

Film for Lent

pay it forward

AIM

To explore the Christian themes found in the film "Pay it Forward".

EXPLANATORY NOTE ABOUT FILMS

Many films have Christian themes in them, even though they don't set out to be religious. Christopher Booker in his book "The Seven Basic Plots" sets out his theory that all stories whether in film, print or from oral tradition follow one or more of just seven plots. We can therefore assume that this would even fit stories in the Bible. It would also seem logical that we can watch a non-Christian film and find Biblical themes included in it.

WATCHING THE FILM

In the first week, we hope that the whole group will sit together and watch the complete film. The film is 2 hours long, so you may want to contact the members of your group and arrange to meet for a longer period of time, or make sure that they all have a chance to see the film before meeting for the first time.

THEMES FROM THE FILM

The themes we pick up from the film will look at different aspects of the way we should live our Christian lives, from the teachings of Jesus and parts of the Old Testament. We will do this each week by looking at a small clip of the film and talking about it, both in the context of the whole film and in the context of the Biblical theme it touches upon. Each discussion will also have a Bible passage that relates to the theme of the clip.

You should note that the film explores themes of loving and accepting yourself, which we will explore during the course and there are themes of abuse, particularly from fathers which are there to explain some of the characters feelings. Whilst we hope that your group's discussions will take place in a sensitive and safe environment for people to be open, please be aware that there may be sessions where people are more guarded in their responses.

Following on from the discussion will be a quieter, more reflective time, using prayers, Biblical quotes and other resources such as poetry and meditations to help the group focus on the week's theme. It doesn't have to be complete silence; use suitable music or split the readings so that people have a chance to reflect on paragraphs rather than whole passages at a time. Choose prayers and reflections from sources with which you are familiar for this purpose, or have a time of open prayer. You may want to include a creative activity, like making a box for your reflections. Such a box could be decorated or filled with small notes each week and serve as a personal reminder of what has been explored during the whole course. A template for such a box can be found at http://www.activityvillage.co.uk/images/box_template_1.gif

(Please note this box activity was also suggested in the Bible Year Lent Course looking at the film "The Terminal")

TIMING

It is very difficult to say how much time will be spent on each of these elements of the course as it very much depends on the make-up of your particular group. Some will enjoy the discussion more than the quiet and vice-versa. In some groups the discussion will be easier on some weeks because people enjoy the theme better or memories are sparked by things that are said. Overall, apart from the first week, there should be enough material to

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last about 1½ hours. Feel free just to “go with the flow” of your group and don’t feel that you have to halt discussion in order to fit the next bit in, or that you have to deliberately extend something just to fill in time.

How you structure your Lent Course session in terms of breaks and refreshments – whether on arrival or at the end or both- is entirely up to you. Please remember that none of us are experts, we are just exploring things together. We may see the film clip and interpret it in an entirely different way to someone else, or someone may interpret the Bible passage differently. That’s ok. That’s what makes it a good course for us all. We are all exploring together. That’s why the course asks lots of questions and doesn’t give any answers! Even though we give you lots of questions to use with your group feel free to ignore them and use questions of your own or find other ways of exploring the topics together.

EVALUATION

At the end of the Lent Course please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

- What was the most helpful thing and why?
- What was the least helpful thing and why?
- What would you like to try now and why?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more material for Lent we plan to have other material on the website.

Acknowledgements

This Bible study has been contributed by Colin Udall, CYDO for East Midlands Synod.

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FILM SYNOPSIS

Pay it Forward (Mimi Leder, 2000)

Trevor McKinney (Haley Joel Osment) starts a new school and meets a new sociology teacher, Eugene Simonet (Kevin Spacey) who challenges the class to come up with an idea that, if it was put in place, would make the world a better place. Trevor takes this idea seriously and comes up with a scheme that a person should do favours for three other people and ask each of those to “pay it forward” to three more people and so on, creating a scheme that would eventually spread throughout the world. Trevor resolves to try three favours but he sees them fail for different reasons. Unknown to him, the idea is taking off as people are beginning to pay their favours forward.

The main sub-plot involves Trevor trying to get his alcoholic mother Arlene (Helen Hunt) and Eugene together. Meanwhile the film also tells the story of a journalist, Chris (Jay Mohr) who encounters “pay it forward” and investigates the phenomenon, which slowly draws him back to the source – Trevor.

Chris interviews Trevor where he describes the scheme, but also expresses his concerns that people will not be good enough to pay it forward each time, as it will mean having to change their own lifestyles. After the interview Trevor tries in vain to protect his friend from bullies and is fatally stabbed. As Eugene and Arlene mourn her son’s death at home and the interview is broadcast, they learn the “pay it forward” scheme has spread across the country and a great crowd is beginning to gather outside to pay their respects

OUTLINE SESSION TIMETABLE

This timetable is just a guide please feel free to structure your groups entirely differently.

