



Renewing the mind. Equipping the Church. Engaging the world.

Movies and Morals

Written

by

Ray Cotton

The movie industry is spending billions of dollars to grab the undivided attention of the movie-going public. The majority of the film makers work very hard at increasing the technical quality of their movies so that you and your family will keep coming back for more. There is no doubt, statistically speaking, that these efforts have been very successful.

Movie theaters are doing better than ever. Oh, they are not the grandiose movie houses with giant chandeliers and ostentatious splendor that some of us can remember. The new movie theaters are big, unappealing buildings containing many small, very plain looking theater rooms. But, attendance is not a problem. In fact, we live in a country filled with the magic screen. Television, which we thought would bring down the movie theaters, has become an extension of the phenomenon through the vast market of video movies.

Statistics tell us that the average child spends many hours viewing movies, either in theaters or on video. Is it not reasonable to conclude that such media can affect his or her view of the world? In particular, can their understanding of ethical guidelines be affected? As is true with all media, movies contain someone's ideas about life. What do the producers, writers, and directors want to convey? Do their ethical perspectives align with those you want to teach your children? Unfortunately, the world of movies is too often a world apart from God.

What are we as parents and concerned adults to do? Well, for one thing we can try to use movies to help our kids learn the lessons they should be learning. There are lessons that can be gleaned from the vast library of video movies, but it will take some effort on our part to know how to guide our children's viewing habits and to interact with them in the process. We must make the medium work to accomplish our goals, and make certain that what they are exposed to in movies is helping to develop healthy minds. Tragically, too many parents use movies as a babysitter for their children. Thus, such parents are often not aware of what their children are watching, yet in

reality they should be watching films together so the family can discuss what they are viewing.

In this essay we will explore some ideas concerning how you can use movies to discuss ethics and morality with your older children. We will introduce some principles and guidelines that you can use in order to lead them to make good value judgments. This is very important because you can never assume that your children see the evil in certain situations, nor that they grasp the moral climate of a story. In fact, if they are not regularly hearing the wisdom a parent can provide, they may be buying into a deformed world view.

During our discussion we will use particular movies as examples. But many films can be used, even ones that show the dark side of life, as long we are not exposing ourselves to material that we know in our conscience we should not be viewing. We will be dealing with films that for the most part work well with older children. Many of the films are also in book form, so reading the story would enhance the process. So, let's look at some ideas about how we might teach ethics while viewing movies.

Popular Films and Ethical Dilemmas

As we seek to help our children glean ethical lessons from movies, they will, of necessity, come face-to-face with challenging ethical dilemmas. There is a certain amount of safety, however, in first encountering ethical tests in the realm of the imagination through movies or literature. This is especially true if a parent is actively participating and helping the young person think through the alternatives.

Let's continue this thought by examining some scenes from *Jurassic Park*.⁽¹⁾ This film includes the very contemporary issue of bioethics. Genetic engineering can be used for both good and evil. The movie presents in vivid detail a type of dilemma frequently faced today; that is, If we have the ability to do something, does that mean we should go ahead and use that ability? Does capability = justifiability?

You may want to emphasize the hard-learned lessons of the scientists in this story and use the implications of biotechnology gone astray. Discuss with your children some of the rapidly growing medical procedures such as test tube babies, surrogate parents, genetic manipulation, and artificial insemination. Debate whether the Jurassic Park scientists merely proceeded in an irrational and irresponsible manner, or whether they were in fact trying to play the role of God, thus trespassing into an area they should have never invaded. Perhaps they were so caught up in the excitement of the possibilities that they never stopped to consider whether the "invasion" should have taken place.

Another area of ethical discussion is in the realm of computer ethics, a subject that may be of great interest to your child. The computer security design in *Jurassic Park* was out-dated and poorly conceived. It hinged upon one person, Dennis Nedry, who turned out to be the weak link

in the whole system.(2) The design flaws allowed one person with a self-serving motive to shut down the whole system.

In his greed for greater wealth, Dennis, the core programmer, shut down the security system and jeopardized the whole project. In security systems, as in our legal system, we must develop a design on the basis of fallen human nature. All of us should realize that we are capable of the worst of evils. We must design safeguards into our security systems to protect against those who go astray. For example, even the President of the United States can't begin an atomic attack without others being involved in the process. This is a safeguard for all of us.

A film such as this also gives you an opportunity to encourage your children to think beyond the exciting technology of the production. Dinosaurs that appear so real and frightening are one thing, but ideas implanted in the script are another.

For a deeper analysis of Jurassic Park you may want to read Probe's article, [The Worldview of Jurassic Park](#) by Dr. Ray Bohlin.

