I heard a Christian speaker talking about needing to avoid certain movies and TV shows. Is it really a big deal what kind of entertainment I watch, listen to or read? Isn't it better to know what is going on in the world than be closed off?

This is an extremely important question. Not only is it pressing (we decide on our entertainment on a daily basis), but it is also deeply personal. All of us must choose how we will entertain ourselves.

Let's clarify the importance of the situation. While we could look at this from a cultural perspective, let's skip that and bring things a little closer to home. There is a psychological principle that has been termed "the law of exposure." This states that the things we expose ourselves to have an effect on us. Music affects our moods. I have a friend who listens to "death metal." He knows that it makes him angry and frustrated, but he listens to it anyway. Language affects our own language. I have another friend who finds himself swearing left and right after a "weekend with the guys." Images affect how we see other people. I talk to many men and women who find themselves in sexual sin after viewing certain photos or videos.

To deny "the law of exposure" is to deny reality. Some people like to claim immunity, but this is simply a lack of self-knowledge. And it is not limited to people of a certain age. I don't know how much sillier we could be than when we will turn off the TV for a child, saying, "You shouldn't be watching this," but then return to it ourselves. Does the fact that I am in my 30s mean that I am unaffected by these images and ideas? Certainly, I am better equipped to discern the truth, but if a movie is bad for a child, how can I be so confident that it is good for me? If it is garbage for a 12-year-old, then it is garbage for me, even if I have learned how to sort through the garbage a little better.

Just as important, we live in a free market society. We vote with our dollars. What do you spend money and time on? For example, I know a number of Catholics who went to see "The Da Vinci Code" or "The Golden Compass" even though these movies are clearly anti-Catholic. It does no good to claim, "I don't agree with them!" The people making this entertainment don't care if you agree or not. Your interior motivation matters, but it is not absolute. Once they have your money, you have already stated that you on their side. And if the movie is evil (or promotes evil ideas), then you just gave $9.75 to the cause of evil. (How much did you put in the collection plate? In the end, all of those numbers will be made known and there will be no room for excuses like, "It was only a movie!").

Entertainment is never "only entertainment." Every form of media presents some philosophy of life, a belief about the world, the human person and God. These ideas mean something, because ideas have consequences. Every great (and every terrible) movement started with an idea. Have you ever noticed that every dictatorship first seeks to control the media? Because when you control the media, you control ideas, and once you control ideas, you can lead people wherever you want.

Rather than attempt to list movies, TV shows or songs, it is more important for our purposes to have some principles that we can apply. We only have room for one in this column today. When encountering some form of entertainment, ask yourself, "Does this reveal the dignity of the human person or in some way distort or obscure it?" Another way to phrase the question is, "Does this entertainment reveal Truth and Beauty?" Some art does this in ways we wouldn't expect. Flannery O'Conner is arguably the finest American fiction writer of the last

century. She wrote about sin and grace in a powerful and truthful way, but it was not pretty. I always thought her stories were grotesque, but they were true. She revealed beauty through writing about ugly things. It is the difference between the violence and gore in "Saving Private Ryan" and that found in the "Saw" movies.

Pope Benedict once wrote, "We may never be entertained by the suffering of others." What does this mean when it comes to "Ultimate Fighting Challenge"? Will I have to change my TV watching?

The next thing we need is conviction. If something is bad for me, then why would I expose myself to it? If I am going to be a follower of Christ, I need to be the kind of person who makes a decision.

Are you the kind of person who can make a decision? Are you willing to? If you are convicted that "this entertainment does not uphold human dignity," are you willing to then not watch it? Seriously, to say, "no matter how funny this new 'The Hangover'-style comedy is, it is not good for me and so I won't watch it." Because, in the end, all of this entertainment will pass away. What will remain, for good or for ill, is the kind of person it has fashioned me into.