

## ***A Christmas Story***

In 1983, a low budget movie reflected the sense of commercialism in America's annual holiday festivities. A Christmas Story was unique in that it acknowledged the American greed surrounding Christmas, highlighted the sufferings of commercialism, but also the sufferings of disappointment and hurt feelings. The movie, so popular in our culture that cable channel TBS runs the movie back to back for 24-hours periods, gives us a glimpse into middle-class, Midwestern life, and specifically, the struggles of adolescent desires, all of which are seen through the eyes of a nine-year old boy, Ralphie Parker.

A Christmas Story is in every way a satire, hilarious and exaggerated, its characters caricatures of the American family. From the grumpy father, Mr. Parker, "The Old Man," who eventually becomes the hero of sorts by providing "the gift," to the kind and loving Mrs. Parker, to the younger brother Randy and so many more, A Christmas Story is brilliant in its depictions of our modern America.

So, why choose a movie for this series that depicts suffering and disappointment? For starters, it's a classic comedy and laughter is always great medicine. Secondly, we've selected a few clips in the hope that they will spark conversation about your own holiday favorites, family traditions, and Jesus' amazing gifts.

A Christmas Story – Santa Claus Clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwGYfMVKQtQ>

A Christmas Story – Ralphie Gets His BB Gun <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soUG7NSgkTg>

Reflect on the most memorable Christmas gift you received in childhood or adolescence.

- What was the gift? What did you experience when you received or opened it?
- Did the gift fulfill your expectations? Do you still own the item?
- What does this tell us about "gifts that last"? How does it re-shape what you think about Christmas and gift-giving?

Now reflect on a gift only the Holy Spirit could provide for you.

- If you were to ask the Holy Spirit for a gift, what would you ask for? Why?

A Christmas Story – Chinese Restaurant Scene <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTq20prt0K8>

The Chinese restaurant scene is, according to screenwriter Jean Shephard, a significant part of the anti-nostalgia theme of the movie. The traditional meal of turkey, potatoes, stuffing and gravy, ruined by the neighborhood dogs, is replaced by a completely un-American Chinese meal. Complete with another hilarious moment in the singing of Deck the Halls by the restaurant staff and the lopping off the now famous duck's "smile," this meal does not fit the ideal.

Many of us have a favorite food or meal for which we feel somewhat nostalgic.

Reflect:

- What are your family's traditional food favorites during the holidays?
- Is there a dish that has to be included or "it just isn't Christmas"?

But is food really the focus of Christmas? Of course not! Jesus is the focus, praise God!

- How can we shift our focus off gift and food expectations back onto Jesus?
- How have you seen or experienced Jesus in your life? What are you thankful for?

## ***A Christmas Carol***

Dickens' tale of a miserly old man who encounters three ghosts is well known. Embittered by poverty and abandonment as a young child, Scrooge is so focused on making money that he fails to make a life, and his bitterness affects all his relationships. Unaware of (or uncaring toward) the pain in the lives around him, he pushes others away and finds himself lonely and resentful at the end of his life. Only by engaging with his past, present, and future will he be able to find wholeness and see God's perspective on what life's purpose should be.

A Christmas Carol – Full Movie – Scrooge (1970 Musical version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99BfCytGEGY>

3:34 – 7:17 – To set up this scene, have participants note words, attitudes, responses, or expressions you note in each of the characters (Carolers, Scrooge, Bob, Fred) Based on this scene, what would you say are some of Scrooge's priorities? Contrast those with some of the priorities of his nephew, Fred, or his employee, Bob. • How do our priorities show up, even if they are unspoken? How does the fruit of our spiritual lives express itself in our relationships and actions? • Read Luke 6:43-45. What can we assume about Scrooge's heart, based on the fruit of his actions?

32:22- 34:00 - Marley indicates that the reason for the chains he wears is their shared focus on business at the expense of "mankind" while on earth. He cannot escape the choices he made while living, but Scrooge still has time to do so. • What are some lifestyle choices that can keep us in bondage? • Read Romans 8:1-4. How can we escape this bondage to sin and live in freedom?

41:23 – 42:40 - This scene gives us a glimpse of why Scrooge is so bitter (abandoned by his family) • Does Scrooge's experience of deep pain and abandonment as a child give you more empathy for his behavior as an adult? Why or why not? • What might we learn from this as we consider people who've hurt us, or behaved in ways that seemed un-Christlike? Often, understanding a person's backstory gives us more empathy for them today. Everyone is going through something.