7.30pm	Arrivals, welcome and film clip
7.45	Discussion questions around the film clip
8.05	Bible reading and discussion questions
8.25	Quiet time, meditation, music, etc
8.45	Prayers, reflections, work on the box (if used), etc

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THEMES FOR THE COURSE

Week 1 **About the film**

There will be a general discussion about the whole film and what themes can be immediately recognised – Christian and non-Christian - by members of the group. It will be a bit like a book club, for those of you with experience of this. But even if not, there are prompt questions to help you along.

Week 2 **Telling our story**

We will look at how people get to know us, what we share and how we build relationships.

Week 3 **Acceptance**

Jesus tells us to "Love our neighbours as we love ourselves". The film explores how some of the characters come to accept themselves before they can accept or love anyone else readily.

Week 4 **Promises**

We will think about the promises we make and how the words of a promise should be turned into action.

Week 5 **Telling Jesus' Story**

How does the idea of Pay it Forward and the scheme that Trevor comes up with reflect the call from Jesus to go and make disciples?

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WEEK 1 "PAY IT FORWARD" – THE FILM

If you are able to all be together and watch the film together, that's great. Please warn your group members that the film is 2 hours long (if they haven't seen it before) and that because of this, the meeting will be longer – approximately 3 hours. Watch the film together.

Discussion Questions

At the end of the film ask members of the group what they felt about the film.

- If they'd seen it before was there anything different they noticed this time round?
- Anything to say about the actors?
- Was there anything that made them laugh, cry, feel angry, happy, disappointed?
- Did the film have a satisfactory conclusion? Why? Were there any parts of the film that were left unanswered at the end for characters?
- Were there any particular themes that people felt the film explored – for example relationships, sharing, grace, generosity or vulnerability?
- Did anyone pick up any Biblical themes during the film? If so, what? (Don't discuss them in great detail if they are to come up later in the course.)

Read Matthew 26:6-10

- What does this passage say about how we should treat others, particularly those we don't know?
- What does this passage tell us about Jesus' vision of the church?
- What do you think this passage is telling us about the woman's feelings for Jesus?
- What do you think this passage tells us about how the woman was feeling about herself?
- What does Jesus say about treating other people?

Spend some time in quiet thinking about the relationships we have with other people. How do we treat people differently depending on whether they are friends or relations? Who are those we feel able to confide in and why? How easy do we feel it is to confide in God?

Pray for our friends and relations; for those who are going through difficult relationships

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WEEK 2 -TELLING OUR STORY

Watch the scene from the film where Chris, the journalist catches up with Arlene's mum, Grace (Angie Dickinson) to hear how she got involved with pay-it-forward. In it we see the flashback to where Arlene comes to meet her mum. We discover some of the things that have gone on in the past between them and Arlene forgives her mum for all that has happened. The scene starts at approximately 1 hour 37 minutes into the film and ends with the camera panning out and Grace saying "She told me I had to do something big for three other people.

Discussion Questions

- Arlene does two big things in this scene – she forgives her mum and she allows her to start coming round and seeing her grandson, Trevor. Which do you think had the greatest impact on Grace?
- We begin to understand the similarities in Arlene's and Eugene's stories from this scene. Can you remember a time when sharing your experiences has helped someone else?
- The role of Chris becomes quite pivotal to the film after this scene as he pieces it all together. What does this say about recording our stories? Has anyone recorded their life stories in any way?

Read Luke 7:18 – 35

- How does John get to hear Jesus' story? How do you think Jesus' story is related back to John?
- What does Jesus tell us about John's story?
- How does all this story telling enable people to understand John and Jesus better?
- We are told that the crowd, except the Pharisees, acknowledged that God's way was right? What do you think the disciples of both John and Jesus were left thinking?

Spend some time sharing favourite stories, real or fiction. You may like to read an extract from a biography of a famous person, or perhaps look at different experiences of the same era – for example read a poem from the First World War and an extract from "War Horse" or "Private Peaceful", both by Michael Morpurgo. What are our favourite Bible Stories? Why?

Pray, giving thanks for the stories we've heard and for the stories in the Bible. Ask God to show us how we can live our lives that will be an example to others and continue the Christian story.

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WEEK 3 –ACCEPTANCE

Watch the scene where Chris interviews Trevor in the classroom for the TV station. It begins approximately 1 hour 43 minutes into the film and ends with Eugene and Arlene kissing by the lockers about 4 minutes later.

Discussion Questions

- How much do you feel this film is about accepting yourself as you are as well as others?
- Trevor says in the interview with Chris that when people give up, that's when they lose? Have you ever been disappointed that you didn't see something through to the end?
- Trevor does not live to see just how successful his idea of Pay-it-Forward has become. How much do you think what he says in the interview is influenced by the fact that he doesn't see that others have paid it forward?
- What does the interview sequence tell us about how we should be living our Christian lives?

