

At the Movies: The Journey

True Grit

February 24, 2013

PRELUDE – “Christ is Risen”

Worship Songs – “Our God’s Alive” / “Mighty to Save”

Video Clip - 01 HE WAS WRONG (1.2 min)

B: Mattie: “People do not give it credence ...”

E: Mattie: “There is nothing free but the grace of God”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1 >

Good morning everyone. Today we are continuing in our “At the Movies” series with the movie *True Grit* which is a remake of the old John Wayne classic. How many of you have seen the new version? How many of you have seen the original version?

I’ve never seen the old version (I’m not a big John Wayne fan) but I have to tell you that *I*

loved this version not only because I think it illustrates an incredibly deep truth but also because it stretches your emotions. I found myself laughing out loud several times because of the wittiness of the dialogue and then I found myself in tears because ... well, you see by the end of this message.

But before we get into it, I want to make brief comment about *why* we're doing *what* we're doing in this series (especially for those who were not here at the beginning). Using movies as "source material" isn't something most churches typically do – and it's not something even we typically do. But every so often we try to follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul when he preached the Gospel in the city of Athens. And, Athens, as you know, is a very secular city.

The book of Acts tells us that he began one of his sermons by saying ...

“People of Athens” ...

“I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” Acts
17:22-23 (NIV)

Paul took a spiritual expression of that culture that had nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus and then used it to explain to them that Jesus of Nazareth was the God they were looking for. And why did he do that? Because people were already familiar with it and could easily relate to it ... which is the same reason why we are using movies.

And the reason we're using *these* five movies – *The Hunger Games*, *The Adjustment Bureau*, *Moneyball*, *True Grit* and *The King's Speech* – is because they progressively paint a portrait of the typical journey of faith. These five movies (quite unintentionally, I'm sure) help us visualize what it often looks like when a person goes from being ignorant of God to having a deep and meaningful friendship with God; walking with God, being in close personal relationship with God – however you want to describe it.

***The Hunger Games* illustrated what it feels like at the beginning of the journey when you become aware that there is no hope for you apart from God.**

You are “dead in sin” as the Bible puts it. You are trapped in a spiritual reality that is totally against you just like those kids were trapped in that movie. And it's an icky feeling, just like the feeling we all had at the

end of the first message.

***The Adjustment Bureau* illustrated the next stage – the “seeking” stage – which most people go through when they become aware of the reality of their spiritual condition.**

They begin to look for God but there’s a question as to what kind of a God He is. Is He just a puppet master drawing up arbitrary plans for our lives just because He can? Or is He good and loving and *for* us?

Last week, when we looked at *Moneyball*, we saw an amazing metaphor of the third stage – the “all in” stage ...

... when people to say “yes” to Jesus’ invitation to “repent” – to *rethink everything* about our lives (which includes agreeing with God that the biggest problem in our lives is sin – the answer to that problem is only solved by what Jesus did on the cross and in His resurrection). At this stage, we

repent and we believe the Good News that Jesus proclaimed: that God's Kingdom is at hand; that it's near and it's now as much as it's far and future."

By the way, all of these messages are online at our website if you missed one and would like to go back and catch up.

Now, I think that in a crowd this size, we probably have people in all three of those stages.

- Some of us here are just beginning to become aware of our need for God. We have a sense of falling short and failing. "What a mess this world is in; what a mess I'm in."
- Some of us are seeking to know more about God so we can make a decision to go all in or not.
- Some of us are at the place where

we've decided that we are "all in." We do believe in Jesus and, as a result, we're *rethinking everything* about our life – our value, our purpose, the payoff of following Jesus – in light of the present reality of God's Kingdom.

- And some of us would say that we're in *all three of those stages at the same time*. And that's OK – because it's not like, in your spiritual journey, you go through one stage and never return again.

In my own life, even though I've gone through these three stages sequentially ...

- There are still days when I become even more aware what it means for me to be a sinner in need of a savior. (My wife will tell you all about it.)
- There are days where I realize I need to know more about "who is this God,

really?" I think I have an understanding, but, no, I need to seek and find out more about who this God is.

- And there are many days where I have to "repent and believe the Good News" – to rethink and readjust my life in some specific area – in light of the reality of God's presence.