1:07:18 -1:14:01 - In both these scenes, one with the Cratchit family and one with Scrooge's nephew, we see Bob and Fred are willing to "drink to the health" of Mr. Scrooge, even though he has not treated them well. • Read Matthew 5:43-48. What does it require, in your own life, to be able to wish the best for those who treat you poorly, or who are your enemies?

1:35:20- 1:38:08 – Scrooge realizes he's been spared and promises to change his life. • Even though Scrooge doesn't mention God or Jesus in his song of thanksgiving, how is his message reminiscent of our gift of the Gospel? • Every day we have the option to "begin again." For what are you most thankful to God?

Activity/Response:

What might we do this Christmas season in a response of thanksgiving to the God who gives us such a wonderful gift? Discuss possible service opportunities at the church or in the community. Consider adopting a single mom, serving together at Open Door Mission, or sending cards to shut-ins at a nursing home to bring joy to those who are lonely.

**The Grinch\*** (Optional opening scene 10 min) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heD427hwSZQ>

How the Grinch Stole Christmas, the movie based upon the children's book by Dr. Seuss, has many adult lessons. In case you have not seen the movie – or have become so “adult” that you have forgotten the story – here is a summary:

The Grinch is jealous of other people enjoying Christmas because he has a heart that is “two sizes too small.” He decides to steal everyone's Christmas presents, their decorations, and even their Christmas trees so that he can have Christmas all to himself. The Grinch is surprised to discover that the people (called the “Who's”) are still able to celebrate Christmas, even without their gifts and decorations. Christmas isn't just about gifts, decorations, and trees, it is about “something more.” The Grinch's heart suddenly grows several sizes, he returns all of the Christmas items to the Whos, and is invited to join them in celebrating Christmas.

Not a bad list of lessons to learn at this time of year. The lesson that there's something more amazing to be discovered in the Christmas season than gifts and decorations, shopping and busyness. The Grinch isn't just a book or a movie for kids, it's for all of us. It's for the lost who need to be found, and for the saved searching for hope.

*Discussion starter:* (divide into two teams and brainstorm as many items as you can think of)

What are the tangible items that you associate with Christmas? (gifts, cocoa, tree, carols, etc)

What are some of the intangible realities of Christmas that make it so special? (love of family & friends, spending time together, serving and helping the less fortunate, etc)

Let's talk about three important lessons from the Grinch that are about “something more”:

*1) Presents aren't the reason for the season*

Throughout the whole movie, Cindy Lou-Who wants Santa to help her mother be free from stress and hardship as a single parent, rather than receive a Christmas-sized gift. The idea of a child rejecting presents is virtually unheard of and truly refreshing! As the movie comes to a close, the Whos learn that all their presents were taken on Christmas morning.

stealing Christmas (4.5 min) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7ctcVtm4xA>

Even after losing all their gifts, (and to the surprise of the Grinch) the community gathers in the town square to sing Christmas carols instead of being angry or frustrated. Here, audiences see that material objects are merely additions to Christmas, rather than the source of meaning. It's the love, kindness and joy we give and receive that brings meaning to the season.

“But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 4:19 (KJV)

*2) Community is important (It's why we “do life together”)*

The Grinch lives in isolation with his sweet pet dog named Max in a cave far away from the Whos. In the newest version of the movie, audiences learn that the Grinch was forgotten as an orphan; this has shaped his heart to be callous towards others, especially during Christmas. Many scenes juxtapose the Grinch's solitude with the happy and warm environment of all the Whos in Whoville. Watch this scene near the end of the movie when the Whos invite him in:

last scene – dinner with the Whos (5 min) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swBASmh3jws>

Although resistant at first, the Whos teach the Grinch that with kindness, coming together as a community helps to bolster love and unity. This was vital for the Grinch, and it's important for audiences as well, to be reminded that we were not created to be alone. We do life together.

“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire...” – Proverbs 18:1a (ESV)

### 3) *Jesus is the Savior of the world!*

With a commercialized emphasis on Christmas, it's encouraging that THE GRINCH inserts truth about the real reason for the season. THE GRINCH features Christmas carols like "God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman" which has a lyric that reads, "remember Christ our Savior" and clearly alludes to the Gospel. What are some other Christian themes you noticed: (examples - honoring your parents, treating others with respect, repenting of wrongdoing)

He realizes & changes heart (5 min) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXmbA6SpOw0>

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." – Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

May God bless us all with community, love, kindness, joy and most importantly, may He bless us all with a Spirit of Peace as celebrate of the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world.

