

*January at the Movies, 2*  
Thirteen Conversations About One Thing

**Ecclesiastes 2: 17 – 26**

17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19 And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. 21 For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. 22 What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? 23 All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

24 A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? 26 To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

**\*\*Clip One (trailer)**

Of all the films that we have talked about over the four years of our January at the Movies sermon series, I don't think I've ever spent as much time as I did with this film staring at a blank computer screen in my study trying to come up with a way to start a sermon to share this with you.

For those of you who aren't aware of what I'm referring to, this is part two in a sermon series called "January at the Movies". In this series we discuss a film each week in January that deals with spiritual or Biblical issues. It's a way for us to look at what our culture is saying about some things that are important to us as Christians. I explained our purpose in more detail as I began last week's message, so if you're interested, you can check that out on our Web site.

Thirteen Conversations About One Thing is different than our typical films, in that it is not a particularly recent film – it came out in 2001. So, it was probably a bit more difficult to get a hold of a copy than usual, but when I saw this film listed on a Website as #1 in the "Top 100 Spiritually Significant Films", I bought a copy (for \$3.50 from Amazon!) and I have now watched it three times.

Every time I see it, I more appreciate the complexity and the subtlety of the writing and editing. One the one hand, it is a somewhat complicated plot – the film is actually four

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stories that have points of contact with one another. They are told in a non-linear manner, although you really don't discover the key for the chronology until near the end of the film. Each of the stories **in some way** involves people dealing with adversity in the midst of life. Part of the fun of the film (and, as I've been hearing, the inevitable discussion after you view the film – this film *has* to be talked about!) part of the fun is trying to define just what that “one thing” is. I've tossed that question to a number of people over the past couple of weeks, and I've gotten an interesting variety of responses from them; all of them are in the same ballpark, I think.

Some say that it's a film about choices... the choices we make in life and how those choices affect other people. (It surely is that.) Others have said that it's a film about how random events affect our outlook on life – that's true, too.

Perhaps a bit deeper: I've heard that the ‘one thing’ is the question, “How can I be happy?”, or, “what is happiness”, or “Is anybody *really* happy?” We start thinking along this line from the opening segment of the film when we are introduced to two of the six main characters – Physics Professor Walker, and his wife Patricia:

**\*\*Clip 2 (what do you want)**

But you can go even deeper than that, than just conversations about happiness... ‘What is the meaning of life?’, or as my philosophical friend Tom Kulp suggested... even deeper yet: “*Is there any meaning in life?*” There are no right or wrong answers to the question of what you think the ‘One Thing’ is, but it is probably something you will think about for days after you see this film.

It was no surprise to me to read on the film's website that the writer/director (Jill Sprecher) was a philosophy major in college. It definitely is an intellectual film that touches on the deeper ‘stuff of life’. She had this to say in her director's statement:

*"I have always been intrigued by the events that shape a person's life, that truly have the power to redirect it. By equal turns they can be grand and dramatic -- the kind that hit with a*

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*slap -- and simpler, more mundane, arriving in the form of small gestures. Such moments always manage to come as a surprise, and never where one might expect to find them. And often, they seem to contain an element of grace."*<sup>1</sup>

The film's website also tells of the genesis of the film in an event in Jill Sprecher's life in the 90's. She had suffered a serious head injury in a mugging. About a year later, while on the subway, someone came up and slapped her on the head. All the anger inside her began to work its way to the surface. She looked at another passenger on the car, who smiled at her. And in that smile was healing. Various bits of that experience make their way into the movie.

This is a movie in which you have to pay attention. There are many small things that will have meaning later in the film. The script, while seeming to bounce around between the various stories, is actually very tightly constructed, and there are visuals that are giving 'clues' all along as to the content of the conversations – the cut on Troy's head that won't heal, the rainbow on the wall from Walker's glasses (that later disappears), Beatrice's 'one eyed doll'. It is a film that I got more out of watching a second time where I could to see some things I have overlooked the first time around.

Each of the six main characters has a 'world-view' i.e., a way of looking at life that is well established, but is challenged by events of life – some are bad, some are personal decisions that are later questioned. I found all the characters intriguing, but I want to focus on two especially. One is Wade (Smiley) Bowman. He's an eternally optimistic guy. Nothing seems to get him down.

**\*\*Clip (SmileyBowman)**

Gene English (powerfully played by Alan Arkin) is Smiley's Boss at an insurance underwriting company. He has a number of conversations with Dick Lacey about how Smiley's attitude really bothers him. Here's an example:

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.sonyclassics.com/13conversations/>)

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**\*\*Clip (jealous)**

That's a great conversation that very subtly asks us a question about the 'point' of life. Is someone with 'drive' and 'ambition' really better off than someone who is content with where they are? How valuable are things that we can't measure in life – family relationships, children, a wife who makes great cookies? Who is better off?