Another film that you may use with older children is *Class Action*(3), a story about a daughter's relationship with her father in the context of battles over personal and legal ethics. (Warning, it does have an "R" rating for language.) At stake in this film is the code of ethics of the California Bar Association. It shows that we may not evade responsibility just because we wish to do so. The film is based on the Ford Pinto gas tank case, and there are many interesting developments in the areas of legal, business, and engineering ethics.

Discuss the concept of cost-benefit analysis and what role, if any, it plays in ethical dialogue. In this type of analysis a company computes the cost of making the necessary changes to correct a situation against the cost of paying off the anticipated number of lawsuits that would arise if the problem is not corrected. Bottom line decisions are too often made based on money, rather than the effect on people's lives.

Ethical Struggles on the High Seas

Now, let's investigate *Billy Budd*, a classic movie which seethes with ethical conflict. This powerful story is "a stark dramatization of man's fight between good and evil. The battle is fully realized in the personal and physical struggle between Billy Budd, a young innocent sailor on a British man-of-war and his superior, the cold, cruel and often vicious Claggart. When Billy Budd's strong belief in goodness is threatened by Claggart's equally strong force of evil, the consequences for both individuals are tragic and lasting."(4) The film is based on Herman Melville's book of the same title.(5) Billy Budd, the popular deck hand, is convicted of murder and is sentenced to be hanged from the yardarm. In the process of his court martial, stimulating ethical questions are surfaced. But remember, this is a classic black and white film. Some children will have difficulty paying attention. You may want to develop in your children a taste

for thought-provoking types of movies by first using more popular films, such as Jurassic Park. Then you may decide to explore the classics later.

Billy Budd is a good movie to watch with your older children. You may even want to hit the stop button from time to time during the dialogue. See if your children understand the dilemma that Captain Vere is experiencing as he struggles with the decision of Billy Budd's fate.

Consider some hints of what to look for. For example, the issue of peer pressure versus responsibility is apparent. Captain Vere was very concerned about what the crew would do when they heard about the verdict, because Billy Budd was very popular among the crew members. How often do we make decisions based more on what we fear our peers will think or do rather than on what we know is right?

This discussion may lead to a second example of great concern. To whom are we responsible? Captain Vere, as the commissioned captain of the vessel, was solely responsible for the ship and all the personnel on board. Yet he was not totally an independent agent; he was accountable to the fleet admiral. He knew the requirements of military law. There were demands of duty upon him.(6) The question that Captain Vere seemed to ignore was whether he had a responsibility to a power higher than man, i.e., God. Was the captain's only choice to follow the letter of the law?

In following the letter of the law, Captain Vere made the right legal decision, but his decision showed a lack of moral courage. He knew he was executing a righteous man, although technically a guilty one. In the end it is Billy Budd who demonstrates the highest level of moral inspiration. About to be hanged, Billy Budd proclaims, "God bless Captain Vere!" This was a moment of great pathos that can stir moral outrage.

Billy Budd is a thought-provoking film that will be worth your time and concentration. Not only is it based on a great story; it also benefits from fine acting and production.

Carpe Diem, "Seize the Day"

In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, John Keating, a prep school English teacher played by Robin Williams, challenges his students with these words: "Carpe Diem, lads! Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary!"(7) In this bold statement he is telling his prep school students to seize the moment or enjoy the day, trusting as little as possible to the future.

One of the major questions in the film is, "What is the meaning of life?" First you should understand the background of these prep school boys. This is a very upper class school supported by rich, respectable parents. It's an institution that is very establishment-oriented. Keating, the inspired English teacher, seeks to instill in his boys a sense of passion for poetry and the arts that goes beyond just understanding it. But, he totally ignores the spiritual life beyond mere human

feelings.

In discussing this film with your children you may want to point out the fallacy of a "Carpe Diem" philosophy of life. How does it contrast with the Christian perspective of our being strangers and pilgrims in this world with our hope set on being with Christ for all eternity? What are the positive aspects of this philosophy? Here you might compare and contrast this approach to life with that of the book of Ecclesiastes. A "Carpe Diem" philosophy of life does encourage living life to the fullest, at least in the senses, but, who or what are these boys taught to rely upon? Themselves or God? Does this philosophy promote a full-orbed spiritual life?

Another fascinating film about human nature and ethics is Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.⁽⁸⁾ The story contains Allen's existential philosophy. This worldview is even summarized in the closing narrative of the film. According to the existentialist, we must give meaning to an indifferent universe, and we define ourselves by the choices we make. Thus we are nothing but the sum total of our choices. The existentialist's only hope is that future generations may learn from our choices and have a greater understanding of life.

In spite of its existential point of view, the film does contain some excellent lessons on moral choices and the penalty of sin. Judah Rosenthal, played by Martin Landau, is a wealthy ophthalmologist, revered as a pillar of society. But he has a mistress and his world begins to crumble around him when she threatens to expose their affair. He eventually has her killed. While this story develops, we are able to observe the different moral reasoning between those who believe in a God who is there and cares, and those who live a life devoid of God. We see the contrast between those who believe in a moral structure to life, those who believe you only go around once, as well as those who believe "might makes right."