\*some ideas above adapted from Tess Farand and Mike Coyner

<https://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/3-christian-messages-that-surprised-us-in-the-grinch.html>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/missionwork/2015/12/lessons-from-the-grinch/>

## **Elf**

Buddy was a baby in an orphanage who stowed away in Santa's sack and ended up at the North Pole. Later, as an adult human who happened to be raised by elves, Santa allows him to go to New York City to find his birth father, Walter Hobbs. Hobbs, on Santa's naughty list for being a heartless jerk, had no idea that Buddy was even born. Buddy, meanwhile, experiences the delights of New York City (and human culture) as only an elf can. When Walter's relationship with Buddy interferes with his job, Walter is forced to reevaluate his priorities.

This movie doesn't try to be religious – in fact, it's something of a parody for other legendary Christmas movies. However, we noticed a couple of themes that have definite tie-in to Biblical values.

1) Early in the movie, Buddy goes searching for his true father. Loosely reminiscent of the story of the Prodigal son (Luke 15), we see Buddy taking a long journey and eventually finding (coming home to) his dad. However, the twist in this movie is that the father, Walter Hobbs (and not Buddy) is the one who experiences redemption and reconciliation. While Buddy maintains his Christmas spirit throughout, Hobbs is a mean and selfish executive whose focus on work and money causes him to neglect his family.

Santa tells Buddy about New York and his Dad (the scene ends, but Santa's next line is about how even though his dad's on the naughty list, that "doesn't mean they can't find their way again" ) (1 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekGILdz0JWw>

Elf meets his Dad (2:25 min) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNMtHosai08>

Think of your own redemption story, of how we once were lost and now found

Tell us about a "Buddy" in your life – someone whose positive spirit and love for people caused you to seek redemption, a new way of life in Jesus. OR

Tell us about how your own "fruits of the spirit" had a positive impact on someone else's life and redemption story.

Read Matt 18:1-5 Buddy's enthusiasm for life and persistent joy are childlike and compelling. What can we learn from Buddy about how to celebrate this holiday (give thanks for God's gifts!) with a more childlike spirit? Why is this approach to life so counter-cultural? How does that make it harder to appreciate/adopt in our own lives?

2) A secondary theme is one of searching for one's true identity. Buddy realizes he doesn't have any of the same talents as the other elves, and feels like he doesn't fit in. Yet even when he goes to New York, he realizes that his childlike wonder and joy are in stark contrast to the pervasive negativity and selfishness present in his dad's work world. (In other words – he still doesn't fit in).

Elf is a Human in an Elf's world (special talents) (3:31) – finds out he's a human

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEUkxtdVVPA>

Buddy tries hard to be like the other elves, yet he does not have the talents needed in order to make toys quickly. When he learns that he is a human he sets out to live into his human identity. Learning how God has uniquely created each of us can provide a better understanding of how he has called us to use our gifts to benefit the church.

Do you know your spiritual gifts? If so, share what they are.

Similar to when Buddy realized he couldn't work with the elves, what can happen if we are in roles that do not align with our gifts? (Burnout, Frustration, etc.)

*Read 1 Corinthians 12:12, 15-20, 24-26*

Verse 18 says God has placed the parts in the body just as he wanted them to be. In what ways can knowing and using your spiritual gifts help the church? Buddy was gifted in bringing his positivity and cheer to a pessimistic environment.

Buddy decorates the store (0:52) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXIGbJ7pBCs>

Not everyone appreciated Buddy and he eventually left his new family. (0:18)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjyY7ePq39E>

What might we learn from the fact that people didn't appreciate Buddy's positivity at first?

What might have happened if Buddy had chosen to blend in and not bring his cheer to New York City?

How might the neglect of our own gifts impact the church?

End with singing on streets of New York— Buddy's influence saves Christmas, and even Walter Hobbs turns his life around (3:12). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Foeeq4Sfwrg>

Ultimately our identity is found in Christ. Select 3-4 of the following verses and read aloud what Scripture says about our identity. [Gen. 1:27, Psalm 139:14, John 15:15-16, 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 2:20, Eph. 4:24, Phil 3:20, Col 3:3-4, 1 Peter 2:9]

How do the truths of these passages compare with the worldly identities that we sometimes chase?

How might these truths change the way we live each day?

What specific things we can do to remember these truths about ourselves?