Gene finally decides that he's going to find out if Smiley's good humor is just an act. When word comes down from 'upstairs' that he needs to make budget cuts in his department, Gene decides that he is going to fire Bowman... and take great pleasure in it.

**\*\* Clip (Smileyfired)**

Will this treatment change Smiley? We'll find out.

(Now, remember, this is just one of four storylines in the film.)

Another memorable character we meet is Beatrice, a young cleaning woman with a good heart. She is a dreamer – and her positive attitude is one that others (particularly her friend and partner Dorrie) relies on. What is hinted at in Smiley's life (in that Smiley responds, "God willing" to something a co-worker says to him), is much more explicit in Beatrice's life... She is a Christian.

**\*\* Clip (Beatrice)**

That Scripture has meaning for what is to come... Beatrice's faith, and her belief that her life counts for something, that she's here for a purpose, is soon severely tested. First, she is critically injured when she is struck by a car (driven by a prosecuting attorney – another character in the film). In a moment of panic, he makes a terrible decision, thinking she is dead, and he leaves her in the street. And he gets away with it. (At least, outwardly).

Months of recovery go by, and Beatrice is shaken by the randomness of this, and the heartless act of someone who would simply leave her there in the street. But the kindness of others keeps her going. Until she discovers that she was falsely accused of stealing a watch from one of her cleaning clients, and is fired from her job.

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That, seems to be the mortal blow, the one that pushes her over the edge. She makes a very sad statement to her friend Dorrie, who remembers how she 'used to be', the person she could rely on to cheer everybody else up. "You were different" And Beatrice replies, "Now I'm just like everybody else. My eyes have been opened. You can never go back."

That theme of the irreversibility of life – and our choices – is one that provides much of the 'meat' of this film. Troy, the prosecutor, who hits Beatrice with his car, finds that his career takes off after this. He gets a promotion, he is never discovered. He 'has it made'. But it turns out that his desire for justice that he pursues as a career is real. And he cannot forget what he has done.

Walker, the physics professor, teaching his class says, "There are no 'ifs'. The laws of the universe are absolute."

\*\* Clip (laws of the universe)

And yet he thinks that he can simply go back home after cheating on his wife. Everything will be waiting for him. He was wrong.

And Beatrice's story isn't finished yet. Here's one more quick scene. Beatrice has come back to her old self. And she's telling her friend Dorrie how that happened. She was ready to step in front of a bus and end it all... and then...the spell was broken.

\*\* Clip (Hebroke the spell)

So you see a little bit of how these characters interact.

I had about eight more scenes that I would have liked to shown you, but that just wasn't practical, so I'll leave it at this, and hopefully, you can see the film for yourself.

What I got from the film is, as I said earlier, that the two characters who are the most consistently upbeat and hopeful, have the only overt God connections in this film.

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Another scene that I would have liked to shown you, towards the end of the film is again, Gene and his friend Dick. Gene turns out to be more complex than one would expect. And after running into Smiley randomly, and seeing that he hasn't found a job, Gene calls his ex-wife's husband (a man he despises) and arranges for Smiley to get a job, which he loves. He does this totally anonymously. An act of good will.

He's discussing this with Dick... after we find out that *he* got downsized, and was let go... and he says these words: "Everybody needs something to believe in."

In that, he is in agreement with Solomon, as we read earlier in this service those haunting words from Ecclesiastes 2:

*\*\* A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, **for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?***

The Biblical answer to questions about the meaning of life, about the source of happiness and real joy, about our purpose and reason for being, is that these questions have no answer other than a person being in right relationship with their Creator God.

If all there is, is what we can see, and measure, and understand with our puny little human minds... then there is no hope for us. Life *is* truly random. Cruelty has the final word – because there can be no justice, and certainly no joy. We can't look for a 'bigger picture' in the events of life, we can't hope that everything will work out one day... because without God, life *is* pointless.

We all make choices. Every day. Those choices have consequences – for us and for others. But the meaningful thread that ties it all together is faith. Faith that this life is not all there is.

**\*\*Clip (life isn't fair)**

Amazing things happen all the time. Do *you* believe that? If those 'amazing things' are not God's doing... then they are simply pointless coincidences.

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I found a wonderful hymn in our UM Hymnal. # 427 "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life". It beautifully addresses the issues raised in this film, and I thought we should give it a try as we close this service...