

# The Gospel of *It's a Wonderful Life* Bible Study

## Goodness

- **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, we long to find ways to demonstrate your goodness to others. Open our eyes to opportunities to model good behavior to all we meet, during this Advent season and beyond. In your name we pray. Amen.*

- **Opening Discussion**

- What are your memories of watching this movie?

- **Interesting Trivia About the Movie**

- *For the scene that required Donna Reed to throw a rock through the window of the Granville House, Frank Capra hired a marksman to shoot it out on cue. To everyone's amazement, Reed broke the window by herself. She'd played baseball in high school, and had a strong throwing arm.*
- *The gym floor that opens up to reveal a swimming pool was real. It was located at Beverly Hills High School in Los Angeles.*
- *Two of the writers called the finished film "horrid" and refused to see it when it was released. The only one of Clifford Odets' [original screenwriter] ideas to appear in the finished script was George preventing Mr. Gower from mistakenly dispensing poison instead of medication.*
- *James Stewart was nervous about the phone scene kiss because it was his first screen kiss since his return to Hollywood after the war. Under Frank Capra's watchful eye, Stewart filmed the scene in only one unrehearsed take, and it worked so well that part of the embrace was cut because it was too passionate to pass the censors.*
- *As Uncle Billy drunkenly leaves the Bailey home, it sounds as if he stumbles into some trash cans on the sidewalk. In fact, a crew member dropped a large tray of props right after Thomas Mitchell went off-screen. James Stewart began laughing, and Mitchell quickly improvised "I'm alright, I'm okay!" Frank Capra decided to use this take in the final cut, and gave the stagehand a \$10 bonus for "improving the sound."*

- **Scripture** (have volunteers read aloud)

- James 3:13
- Galatians 6:9-10
- Matthew 12:35
- 1 Timothy 6:17-18

- **Video – Lesson 1: Goodness [17:09]**

- Had you ever noticed O Come All Ye Faithful at the beginning?
  - Why do you think that was chosen?
- When they state “discouraged” is worse than “sick,” do you think this is a joke or truth?
- What good deeds from the movie are most meaningful to you?
  - *Saving his brother's life*
  - *Saving Mr. Gower from poisoning customer after Gower hears about his lost son*
  - *Stands up to Mr. Potter when he was berating his father*
  - *Stands up to Mr. Potter and gives up his plans to travel the world*
  - *Gives college money to Harry*
  - *Stays in Bedford Falls rather than turning over the Building & Loan to Harry*
  - *Gives up his honeymoon*

- *Mary gives up honeymoon money*
  - *Turns down job from Mr. Potter (equivalent to \$355,000/year)*
- What real-life people do these characters remind you of?
  - George
  - Mr. Potter
  - Mary
- **Study Guide**
  - What motivated George to do good?
  - Can you share a recent good deed of your own? What motivated you?
  - Read 1 Peter 3:17
    - Have you or someone you know suffered for doing good? Was it worth it?
  - *Frank Capra compared George Bailey to The Good Samaritan – “Of all actors’ roles I believe the most difficult is the role of a Good Sam who doesn’t know he is a Good Sam. I knew one man who could play it... Jimmy Stewart.”*
  - Read Hebrews 10:24
    - Did George’s good deed influence Mary to also do good?
    - Who has set good examples for you?
  - What is a measure of goodness?
- **Closing Prayer (ask a volunteer to offer this)**

References for material:

- [\*The Gospel of It's a Wonderful Life Bible Study, Study Guide\*](#)
- [\*It's a Wonderful Life Bible Study, DVD Leader Pack\*](#)

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*Italics* imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

# Godliness

- **Opening Prayer**

*Dear Lord, you call us your children, and you gave us an example to follow in your Son. Show us ways in which we can promote your Godliness here on earth. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.*

- **Opening Discussion**

- What is your definition of godliness?