But there's a fourth stage in this journey. And some of us have entered into it for the very first time ... and some of us have come back to it for the 40th time or the 400th time.

What is it? Well, let's take a look at *True Grit* and find out.

A Parable Illustrated

If you've seen the movie, you know that the plot is fairly simple.

<pic> Mattie Ross is an exceptionally determined and unusually self-confident 14-year old girl.

<pic> Her father (as we heard in the first clip) has been murdered by Tom Chaney, one of his hired men.

<pic> With the help of a U.S. Marshal by the name of Rooster Cogburn ...

<pic> ... and a Texas Ranger, who is known to us only as LaBoeuf (“la beef”)...

... Mattie pursues Chaney through the hills of Arkansas and, in the end, she gets her man. In fact, the entire plot of the movie is summarized in the voiceover of the adult Mattie at the beginning. “No doubt Chaney fancied himself scot-free, but he was wrong.” That’s the story.

But this is one of those movies where it’s more about *what happens to the characters* than it is the storyline – and also, at least in

the way I perceived it, what (and who) those characters represent. So, let's dig a little deeper into that.

Mattie's father has been murdered. But no one seems to care and, as we'll see, that's more than she can abide because *it's just not right*.

So, she goes looking for help. She asks the sheriff of a neighboring town to recommend a U.S. Marshal who she might "incentivize" with a \$50 reward. He names several including Rooster Cogburn, who he describes as "the meanest" of the bunch, "a pitiless man, double tough – and fear doesn't enter into his thinking."

And that's who Mattie chooses. Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 1 >

Video Clip - 02 A MAN WITH TRUE GRIT (1.7)

min)

B: Mattie: "Mr. Cogburn, I'd like to talk to you."

E: Cogburn: "Thanks for the cigarette."

Rooster Cogburn is obviously "double tough" and shows *no pity* even to a young girl like Mattie and the position she is in.

However, Mattie is not one to take "no" for an answer. She's determined to see justice served.

So, the next morning, she walks into his bedroom and wakes him with the words: "Mr. Cogburn, it is I, Mattie Ross, your employer" and announces her intention to *join him* on the manhunt.

Cogburn resists at first then agrees to go after Chaney (but for \$100 instead of \$50) on the condition that he goes alone. After all, he

tells her, the wilderness would be too dangerous for her. But, again, Mattie is not to be dissuaded.

As we watch this next clip, pay particular attention to how she describes her quest to her mother near the end of the scene. It's the key to understanding what this movie is all about.

Video Clip - 03 NO COON HUNT (1.7 min)

B: Mattie: "I have slept out at night before ..."

E: Mattie: "I am off for the Choctaw Nation."

Did you hear what she said? "Firm in the right ... the Author of All Things watches over me ... Papa's death will soon be avenged." That's how she describes her quest.

Now, keep that in mind while we watch one more scene, and then we're going to start

breaking this down. It's going to be awesome!

When Mattie arrives at Cogburn's room, he has departed without her. Not surprisingly, she goes after him. When she finally catches up with him, she discovers that he has joined forces with Texas Ranger LaBoeuf who plans to capture Chaney and take him to Texas where there is a bounty on his head for killing a state senator. She is very unhappy about this but Cogburn argues that "justice is justice" and it should make no difference to Mattie where Tom Chaney is hung.

Check out her response and, more importantly, pay close attention to what is revealed concerning Rooster Cogburn.

Video Clip - 04 A NOTORIOUS THUMPER (1.7 min)

B: Mattie: "When I have bought and paid for something ..."

E: Mattie: "We don't need him, do we Marshal?"

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

Turns out they *will* need him ... but let's stop here and consider what we know about our two main characters.

What we have in Cogburn, in case it wasn't already clear, is a less-than-honorable lawman who ...

- Doesn't fear God – remember he doesn't "believe in sermons" and ...
- Doesn't care about people – he's a "notorious thumper" who participated in some of the most brutal atrocities of the Civil War.¹

The only reason Cogburn is a U.S. Marshal

is for the money. He's certainly not in it for the sake of justice.

On the other hand, what we have in Mattie is a persistent young woman whose only goal is to see what is right and what is just prevail. It's very important to understand that. Mattie is *not* interested in getting revenge for her father's murder. She's interested in avenging her father's murder. There's a huge difference.

