Matt Walsh: Christians, it's simple: if that TV show won't bring you closer to God — don't watch it – TheBlaze

Many of us, as Christians, have decided that our entertainment choices ought to be exempt from moral scrutiny. We've come to the convenient conclusion that television is a neutral medium. We need not even engage with someone who suggests that a certain TV show or movie is not helpful in our Christian walk. "It's just entertainment," we respond with a shrug. Which is a bit

like saying, "It's just food," when someone warns that a Cinnabon won't help us lose weight.

This attitude is especially troubling because we waste almost all of our time being entertained. The average American spends 5 hours a day watching TV. He spends another 5 hours on his phone or laptop, or playing video games. This is enough screen time to watch almost an entire season of House of Cards in a day, every day. And we would have no moral qualms about doing so, despite the fact that the whole delight of House of Cards comes from seeing a gay sociopath lie and scheme and murder for his own gain, taking a break for the occasional bisexual threesome. But why shouldn't we get our kicks that way? It's just entertainment, we insist again. We need to escape sometimes!

Wait, sometimes?

When are we not escaping? Once we've factored in sleeping, we're only left with about 5 or 6 hours a day not dedicated to "escaping" or being "entertained" by staring into one screen or another. So if we have decided that we need not glorify God with our entertainment selections, and all we ever do is entertain ourselves, when will we glorify Him? In our dreams? Oops. No. TV claims that time, too.

It's one thing for us to debate which shows or movies bring us closer to God. That's a healthy discussion. But it's another for Christians to claim that we shouldn't take such things into consideration. I'm willing to listen to an argument that a show I've written off as morally objectionable is actually edifying. On the other hand, I have little patience for an argument that a show isn't morally objectionable because it's morally neutral. I could take more seriously the assertion that The Walking Dead is a spiritually enlightening masterpiece (it isn't) than an argument that watching a guy get his face eaten is entirely neutral and leaves no mark on our souls at all.

Nothing you do is morally neutral. Your clothing, your diet, the way you speak, even the kinds of thoughts you allow yourself to think -- none of these are neutral. They are for good or ill, one way or another. So there certainly is no moral neutrality to be found in the sorts of images and ideas you choose to spend 5 hours a day passively ingesting. You are either being hurt of helped by them. Most of the time, you're hurt.

But many Christians pretend not to believe or understand this simple concept. When St. Paul said, "Whatever you do, do it for the glory of God," we imagine that he meant, but forgot, to include a disclaimer: Whatever you do (*except for the thing you spend the majority of your free time doing, and that influences human behavior to such an extent that companies spend billions of dollars

advertising through it*), do it for the glory of God. Quite a boneheaded oversight on the Great Apostle's part. Or else a boneheaded interpretation on our part.

I offered this idea on Twitter last night, saying that we ought to consider whether a show brings us closer to God before watching it. A large number of people -- a majority of them Christian -- responded or sent messages mocking me for making such a radical suggestion. They agreed wholeheartedly with the hedonists and relativists who believe that whatever a person does for fun must be good because he enjoys it. Predictably, I was accused of being "self-righteous" for so much as hinting that some television shows are counterproductive. Some people fretted that if we try to make moral choices in our TV watching, we may discover that none of our favorite shows are appropriate. What are we supposed to do? Watch no TV at all? How can we endure such a life? My God, my God, why hast thou abandoned us!

Now, to be clear: I did not say, nor do I believe, that we must give up TV completely. But I want to pause here and reflect on this mentality. In Scripture, Christ tells us to give up everything for Him. And there have been scores of Christian martyrs throughout history, and still today, who have done just that. Yet we have judged it unrealistic to give up a TV show? Christ says gouge out your eye if it causes you to sin, yet we cannot bear to delete something from our Netflix queue? While Christians in the

Middle East are frog marched into the desert and decapitated for their faith, we are unable to endure the prospect of having to, like, read a book or something from 8-9 on Thursdays instead of watching Grey's Anatomy or Scandal or Empire or whatever other brain-rotting, soul-deadening piece of filth?

This, brothers and sisters, is an unhealthy attachment.

I understand the attachment, by the way, and have struggled with it. I have a TV in my home. I use it, although nowhere close to that 5 hour watermark. I have watched plenty of shows and films that I should not have watched. My wife and I try to catch ourselves whenever it appears that we've put on something that's just trashy for the sake of being trashy. As I say, I have been very far from perfect in this regard.