- **Interesting Trivia About the Movie**

- *While filming the scene in which George prays in the bar, James Stewart has said that he was so overcome that he began to sob. Frank Capra later re-framed and blew up the shot because he wanted to catch that expression on Stewart's face. That's why the shot looks so grainy compared with the rest of the film.*
- *A photograph of James Stewart at the age of six months, donated by his parents, was included in the Bailey home set.*
- *The set for Bedford Falls was constructed in two months and was one of the longest sets that had ever been made for an American movie. It covered four acres of RKO's Encino Ranch. It included 75 stores and buildings, a main street, a factory district and a large residential and slum area. Main Street was 300 yards long--three whole city blocks.*
- *Films made prior to this one used cornflakes painted white for the falling snow effect. Because the cornflakes were so loud, dialogue had to be dubbed in later. Frank Capra wanted to record the sound live, so a new snow effect was developed using foamite (a fire-fighting chemical) and soap and water. This mixture was then pumped at high pressure through a wind machine to create the silent, falling snow. 6000 gallons of the new snow were used in the film. The RKO Effects Department received a Class III Scientific or Technical Award from the Motion Picture Academy for the development of the new film snow.*
- *The Martinis are based on Frank Capra's own family, who emigrated from Sicily in 1903. A goat accompanies them in their car. "Capra" means goat in Italian.*

- **Scripture** (have volunteer read aloud)

- 1 Timothy 6:3-10

- **Video – Lesson 2: Godliness [11:42]**

- *Remind everyone about the scene where Uncle Billy accidentally loses his \$8000 deposit to Mr. Potter*
  - *\$8000 is worth over \$100,000 in today's dollars*
- *What one thing might George have done differently when faced with this stressful situation?*
- *Have you experienced periods of stress that may have distanced you from God?*
- *The children quickly turned to prayer. Why is that? They don't have anything else they feel they can do to control the situation*
  - *Is this a model for us somehow?*
- *What does George pray for? "Show me the way"*
- *When you are most stressed, do you quickly turn to God in prayer?*
  - *What type of prayer are you likely to offer?*

- **Study Guide**

- *How would you describe to a non-believer the difference between "goodness" and "Godliness"?*
- *Spiritual disciplines: praying, reading scripture, communion, worship, fasting, good works, feeding, visiting, clothing, caring, giving, seeking justice, ending oppression/discrimination*

- Can you share examples of Godliness?
  - “George had built his life on being good – but should have built his life on being godly.”
    - Do you agree?
  - What are the benefits of godliness over goodness?
  - Have you ever trusted too much in someone or something that failed?
  - How did Uncle Billy react to the lost money? *humility, sincerity*
  - How did George react? *anger, selfishness*
  - Read James 4:17
  - Mr. Potter committed sins of omission (failing to disclose what he knew about the money)
    - What are some of the sins of omission we commit?
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- **Closing Prayer (ask a volunteer to offer this)**

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# Prayers

- **Opening Prayer**

*Lord, sometimes we are at a loss for words when we pray. Thank you for the assurance that you know our needs even when we find it difficult or impossible to express them. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

- **Opening Discussion**

- Who are your models for praying?
- What do you think of Pope Francis's suggestion that "lead us not into temptation" be changed (e.g., to "don't let us fall into temptation" as has been adopted by the Spanish)?

- **Interesting Trivia About the Movie**

- *James Stewart cited George Bailey as being his favorite character, but has stated in several interviews that Harvey (1950) was his favorite movie he starred in. The part of George Bailey was originally developed at another studio with Cary Grant earmarked for the role. When Frank Capra inherited the project, he rewrote it to suit Stewart.*
- *Initially a box-office flop in 1946, the film became a cherished holiday tradition in the US. Due to a clerical error at NTA's (National Telefilm Associate's) copyright office, the copyright wasn't renewed when it expired in 1974. The film became public domain, meaning anyone who could obtain a print could broadcast it without paying royalties. Local stations aired it dozens of times between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. In the 1990's, after a series of court battles, NTA's successor, Republic Pictures, re-acquired the rights to the film because they owned the source material ("The Greatest Gift") and the film's score, which were still copyrighted. NBC now broadcasts the film, exclusively, at least twice during the holiday season.*
- *Frank Capra estimated the film would be shot within 90 days; he was right and the whole cast and crew threw a party to celebrate.*
- *During the bank run scene, Frank Capra rehearsed the scene between James Stewart and Ellen Corby several times. When Corby's character was asked how much money she needed, she replied \$17, which was in the script. Just prior to the first actual take, Capra took Corby aside and told her to give Stewart an odd number. He thought it would be funnier. When she said "17.50" to Stewart; he was taken off-guard and impulsively kissed her, which was not in the script. Stewart's spontaneous reply was so genuine that Capra left the scene in the final film.*
- *The scene on the bridge where George saves Clarence [or more appropriately – Clarence saves George] was filmed on a back lot on a day where the temperature was 90 degrees Fahrenheit. This is why James Stewart is visibly sweating in a few scenes.*

- **Scripture** (have volunteer read aloud)

- Philippians 1:3-11; 4:6-7

- **Video – Lesson 3: Prayers [10:01]**

- In response to the prayers of the community, George's family, and George himself, God sent Clarence.
  - Would God have sent Clarence anyway?
- What do you think of Clarence's approach to tell George the truth about himself right from the start (i.e., being from heaven, jumping in to save George by keeping him from committing suicide)?
- George believes \$8000 is the answer to his prayers. Would you say that your prayers of petition are typically infusing your will on God, rather than the other way around?
  - Why are we so interested in providing God with solutions rather than problems?

