

May a Christian Watch Horror Movies?

Capability vs. Permission

May a Christian watch horror movies? In a word, no. You bristle. No one likes being told what to do! But...watching horror movies for a Christian is problematic. So, if you're a bottom-line, brass tacks kind of person, then my counsel as your pastor is to not watch them. Because if you do, you are going to have to practice something very few Christians in our day and age practice—discernment. Restraint. Wisdom. So if you're not interested in learning these things, stop reading this. But if you are...

The word *may* is key in this discussion. May speaks to permission. Can speaks to capability. Clearly, anyone *can* watch a horror movie. The question is: should they? Again, probably not. If it's this clear-cut, then, why am I writing this piece? Because horror movies are extremely popular and ubiquitous, especially this time of year. One out of every six movies released annually in theatres are of the horror genre. Some of the most cost-effective and profitable movies for new Hollywood to make are horror movies. So, I write to teach you *how to think through the issues*, to *learn some discernment* (which will serve you in other areas), and to *encourage you to do what is good, true, and beautiful*. Our lives should be oriented toward those things, for Christ is the Good, the True, the Beautiful. He is the Way, Truth, and Life.

I come at this topic as someone who was permitted to watch *way too much* TV as a child, to watch pretty much every movie I wanted. I grew up in a Christian home, by the way. As did my friends. I went to a Lutheran parochial school. As did my friends. But as young teenage boys, we were allowed to watch things we never should have watched. With no oversight. In the basements of homes of good Christian parents. So I've seen things I shouldn't have. Things I can't "unsee." Parents should protect little hearts and minds from demonic and violent things. So, I write from a place of experience and repentance.

Limiting Principles

With all that said, I stand by my pastoral answer. Don't watch them. They almost never are God-pleasing or Jesus-glorifying. But...I know you will. At the very least, then, read this and take it to heart. I give you three key things to help with building discernment practices to navigate this genre. The first thing is *limiting principles*.

A limiting principle is pretty simple. There are things in most every horror movie that are absolute "no goes" for Christians. Nudity and sexual immorality, graphic gore and violence, the occult. All are from the devil. If any movie or series has these things, as a Christian you are to avoid what is evil and hold fast to what is good. You are to flee from sexual immorality. You are to have *non-negotiables* in terms of content. These are your limiting principles: no nudity or sex; no gratuitous violence and bloody mayhem; no romanticization of the occult (witchcraft/demonic worship). If you employ these principles, it will eliminate about 97.4% of all horror movies.

However, I know how your mind works. What about a *little* nudity? What if it has violence that's not too graphic? What if the demonic activity is mild? Or part of the plot? Again, limiting principles. Unless you are quick on the remote, and you know stuff is coming, you will encounter way too much of this stuff. Remember, we are formed and shaped by the things we consume. Receive the Eucharist, read the Bible, worship Jesus...avoid horror movies.

If you are tempted, or you think certain movies should be permitted, there is a way to check. Google *IMDB Parent's Guide* with the *movie title*, and it will tell you how much of the following elements are in the movie: Sex & Nudity; Violence & Gore; Profanity; Alcohol, Drugs, and Smoking; and Frightening & Intense Scenes. Very helpful...for adults! Screen your movies this way. Don't be surprised. Watch everything before you show them to children.

The other part of using limiting principles is to include the word "no" in your content choices. For instance, there are some movies I've seen in the past that I'll never see again. Hard "no." There are others that might have a scene or two. I have to decide if I'll fast-forward through the scenes. And there are some I've never seen, and never will. The *Saw* movies for instance. Never seen one of them, and I never will. Limiting principles. No.

Do You Exercise Discernment?

This leads to the next key (if you insist you are mature enough to tempt your weak, sinful flesh). *Discernment*. Jesus says, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." He tells His apostles, as He sends them out into the world, be prepared to encounter rejection and persecution. They will encounter danger. Remember, these men were His fully-empowered ambassadors to preach His Kingdom to the world. So, they are to practice shrewdness and even cunning in dealing with all they encounter. At the same time, they are to be pure, free from guilt, innocent. In another passage, He says they are to be in the world but not of it (John 17). There's a role for Christian discernment in the life of a disciple of Jesus.

So, what is it? Discernment is recognizing what is real and what is not. Recognizing what is good and what is wicked. Knowing what is true and what is false. Knowing what is instructive and Kingdom-building, and what is vapid, titillating, and tempting you to sin. Horror movies have very little real, good, true, instructive content. Most of the time, they are meant to subvert Christ's Kingdom by playing upon our basest instincts and urges. We are to discern this, rightly evaluate all content in light of God's Word and will, and stay pure.

You may be the kind of person who watches "whatever," with very little thought to what's in it. Beware of this lack of discernment. You may be the kind of person who is naturally curious about all kinds of things (especially the off-beat and esoteric). Beware of your morbid curiosity. You may be the kind of person who "likes to be scared." Ask yourself, "Why?" Why do I enjoy this experience? What is it doing to me and what am I chasing? Self-awareness is a big part of discernment.

What's Your Worldview, Bro?

Which leads to the third key (to watch any movie). Are you aware of your own world view, what it is and how you got it? How do you view the universe? What are your influences? What is your view of what a human is? What is your confession of Who God is and where can you know Him? All of these questions, and their answers, make up your view of the world. Everyone has one. Not everyone can articulate it. Even fewer engage it when they consume mass media, interact with politics, and yes, when they consider what movies to watch and which ones to avoid. One's world view informs *who is in charge and why*. As Christians, our world view begins with the distinction: *God is the Creator; we are His creatures*. As Christians who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are to live according to God's design and desire. What we watch, say, do...matters because we were bought with a price. We are to glorify God with our body.

This may seem too deep and philosophical, so let me give you a scenario. A new neighbor moves in next door. You introduce yourself. As you get to know them, you realize that they don't go to a church. You invite them to yours. They say, "That's okay. I don't believe in organized religion. I think life is to be led by what makes you feel good. Do what you want. I don't think anything happens to you when you die. Live for today and enjoy the good life." You may hear this, and think, that person doesn't have a world view. But in fact, they do. They have *a way of viewing the universe and their place in it*. They have a way of operating within the universe, even if they claim to not believe in a god. Or God. Or anything. The obvious point—they will watch and listen to anything, without restrictions. They will "be into" all kinds of stuff. If they dig horror movies, they will indulge.

Many people who claim the title "Christian" live life just like that hypothetical neighbor. They may not say the same things, but they operate in the same ways. The Jimmy Buffet lifestyle. Do what feels good. Some Christians will compartmentalize. Their faith is in one box; their hobbies in another; their work life in another; their "private" life in another. That's not Christian. That's functional idolatry and hedonism. Instead, our relationship to Christ informs everything we do. We are to have "the mind of Christ." (1 Cor 2:16). We are to live as a "living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, which is our next-step service." (Rom 12:2) What we consume matters because we do not engage with evil (willingly) and do not seek to gratify the desires of the sinful flesh. And if anything promotes the demonic, we are to avoid it. Flee from the devil and he will flee from you.

Final Thoughts

If you never watch horror movies, then this article means very little to you. At least, though, you should see how these things inform all the things you *are* into. But if you really enjoy Halloween flicks, the macabre, and watching the occasional horror movie, you might be bummed. Or you'll ignore me. To you, I say, "Repent! Seek the mercy of Jesus." But still...are there really *no* horror movies you're permitted to indulge in? Very, very few. But I will recommend two that fall

within the “horror genre.” The first is *Nefarious* from 2023. This is the best movie portraying demon possession ever made. There is no sex, very mild profanity, very mild gore...but it is *intense*. Beware! But the filmmakers (Executive Producer and Story Creator Steve Deace) have a *Christian world view*. It is rated “R” for its intensity. I would not allow young teens to watch this, but older teens on up could learn a great deal from this movie. The second is *A Quiet Place* from 2018. It was directed by John Krasinski (Jim from *The Office*) and stars himself and his wife, Emily Blount. There is no blood, no profanity, no sex...but it is *severely intense and scary*. So, if scary is your thing, this might work.

Of course, if you were to avoid horror movies, haunted houses, slasher films, any deeply disturbed content, that would be the best. The point of this article isn’t to create a system for navigating problematic and sinful content, but to *get you to think more deeply about what you watch and why*. It’s to get you to be aware that everything you consume has an agenda, a worldview, and is trying to form and shape you in some way. *There is no neutral*. There’s the Kingdom of Christ, and everything else. We are to be aware of the ways Satan seeks to devour us. We are not to dabble with darkness, but stay in the light of the Lord. Being a child of God has duties and responsibilities. We are to be stewards of all that God gives, starting with our eyes, ears, minds, hands, and hearts. We are to avoid evil things. At the same time, we are to be informed and prudent with respect to Satan’s tactics, and what things can be redeemed and what things must be out-right rejected. It’s worth thinking about these things, especially this time of year. Above all else, we stay close to Jesus, and trust in Him. For He truly has conquered the powers of darkness, and will finally, fully restore this entire cosmos, without remainder.