As you discuss this film, key in on the moral struggle Judah goes through after the tragic deed is done. The dining room vision he has when he returns to his childhood home is especially poignant. You will want to note that even though Judah's father is seeking to make a stand for God, his closing remark is a fallacy, even though it demonstrates great loyalty to God. God is truth and defines truth. God will never stand opposed to the truth. In fact, we can only understand truth in the context of understanding God.

Our children are growing up in a world heavily influenced by existential thought. It is important in viewing this film to describe this non-biblical perspective of life.

Guidelines for Viewing Films

We will conclude this essay with some guidelines and possible resources for more productive film viewing:

1. You may want to subscribe to a movie review newsletter such as *Movieguide: A Biblical*

Guide to Movies and Entertainment, Good News Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 9952, Atlanta, GA 30319, or *Preview: Family Movie & TV Review*, PO Box 832567, Richardson, TX 75083-2567. Their website is www.PreviewOnline.org.

2. Take note of the ratings and read a review as you attempt to determine if a movie conforms to the established non-Christian ethical standards of Hollywood. You may have had the experience of walking out of "PG" movies wondering why they held a "PG" instead of an "R" rating. Or perhaps you have seen "R" rated movies that were far less offensive than some "PG" offerings.

3. Before exposing yourself and your children to a film that may be questionable, you may want to talk with friends who have already seen it in order to discover what they recommend. But you should also exercise caution with these recommendations. Everyone's perspective is different, so don't rely on referrals alone.

4. Don't hesitate to walk out of a movie or to shut off a video that offends your conscience. Your mind and your time are far more important than the money invested. The more movies we see that we know we shouldn't, the more jaded we become about what offends us. We become desensitized. For example, we may allow our children to see sex scenes that years ago would have been very troubling. Or we may find ourselves watching senseless violence and gore without being offended.

5. You may want to invest in books on how to analyze films, such as *The Art of Watching Films*, by Joseph M. Boggs.

6. Never go to a movie with the attitude of just shutting down your mind and being entertained. Always think as you watch. Be a good critic. It can be especially helpful to attend a film with someone who will discuss it with you afterwards.

7. Finally, think through what you want to learn from the film, such as the film's premise and how it relates to biblical truth. How are various roles portrayed? How accurate is the historical perspective? What part, if any, does religion play? How do you feel after watching the film? How are various ethnic and other groups of people depicted? Or was there redemptive value in the film?(9)

Above all, be involved with your children in what they are watching. Help them develop a sensitivity to the ethical dimension of their everyday lives. Train them to pay attention to the moral choices they make. Education begins in the home. There is no doubt about it, children are establishing some of their values from what they see in movies. We need to develop an interest so that we know what our children are watching. Then we can use opportunities to interact with them to discover what they are learning from what they watch. Help them begin to think God's thoughts after Him as they enter the world of movies.

Notes

1. Jurassic Park, Disney, 1993.
2. For deeper study in this area you may want to refer to Mitch Kabby's analysis in Network World. 10(30):89, 26 July 93.
3. *Class Action*, Fox Video, 1990.
4. *Billy Budd*, Key Video, a division of CBS/Fox Video, 1985.
5. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales* (New American Library, 1961).
6. For those who want to study ethical theory (for example, families involved in home schooling), this would be a good point to discuss the ethical teaching of Kant. His "categorical imperative" is based on a sense of duty. Through your actions you must treat individuals as an end in themselves, not only as a means. See Rex Patrick Stevens, *Kant On Moral Practice* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1981).
7. *Dead Poets Society*, Touchstone Home Video, 1989.
8. *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Orion Home Video, Orion Pictures Corp., 1989.
9. Lois Beck, "The Discerning Moviegoer: Watch What You Watch," *The Bridge* (Messiah College, Mechanicsburg, Penn).

©1997 Probe Ministries.

About the Author

Ray Cotton is the former finance director and treasurer of Probe Ministries. He received a B.S. in business administration/management science from the University of Northern Colorado, a certificate in Christian studies from the Center for Advanced Biblical Studies, and an M.A. in interdisciplinary studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. He now serves in a ministry to international students.

What is Probe?

Probe Ministries is a non-profit ministry whose mission is to assist the church in renewing the minds of believers with a Christian worldview and to equip the church to engage the world for Christ. Probe fulfills this mission through our Mind Games conferences for youth and adults, our 3-minute daily radio program, and our extensive Web site at www.probe.org.

Further information about Probe's materials and ministry may be obtained by contacting us at:

Probe Ministries

1900 Firman Drive, Suite 100
Richardson, TX 75081
(972) 480-0240 FAX (972) 644-9664
info@probe.org
www.probe.org

[Copyright information](#)