- Clarence gave George a dramatic wake-up call. Have you ever had a similar wake-up call from God – an epiphany which changed a direction you took in life?
  - What was God’s answer to George’s prayer? *perspective that your love will abound in perspective and insight*
  - **Study Guide**
    - Does praying in numbers help? In what way?
    - Philippians 4 talks about the “peace of God, which transcends all understanding.”
      - How does this differ from what the world calls peace?
    - What is the smallest problem you prayed about lately?
    - What is the largest problem?
      - On reflection, do you find it appropriate to spend the same amount of time for each?
  - **Closing Prayer (ask a volunteer to offer this)**
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# Miracles

- **Opening Prayer**

*Oh Lord, open our eyes to the miracles you perform all around us. Help us be instruments of your miracles with your people. In Jesus' precious name. Amen.*

- **Interesting Trivia About the Movie**

- *In the post-production photo of all cast and crew, James Stewart and director Frank Capra appear twice, once on the far left and another time on the far right. As it was slow-taking panoramic pictures, they ran to the other end before the pan reached that point.*
- *Sam makes a fortune in plastics while Harry becomes an engineer at his father-in-law's glass factory. Both of these come out of Frank Capra's own education in chemical engineering. Capra himself was unable to find a job with his background, and like George Bailey, considered himself a failure for many years.*
- *Lionel Barrymore convinced James Stewart to take the role of George Bailey, despite his feeling that he was not up to it so soon after returning from World War II.*
- *George hopes to go to college to "learn how to build things." In real life, James Stewart majored in architecture at Princeton University.*
- *According to Robert J. Anderson, H.B. Warner really was drunk during the scene in which Mr. Gower slaps young George. Warner's slaps were real and caused real blood to come from Anderson's ear. After the scene was finished, Warner hugged and comforted Anderson.*
- *This film is one of five times Beulah Bondi portrayed James Stewart's mother, The others are: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939), Of Human Hearts (1938) Vivacious Lady (1938), and The Jimmy Stewart Show: The Identity Crisis (1971).*

- **Opening Discussion**

- What miracles in the Bible can you remember?

- **Video – Lesson 4: Miracles [9:29]**

- *The character Zuzu was named after Zu Zu ginger snaps, which were manufactured from 1901-1980s. That's why George calls Zuzu his "little ginger snap"*
- *"The Bells of St. Mary's" appears on the marquee in Bedford Falls*
  - *Henry Travers, who plays Clarence, co-starred in that movie*
- Which of the townspeople in the final scene seemed the happiest? *Those giving*
  - How does art reflect life here?

- **Study Guide**

- What miracles have you experienced in your life?
- *A few weeks before production, Capra said he was making the film to "combat a modern trend toward atheism."*
- Recall the closing scene where George shouts "Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter!" – an example of "loving your enemies"
  - What does "loving your enemies" look like to you?
  - An early script had Clarence showing up and admonishing Potter after he says "Happy New Year to you too – in jail!"... Clarence says, "You're going to die soon – then what? Can you think of anyone in the world...that would care? Think hard, Potter. Are you the richest man around here, or the poorest?"

- How would including this scene have affected the movie?
  - When George gets home, he greets the sheriff with a cheerful “I’ll bet it’s a warrant for my arrest. Isn’t it wonderful? I’m going to jail!”
    - How could George face this trouble so gleefully?
  - What did Harry mean when he called George “the richest man in town”?
  - In what ways do you see yourself as rich?
  - In an early script, Potter’s conscience catches up with him and he goes to George’s house. However, when he arrives and hears them singing carols, he feels unworthy to join them and remains outside holding the money.
    - How would including this scene have affected the movie?
  - Do you feel it’s important to believe in miracles?
  
  - **Closing Prayer (ask a volunteer to offer this)**
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