

Christmas in the Movies

“It’s a Wonderful Life– Life”

[Luke 12:15](#)

This Advent, we have been watching some of the most popular Christmas movies and finding gospel messages in them. So far, we have viewed three films - The Polar Express, Miracle on 34th Street, and Elf. These movies reflected on the themes of belief, hope, and joy. Today, we turn to *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and we will consider what the movie has to tell us about “life”.

It’s a Wonderful Life is considered to be one of the greatest movies ever made. It is one of the most cherished movies of all time. For many families in the United States and around the world, watching this classic Christmas movie is an annual ritual. I loved it when I watched it with my siblings for the first time on our family’s small black and white TV many, many years ago. The movie is so touching and inspiring, that I still cannot finish watching it without my eyes getting teared up. Certainly, it is one of my all-time-favorite movies as it is for many others.

Ironically, however, the life of *It’s a Wonderful Life* has not always been so wonderful. Though it was nominated for 5 Oscars, the movie did not do well at the box office when it was first released in 1946. As a result, the director of the movie, Frank Capra, suffered a loss of over a half a million dollars, which bankrupted the production company he had just begun. To make it worse, the FBI found the negative image of bankers in the movie to be problematic. They issued a memo, titled, “Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry” and considered *It’s a Wonderful Life* to be Communist propaganda.

Then, about 30 years later, *It’s a Wonderful Life* serendipitously found new life. In 1974, the movie accidentally fell into the public domain through a copyright lapse. This meant that TV stations could show *It’s a Wonderful Life* for free without paying any royalties. And that is exactly what they did! During the holidays, year after year, for the next 20 years, its popularity kept growing because TV stations would play the movie constantly. And eventually, it became one of the most beloved Christmas movies of all time.

Here is one more interesting fact about the movie. *It’s a Wonderful Life* was filmed in California during the summer time, in the midst of a heat wave. So, if you watch it carefully, you might be able to notice Jimmy Stewart, who plays George Bailey, the main character, sweating in what is supposed to be freezing cold and snowy weather.

Set in a small town called Bedford Falls, *It’s a Wonderful Life* portrays the life of George Bailey. Bailey is always concerned about the welfare of others and helps those in distress. But, he also had big dreams. He wanted to travel the world before entering college to study architecture. After his study and training, he had hoped to come back to his hometown and build many buildings. But, right before he left town, his father suddenly died, and his life was forever changed.

First, he is forced to postpone his plans to travel the world, so that he can sort out the family business, Bailey Brothers’ Building and Loan, the company that his father had built, the company through which he made a difference in the lives of the town’s people.

Then, there is Henry Potter, the movie's villain. He is the local banker and the richest man in town. But, he only cares about his wealth and wants to control the whole town. He tries to dissolve Building and Loan through manipulation in hopes that his competitor will be eliminated. Bailey gives an impassioned speech at the board of directors meeting and blocks Potter's attempt. Let's take a look. (Show clip #1)

The two main characters, Bailey and Potter, are basically in the same business. They both take in people's money in savings and loan it out to those who build homes. Yet, they run their business and approach their life very differently. Potter's mantra in his life and business is "How can I make more money?" "How can I have more?" But, Bailey's is "How can I help more people?" "How can I give more?"

About our approaches to life, Jesus said, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." (Luke 12:15) And, he further explained it through a parable. There was a rich man whose land produced a good crop. He decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his crop. He said to himself, "You have plenty of good thing laid up for many years. So, take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But, God said to him, "Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?"

It's not that Jesus was condemning the rich man's success and wealth but his greedy approach to it. He does not die because of his wealth. In fact, we all die whenever God calls us home. What Jesus was teaching through this parable is that life is not about what we have accomplished. It's not about what we have but what we do with them. Jesus finished his parable with these words: "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God."

How are you approaching life? Do you define your success and happiness by your possessions - your job, the money you have in your bank accounts and invested, the house you own, the car you drive, the nice clothes and shoes you wear, and fancy handbags you carry, just to name a few? All the nice things you have are God's blessings, though you might think you have earned them through your hard work. Are you building bigger barns to store them, to keep them to yourself and your family? Or are you using them to be rich toward God?

As a result of the great speech he gave, Bailey ends up taking over his family business and not being able to leave the town for the rest of his life. He and his wife even cancel their honeymoon and use their savings to keep the company out of Potter's control. He establishes a housing complex for his town's residents and rescues them from Potter's overpriced rentals.

On Christmas Eve, Bailey's assistant, Uncle Billy loses a great sum of money that he was going to deposit in the bank. Potter finds the money and does not say anything about it. Without the money, Bailey will end up losing his company, disappointing many of his town's folks who look to him for affordable housing. He will also be arrested for bank fraud. In desperation, he goes to Potter and appeals to him for a loan. But, the greedy man mocks Bailey and refuses to loan money to him. Let's take a look. (Show clip #2)

In complete despair, Bailey wishes he had not been born. He goes to the bridge to end his life. Right then, his guardian angel, Clarence, intervenes. With the help of the angel, Bailey is able to see how the world would be if he was never born. Soon, he realizes that the world without him is a dark, hopeless, and sad place to live. The name of his town is no longer Bedford Falls but Pottersville, as it is now completely

controlled by the greedy man Potter. There is no affordable housing for its residents, only Potter's overpriced rentals which are in poor condition. He sees the grave of his younger brother, Harry. He died because Bailey was not there to save him from drowning. Bailey notices that people's lives have been ruined because he was not there to help them when they needed him. Bailey soon realizes that he has actually touched many people and made a difference in their lives. His life matters. And, after all, his life is not miserable, but wonderful!

Bailey goes back to the bridge and begs to his guardian angel that he would live again. And, he is granted his life back. Running back home, he realizes it's still Christmas Eve. At this point, nothing in his life has changed. The money is still missing. And, he knows he will be arrested, and his company close. Potter is still Potter, an incredibly greedy and heartless man, wanting to have a complete control of Bedford Falls. There is nothing to celebrate and be happy about. Yet, George Bailey is overjoyed and cannot keep his excitement to himself. Let's take a look. (Show clip #3)

While Potter is sitting alone in his office on Christmas Eve, Bailey is surrounded by his family, and friends, and neighbors, witnessing a miracle that is unfolded before his eyes. It's clear that, after all, the true richest man in town is not Potter but Bailey, who became rich not by accumulating, but giving away, not by being served but serving. The definition of his richness is more like what Jesus said in the Gospel Luke - being rich toward God.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." When we define life by our possessions, it becomes very small because we compare what we have to what others have. There is never enough. But, the life we find in Jesus Christ is an abundant life, a life that keeps growing by giving away. The life Jesus gives us is a wonderful life, that makes other lives wonderful. May we multiply this abundant, wonderful life by living it fully! Amen.