There was a time when I watched anything at all, with absolutely no thought as to whether it was morally objectionable. I began to see the error in my ways 7 years ago, when my wife and I had just started dating, and I put on an episode of Dexter. If you're not familiar, the show is about a benevolent serial killer who satisfies his lust for blood by murdering and dismembering other criminals. My wife was horrified by it, rightly so, and even more horrified that I would find any pleasure at all in watching something like that. I argued with her at first, saying all of

the same dumb things that people say to me now -- "It's just a show! It isn't real! What's the big deal?" -- but she answered with one simple question:

"Do you think Jesus wants you to watch this show?"

Um. Well, I mean, I... Yes?

The answer was no, of course. And I came to see that in due time.

But in this argument I had with my wife, or in the arguments people made to me last night, we see an obvious contradiction. If TV is such a neutral thing, if it's "not a big deal," then why do we so passionately defend our TV watching habits? Why do we consider it "unrealistic" to curtail those habits,? Why have I rarely received such a backlash to one of my pieces as I did to the one I wrote a couple of years ago suggesting that Christians shouldn't watch Game of Thrones? Why was I willing to fight with my wife about Dexter, of all things? Why did someone send me an email last night calling me a "holier than thou piece of sh*t" because I insinuated in general terms that some TV shows aren't good? Why did someone else call me a "delusional puritan," as if I had announced that electricity is from the Devil? I thought this stuff was no big deal? Why do you defend "your shows" like you gave birth to them? Why is this unimportant thing

so incredibly important to you? Why can't you envision an existence deprived of the CW's prime time lineup?

Because it's not neutral. Entertainment is a force. It moves us. That's why we value it so highly. That's why we spend 5 hours a day with it. That's why actors in this country make millions of dollars. We value what they do more than we value pretty much anything else. There is much to be said about that fact, but you cannot say that it's a symptom of moral neutrality.

Indeed, it would be difficult to overstate the power that these glowing screens have over our lives and our souls. I just read a review of the movie Dunkirk -- a film I am excited to see -- that has this line: "You disappear inside of it and it changes you, as all great movies do." I would just add that even the bad and abhorrent ones have that effect. That is why the bad and abhorrent ones are so dangerous.

Should a Christian "disappear inside" a reality show where one of the primary pleasures comes from gawking at desperate, attention-starved fame whores? Should a Christian disappear inside an HBO program where one of the primary pleasure comes from the titillating soft core porn scenes? Should a Christian disappear inside a zombie show where one of the primary pleasures comes from watching zombies devour someone's bowels? It

doesn't matter that it isn't real. What matters is that we are intentionally feeding the lustful, malicious, petty parts of our souls. We are handing ourselves over to these feelings, and going as far with them as the show will take us.

It may sound corny, but I think a good rule of thumb is this: if you wouldn't watch a particular show with Christ sitting physically in the room with you, then you shouldn't watch it. After all, He is in the room with you. (Of course, I realize that if Christ did manifest Himself in your den, you probably wouldn't put on the TV at all.)

That isn't to say that we should only watch specifically "Christian" shows. The only thing more objectionable than anti-Christian entertainment is entertainment that cynically panders to Christians with hollow storytelling and questionable theology. There is nothing wrong with watching or reading (remember reading?) a "secular" story about heartbreak or tragedy or adventure or romance. Human beings have been doing that since the beginning of time, in one form or another. But there ought to be something redeeming in it. "I will set no worthless thing before my eyes," the Pslamist said. We should do likewise.

The shows we set before our eyes ought to have something real and meaningful to say. Something about

beauty, truth, sacrifice, heroism, goodness. There can even be value in a story about evil and hate. If something true is revealed about evil, something that would help the viewer to understand it and avoid it, then it could be worthwhile viewing for Christian adults. I believe The Godfather is one of the greatest films of all time because it shows, with penetrating insight, how a man may succumb to greed and avarice, and how it unravels everything good in his life. I'd say the same about Breaking Bad. I think of them both as the sorts of tales Dostoevsky or Shakespeare would have told, had they lived in our time. Evil can be portrayed in a story -- as it is in Hamlet or Crime and Punishment or The Passion or the Bible -- but it should not be promoted, trivialized, or glorified. Yet that's what so many shows are explicitly designed to do.

When it comes down to it, much of what we call modern entertainment either has nothing to say at all, existing only to shoot chaos and sound into our pulverized brains (hello, Michael Bay), or what it says is not true. It lies to us, and we submit ourselves to that lie, receive it passively, and take pleasure in it. The message often embedded in film and television is that evil is fun, sex is a game, human suffering is a spectacle for consumption, goodness is bland, the traditional family structure is oppressive, religion is for weirdos, and on and on. Hollywood defecates all over our faith, our values, and our families, and we eat it up like starving dogs.

We should find something else to eat. That's all I'm trying to say.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, 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 such things." - Philippians 4:8

To see more from Matt Walsh, visit his channel on TheBlaze.