- Revenge is *personal*. It says "you owe me for what you did and I'm going to take it ... and then some."
- Vengeance, which is what you're after when you seek to avenge an injustice, is about *principle*. It says that unless we follow the rule of moral law given to us by "The Author of All Things" (as Mattie describes God) ... unless we uphold

the principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” this world will be chaos. It’ll become what we saw in *The Hunger Games*. Therefore, justice must be pursued and justice must be done.

Now, with all that as background, some of you probably realize by now that these two characters look remarkably similar to two characters in a parable Jesus once told. In fact, this movie, *True Grit*, is the greatest illustration I’ve ever seen of that parable which is found in Luke chapter 18.

It says ...

One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. Luke 18:1 (NLT)

This is a story about not losing heart as a

follower of Christ.

He said ...

“There was a judge in a certain city who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’”

Luke 18:2-3 (NLT)

Sound familiar? Cogburn isn't a judge but he is an officer of the court and Mattie isn't a widow but she is a widow's daughter. And she wants justice.

Jesus continued ...

The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, “I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy.

I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!" Luke 18:4-5 (NLT)

That's what happens to Mattie. She has persistently hounded and pursued Cogburn to the point where, even though he's not really interested in justice, he's going help her. She's worn him down.

Then the Lord said, "Learn a lesson from this unjust judge." Luke 18:6 (NLT)

And we'll do that in just a few minutes but, first, let's learn a lesson from Mattie.

Remember how she described her situation to her mother? She said three things.

- She's firm in the right (even her pursuit of Tom Chaney is virtuous – it's not

about revenge)

- God is watching over her.
- And, therefore, her Papa's death will soon be avenged (even if God has to use a man like Rooster Cogburn to get it done).

By the way, that little triad is also a good way to describe the fourth stage of the spiritual journey that we travel as we go from "distant and disconnected from God" to a "deep and meaningful friendship with God."

Let's call it the "obedience stage" where our life becomes about being "firm in the right" – discovering what God says and doing it.

Jesus said we need to rethink everything and, in this particular stage of our journey, we begin to apply that new thinking to everyday life. We start reading the Bible and church becomes important because we

want to know what God says about life because we want to live the way he has called us to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I clearly remember this stage in my own spiritual journey in my late teens and my early 20s after deciding to go "all in" with Jesus in my first year of high school. I learned so many things that God said about how to handle things like money, sex and power. I learned what God said about being a good steward of the gifts and abilities He had given me. I learned what he said about Christians being his representatives to this world.

And I don't want to make this sound like I was perfect because I was far from it, but I took that stuff seriously, and it affected the choices I made. It affected who I chose to

date and eventually who I chose to marry. It affected what I spent my money on; what kind of movies I watched and music I listened to; how I handled drugs and alcohol (I didn't); the kinds of people I chose to be my closest friends; the level of commitment to and involvement within my church; the way I related to people who were still distant from God.

And none of those choices were made begrudgingly – never did I think, “oh, man, I can't believe I have to do that.” I just didn't want to live a life that was anything less than what the Author of All Things had intended.

The Apostle Paul once wrote to some of his friends ...

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Ephesians 4:1 (NIV)

... as a citizen of God's Kingdom right here and right now. That's what I wanted to do and that's what this stage is about.

And I'm sure a lot of you can relate to this because this is where you are and where you've been.

On the other hand, some of you have made that decision to go "all in" with Jesus but you haven't moved in this direction yet. You're not into the obedient stage. And hopefully this message is an encouragement for you to do so especially because it was in this stage that I discovered something quite amazing, and many other people have discovered this as well. And that is, *God actually blessed my obedience.*

- God said "give and it will be given to you" ... and I did and it was.

- God said “save sex for marriage” ... and I did and my marriage (and sex) was great.
- God said “whatever you do, do it as working for the Lord and not for men” ... and I did and my career was great.

And I could go on and on about the blessings I experienced, which is why this is such a wonderful stage of the spiritual journey. And I hope you'll get to experience it if you haven't just yet.

But there was something else I discovered in this stage. I wasn't conscious of it until many years later but, it was during this stage that I unknowingly developed an unwritten formula about the Christian life that was a lot like Mattie's little triad of ...

