

Pay it Forward

M 15+

Hollywood Jesus: http://hollywoodjesus.com/pay_it_forward.htm

IMDB: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0223897/>

Directed by

Mimi Leder

Writing credits (WGA)

Catherine Ryan Hyde (book)

Leslie Dixon (screenplay)

Cast overview, first billed only:

Kevin Spacey

Helen Hunt

Haley Joel Osment

Jay Mohr

James Caviezel

Jon Bon Jovi

Angie Dickinson

Runtime: 123 min

Country: USA

Language: English

Color: Color (Technicolor)

Synopsis

Tells the story of a social studies teacher (Kevin Spacey) who gives an assignment to his junior high school class to think of an idea to change the world for the better, then put it into action. When one young student (Haley Joel Osment) creates a plan for 'paying it forward' favors (pyramid style!), he not only affects the life of his struggling single mother (Helen Hunt), but he sets in motion an unprecedented wave of human kindness. He is unaware his idea has blossomed into a profound national phenomenon. The principles of Trevor's 'pay it forward' idea are:

- it has to be something that really helps people
- something they can't do by themselves
- I do it for them, they do it for three other people and the film explores

The film shows people taking on Trevor's idea - the homeless man fixing Trevor's mother's car and later preventing a young woman from committing suicide. The prisoner gets medical attention for a young woman, her father - a wealthy businessman - gives away his car to a reporter who has had his car written off in an accident.

Group discussion

- What are the issues raised in the film?
- What biblical stories and gospel values/truths engage with the film's story?
- What insights do we gain into contemporary society, and the human condition?

The Challenge!

To his class of upper primary children, the teacher invites them to think of the world they will inherit in the future, and their relationship with it. 'What does the world expect of you? Nothing! What is the world is a big disappointment? Unless you take the things you don't like and turn them upside down. And, you can start that today. Think of an idea to change the world and put it into action!' He says the 'realm of possibility exists in each of us, and we can do something or let it sit back and atrophy'.

Young people are not simply consumers and recipients of the world handed to them 'on a silver platter'. Too little is expected of young people as change agents, and they are often excluded from decision making bodies and processes where they might have some influence. What sort of world do they want, and how can they help create this future? How can adults create space so that young people's voices can be heard, and young people can be supported as they put these ideas into action? Discuss.

Visible and invisible scars.

Arlene endures domestic abuse from her husband when he is affected by alcohol. The teacher recounts domestic abuse inflicted on his mother and himself as a child by his abusive and violent father, finally resulting in an incident that leaves him with hideous scarring from burns. Negative experiences from childhood and adolescence are often carried forward as scars that are most often hidden from the view of others. Can the injection of a 'random act of kindness' be a means of transformation, or do people (as in some cases in the movie) slip back into old habits and patterns? Discuss.

Grace

Grace is described as 'unmerited favour'. Trevor's shows kindness to three people, 'out of the blue' with no expectation of return or reward. His kindness often takes others by surprise, and they are suspicious of his motives. God's grace towards people is also 'unmerited favour' - we have done nothing to deserve it! Christ died for us even when we were sinners! Read Ephesian 2:1-10. In the way God has shown grace to us, we are then called to be God's agents of grace, hope and transformation in the world (pay it forward!), to love others as we have been loved by God. Discuss.

Out of the mouths of babes....!

Trevor is an 11 year old boy who grasps an idea that might make a difference to the world. No matter how young a person is, they can still make a difference (I Timothy 4:12, Jeremiah 1:4-10). One person can make a difference and every person should try! Young people in particular have the confidence to believe they can be participants in shaping a new world - locally and globally. They embrace the possibility of change with enthusiasm and commitment. 'A little girl was walking along a beach covered with thousands of starfish left dying in the sun by the receding tide. Seeking to help, she picked up a starfish and tossed it back into the ocean. A man, amused by her action, said to her, 'Little girl, there are too many starfish. You will never make a difference'. Discouraged, she began to walk away. Suddenly, she turned around, picked up another starfish, and tossed it as far as she could back into the sea. Turning to the man, she smiled and said, 'I made a difference to that one!' The starfish story highlights that seemingly hopeless problems can only be solved by taking a first step to begin working on them. (Source:www.cityyear.org/about/starfish.html) Discuss.

'Think globally, act locally'

In our 21st century 'global village' we can see and know what happens on the other side of the world instantly, or have chats on line with people around the world. And yet, many people would rather be involved in local projects where they may influence the outcomes, to participate in the processes of change, with a strong sense of ownership.

'Let no-one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills - against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence... Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation...' It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance'. (Robert F. Kennedy, speaking in South Africa in 1966. His words proved to be prophetic, and the ripples he and countless others created did in fact form a mighty current of change. White minority rule in South Africa finally ended in 1994, with the presidential election of black leader and former political prisoner Nelson Mandela).

Hebrews 11 recounts how many of the biblical 'greats' didn't see the end result of their actions. 'Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours'. Our actions interlock with the actions of the 'pioneers' and saints who have gone before us. We may never know the impact of our own actions and words. 'We feel what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean, but the ocean would be less because of that drop' (Mother Teresa). Discuss.

Permission given to copy the discussion sheet for group use.