Read Luke 10: 25 – 28

- Jesus agrees with the man that the Law states we should love our neighbours as ourselves. What do you think "loving ourselves" means?
- Who are your neighbours and how do you love them?
- Some people irritate us or anger us by their actions or mannerisms. How do we learn to accept them for who they are?
- How do you and your church show acceptance for others in the actions you take?
- Immediately after this passage is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Compare it with the scene in the film where Jerry (the drug addict that Trevor helped) tries to stop the woman from jumping off the bridge.

Spend some time in quiet. You may want to think about times when we have not treated others as well as we should have done or not accepted them for who they are. Perhaps have some sort of symbolic action where you give all your sins to God and receive His forgiveness. Reflect on the story of The Good Samaritan and its message of compassion being above the Law.

Pray, thinking about our neighbours near and far who are in need. Pray for ourselves and for tolerance and acceptance of others.

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WEEK 4 – PROMISES

Watch the opening scene immediately after the credits where Chris the journalist receives the brand new Jaguar car from the man walking his dog. It ends with Chris saying "Besides, I've got a car...sort of." Then watch the scene where Chris catches up with this man (whom he calls Mr Thorsen) at his offices as he is trying to leave. Chris challenges him to tell about the pay-it-forward scheme and he is told about the gunman in the hospital ensuring his daughter gets treated. The scene starts approximately 25 minutes 30 seconds into the film or if you can select scenes, it should be scene 8. The scene finishes with Mr. Thorsen saying "I'm sorry I'm late for my mass wedding."

Discussion Questions

- Mr Thorsen tells Chris that if he accepts the car then he is "obligated" to pay it forward - to do big favours for three other people. How do you feel when you are "obliged" to do something for someone?
- Why is it so hard to look outside our problems to help other people with theirs?
- Does helping other people help to solve our own problems?
- What things are we obligated to do as followers of Jesus?

Read Matthew 5:33 – 37

- In this passage Jesus tells us to keep our word. What does this mean to you?
- "Few people take promises seriously these days. (In fact, it's almost surprising when people actually follow through!) That's where God's people can stand out from the crowd. By living with integrity, our actions will make more of an impact than any words ever could" (ministryandmedia.com). What sort of actions will make us stand out from the crowd?
- When was the last time you or your church took an action that made you stand out from the crowd?

Spend some time in quiet reflecting on promises that God through Jesus has made for us and how he has kept them. Think about promises you have made. Give thanks for those you have kept, ask for strength to keep your word.

Pray together thinking about the problems we have and how we can help others with their problems. Who can we help? How can we take action that will make us stand out in the crowd?

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WEEK 5 – TELLING JESUS' STORY

Watch the scene where Trevor explains to his class the idea of "Pay it Forward". It begins approximately 31 minutes 40 seconds into the film. If you have scene selection, it should be the beginning of chapter 10. It begins with the last line of the previous scene when Arlene asks Jerry "What's paying it forward?" The scene then repeatedly cuts between the conversation Arlene and Jerry are having and what's happening in Trevor's class. It ends a couple of minutes later when Arlene asks Jerry if he wants a cup of coffee and he answers "Yes Ma'am".

Discussion Questions

- Is Trevor's idea really utopian – that it can only happen in a perfect world?
- In Galatians 5:13 we are told that freedom should be used to serve one another. How does serving one another continue that freedom?
- A call to be a Christian means serving one another and giving without expecting repayment. Is paying it forward therefore a Christian concept?
- IN the interview with Chris towards the end of the film, Trevor says that he doesn't feel the concept will work, because it means that people will have to change. Is he right?

Read Psalm 78:1 – 8 and Matthew 28:16 – end.

- When was the last time you shared a Bible story or the Gospel with a non-Christian, or even admitted you were a Christian to people who are not Christians?
- The Psalmist tells us we are obligated to pass on the stories of God's deeds. How well do we do this?
- If we followed the concept of sharing the Bible stories and Gospel as "Pay it Forward" then as Jerry and Trevor show, many more people would soon hear God's Word. How can we do this better?
- How can we change so that we keep our promises, serve one another better and share the Gospel better with other people?

Spend some time in quiet making a personal action plan of how you are going to serve someone, help someone or share your faith with someone who is non-Christian or not a church-goer. Bring these ideas together to make a group plan. Can we keep our promises to take this sort of action and hold each other accountable for doing so?

Pray, giving thanks for all that we have shared on this course, asking for strength to keep our promises and to carry out our action plans. Pray that we can help each other in the time ahead as we perhaps struggle with our own difficulties whilst helping others.

Ensure that there are no unanswered questions lingering on from the course.

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HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk