Word Provides Clarity

Lest you think I am espousing some sort of postmodern, relativistic rubbish, I want to point back to our standard in this: **God's Word**. I'm not afraid of the clear, bold teachings of the Bible, including what it says about my entertainment choices:

- Lust is serious and kin in some ways to adultery in God's eyes (Matt. 5:28; Job 31:1; Prov. 6:25; 2 Pet. 2:14);
- Christians are to think about pure, honorable things (Phil. 4:8);
- Evil influences corrupt my morality and psyche (1 Cor. 15:33);
- The thoughts of the heart need to be guarded (Matt. 15:19; Jas. 4:8);
- Fornication shouldn't be touched with a 10-foot pole (1 Cor. 6:18);
- I must desire a pure heart (Psa. 51:10);

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- The thought of doing something wicked shouldn't even be considered (Psa. 101:3);
- Christians need to be aware of the example we are setting for others by what we watch (1 Tim. 4:12).

If you don't believe these things with every ounce of your being, this article is not for you. These passages without a doubt I think rule out <u>most</u> movies made in recent times (unless you use a content-filtering service like *VidAngel*, *ClearPlay*, or *TVGuardian*, any of which I highly recommend). **I *know* a Christian can't watch profanity-laced, sex-saturated movies and still be pleasing to God**. But what about movies that, arguably, are not automatically ruled out by the aforementioned verses?

It is *because* I deeply believe these clear, heart-penetrating teachings of Scripture that I wrestle with this matter. As much as I believe these passages with *all* of my heart, I still don't always know where to draw the line.

Is It Wrong To Entertain Any Storyline Involving Sin?

Some people argue that it is wrong to watch movies that have alcoholism, drug use, anger, cruelty, violence, or any other sin in them on the basis of Philippians 4:8. They claim that such things are not wholesome to view and are therefore disheartening spiritually. Depending on the movie, that may be true. But just because a movie incorporates sin into the storyline without painting it as wrong doesn't *necessarily* mean Christians can't watch it.

Jesus' parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1-9 I think is relevant to this point. The story is about a slimy, good-for-nothing employee who was stealing from the company – and Jesus never explicitly condemned him. In fact, Jesus only highlighted a single good trait without mentioning anything about the obvious sin going on in the parable. He assumed the listeners of the parable (you and me) would be discerning enough to recognize sin for what it is. **Evidently, it is not wrong to entertain a story that involves the portrayal of sin in a neutral light**.

Did the story in Luke 16:1-9 violate Philippians 4:8? No, because **Philippians 4:8 does not condemn the mere exposure to sin, but the approval and incorporation of that sin into our belief and thought processes**. Jesus assumed we could relate to the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1-9 because, as people living in the world, we have seen similar situations first-hand. Therefore, the mere secular depiction of sin is not necessarily wrong for Christians to watch.

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Two False Extremes

There are, however, two extremes on this topic for which I have little respect. **The first extreme is the idea that it is wrong to watch any kind of secular entertainment and I must isolate myself from every kind of secular messaging**. As well-intentioned as this view may be, good intentions alone never saved anyone (Matt. 7:21). After clarifying the necessary caveats, Christians still need to relate to the world (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Total entertainment asceticism may be an easy fix, but I think it is a lazy hermeneutic. Though Christians are not *of* the world, we are nonetheless *in* the world. We must still function within our culture. Jesus wants us to *stay* in the world (How else will we know how to influence it?); He simply doesn't want us to operate by the world's ethic, but by the standard of God's word (John 17:14-17; cf. Rom. 12:2). This requires everyday discernment – not everyday isolation.

The other extreme is the idea that it doesn't matter what you watch. This is the person who has given up. He/she gives no thought to how many expletives are in a movie; is not bothered by laughing at sacrilege; does not even blush at sexually explicit imagery. When buddies from work invite him/her to the theatres on the weekend, the question as to whether a particular movie is appropriate for a Christian to watch hardly crosses his/her mind. I find the *indifference* in this self-identifying Christian's heart disgusting (cf. Rev. 3:16).

"As For Me And My House" (Where My Family Draws the Line)

There must be a place in the middle – not to be confused with *moderation*. (I don't think Christians should be moderate about much of anything. We must be people of conviction!) There is, admittedly, a gray area (to use a tired phrase). I don't think there is always an exact place for every movie where black and white meet. Yet the line between these two extremes must still be drawn *somewhere*. Thus there is room for honest, personal judgment on this. And if another Christian's honest judgment isn't identical to yours, I think you still need to extend to that brother or sister a degree of charity on this. Patience with one another as we each develop our entertainment scruples is in order.

The worst thing you can do, however, is be *haphazard* about what movies we watch. Christians need to be people who *think* through these issues. **I recommend you write down a set of rules by which your own household will judge your movies**. I've done that for my own house, and **below are the rules my wife and I crafted**. We judge each movie, generally speaking, by the following guidelines on a case-by-case basis when we feel

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it is not *automatically* ruled-out by the previously mentioned passages. We don't bind this list on anyone but our family, but we do believe these principles have a Biblical basis:

1. Will this movie incline me to sin? This is about knowing my weaknesses. James 1:14 says that "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by **his own** desire." The implication is that different people are inclined to commit different sins. Personally, I (Ben) am much more tempted to lust after a woman than I am after a man, and I am much more tempted to fudge some numbers when I file income taxes than I am to steal a TV from *BestBuy*. I can watch an entire movie about drinking beverage alcohol and not be even slightly tempted to drink alcohol. Yet I could not watch a movie full of sexually suggestive scenes without being very much tempted to lust. Furthermore, if your wife is a recovering alcoholic or your husband is a recovering gambling addict, it would be foolish to watch movies with strong alcohol or gambling themes.

2. Does this movie manipulate my mind to support sin? Romans 1:29-32 is an important passage. Not only is it wrong to commit sin, but it is also wrong to support *others* when they commit sin. I'm sensitive about this when it comes to movies that cause me to root for the bad guy. Isaiah 5:20 warns, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness." When a movie paints someone who is clearly evil as the protagonist, these two passages give me pause. If a particular movie is going to somehow lessen my resolve against [insert sin here], I need to avoid it.

3. Does the sin in this movie exceed the normal threshold of sin my faculties would otherwise normally observe during the course of routine exposure to the world? The implication of God's will for Christians to be "in the world" but not "of the world" is that Christians will inevitably be exposed to sin. Sadly, typical life in American society will involve exposure to depressing life situations, foul language, immodesty, drug use, and caustic attitudes when we go to school, work, the store, mall, or bank. Christians shouldn't go *looking* for sin, but the parable of the sower teaches us we need to have a sort of "tolerance" for the sins we will in reality face (Matthew 13:3-9; 21-22). As it relates to the movies I watch, I need to ask if this will expose me to more sin than I would normally be exposed to if, say, I took my family to the food court in the mall. (We need to be very careful about this point, however, lest we turn it into an excuse to watch *anything*. This point is only valid to the degree that we are honest with our true motives. Filth is filth, and this point is invalid for anyone who is looking to justify something they know is wrong.)

4. Is this movie intended by the world as a statement against God's law? Naturally, the world is going to produce movies based on worldly values. While sin should always cause us to blush (Jer. 6:15), we should not be surprised when sin is incorporated into a secular movie. But what about when a movie is specifically intended to *promote* sin? A

proper interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:27-29 teaches that Christians are to stay away from things that are specifically intended as a sort of cheerleader for sin. There is a difference, for example, between (a) a storyline that involves a broken family and (b) a script that goes out of its way to glorify marital infidelity. In a very real sense, one movie was produced in worldly ignorance, the other was produced in defiance of God. (Incidentally, this is the biggest reason why I do not like the movie, *Gone With The Wind* – not because it drones on and on for 17 hours, but because it was the first mainstream film to use the word "damn" as an expletive.)

5. What is the venue in which I will be watching this movie? 1 Corinthians 10:23 says, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful." Regardless of whether or not I can watch a certain movie in good conscience is beside the point if the example of my watching this movie is hurtful to others. In other words, I need to care about appearances. There are some movies that I can justify watching in the privacy of my home (like a classic western movie) that I could not justify showing at, say, a church function. Additionally, I also need to be guarded about talking publically about the movies I have seen, lest I hurt my influence among people who have different scruples about this subject. Whenever my wife and I do mention a particular movie we've seen – if it contains vulgarity – we make a point to mention we watched it with a filtering service like *VidAngel* or *ClearPlay*.

6. What *kinds* of sins are in this movie? Exposure to some sins are simply more toxic to the mind than others. Watching one actor pretend to kill another actor doesn't tempt me to commit murder *per se*, but hearing an actor repeatedly cuss certainly has more of a subliminal effect. The more people utter expletives around me, the more those words enter into my available mental vocabulary. Sometimes those words come to mind when I don't want them to, and that scares me. No honest person would claim that you can hear bad language *all the time* without it eventually becoming part of your *spoken* vocabulary. That's why I have a very low tolerance for cuss words in what I choose to watch. In the 21st century, there is no excuse to *not* screen a movie on the internet for cuss words and sexual content *before* you watch it. (Just Google "parental movie review" beside any movie title for a list of reputable sites that provide a list of any potentially offensive content in the movie.)

Conclusion

What a blessing technology has been for people who are serious about getting these questions right. **Services like *VidAngel*, *ClearPlay*, and *TVGuardian* make it much easier to filter out language, sex, other sinful elements, allowing us to watch movies we otherwise could not in good conscience**. But even without these conveniences in our wicked age, Christians must be bold enough to draw the line and say, "As for me and my house," we will not be held hostage by the value system of the world.

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