- “Firm in the right”
- God watching over her

- Certainty that her quest would be successful.

And here's the formula:

My obedience + God's providence = my success.

I had it in my head that as long as I attempted to live a virtuous life as a follower of Jesus, God would be watching over me ensuring that I would be blessed. I'd figured it out. This was the deal in my head.

And I don't want to minimize this at all because there's truth in this and I've experienced it and many of you have experienced this, too. But there's a downside when this starts to dominate our thinking. And ... we have to go back to the movie to see what that is.

The Reality of Disappointment

Through a series of events, LaBoeuf ends up rejoining Mattie and Cogburn and the three of them follow on the trail of Tom Chaney, but they are unsuccessful. One evening, after a day of non-stop whiskey, Cogburn becomes verbally abusive and begins blaming LaBoeuf for their failure to capture Tom Chaney ... and then he makes a startling pronouncement.

We'll pick up the scene as LaBoeuf is responding to Cogburn's outburst.

<END SLIDE SET 2>

Video Clip - 05 "I BOW OUT" (1.7 min)

B: LaBoeuf: "It is you who have nothing to offer, Cogburn."

E: Cogburn: "Our engagement is terminated. I bow out."

And the look on Mattie's face says it all. She

put her faith in the man with “true grit” and he decides to quit on her!

But as fate (or the Author of All Things) would have it, the next morning when Mattie goes down to the river for water, she makes a startling discovery: *Tom Chaney is watering his horses at the same exact place!* And for a moment it seems like justice will soon be served.

But watch what happens next.

Video Clip - 06 CHANEY CONFRONTED (1.4 min)

B: Mattie: “I have come to take you back to Ft. Smith.”

E: Cogburn: “Mattie!”

Cogburn is too late. Chaney takes Mattie prisoner and rejoins Lucky Ned’s gang on the other side of the river. After a brief gun battle, Ned makes a deal with Cogburn – if

Cogburn will ride off and leave them alone, he will release Mattie later.

Cogburn agrees. Ned and the gang return to camp where he questions Mattie.

And as we watch this next scene, try to listen for how Chaney (who's mostly in the background) assesses his life situation and how Mattie assesses hers. It's pretty remarkable. Watch.

Video Clip - 07 ABANDONED (1.8 min)

B: Ned: "What are you doing here?"

E: Mattie: "He's abandoned me to a congress of louts."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

Did you catch Chaney's assessment? He said it in the previous scene as well – "nothing's going my way." And in a moral universe under the direction of a good and

moral God, that's how it ought to be. He's a cold-blooded murderer of a man who tried to help him. Nothing *should* go his way!

However, and ironically, Mattie's assessment of her situation is almost identical. *Nothing's going her way, either.* She's been "abandoned to a congress of louts." And in a moral universe under the direction of a good and moral God, that's *not* how it should go for people who are firmly in the right, who live according to principles of virtue and integrity.

And this, friends, is the challenge of this fourth stage: *the formula that a lot of us unconsciously adopt doesn't always work in the manner or the timing we expect.*

- We "trained up our children in the way they should go" as the OT Book of Proverbs tells us to do and when they

got older they *do* depart from it, which is the opposite of what Proverbs says will happen.

- We made a big pledge to a church capital campaign and starting giving but our finances got worse instead of better. Now we have to really sacrifice if we're going to make that pledge.
- We made every effort to honor God in our job and we got laid off.
- We fasted and prayed and the tumor didn't go away.

The formula doesn't always work in the manner or the timing we expect ... and the downside to having that little formula in our head is that we can become bitter and discouraged.

“What is going on?” we ask. “God is in charge. I’ve willingly obeyed the rules ... and *He’s abandoned me to a congress of louts.*”

And at that point a lot of people are tempted to give up. Some of you this morning are being tempted to give up because the formula isn’t working for you and hasn’t in a long time. And you’re saying to yourself, “if this is all there is, if this is how it’s going to be, well, then, I bow out.”

The Grace of God

... which brings us back to that parable Jesus told his disciples to encourage them to not lose heart and quit. Remember, that was his purpose in telling the story about the widow who never gave up and hounded the judge until she got the result she wanted.

However, her example *was not* the lesson

Jesus wanted his followers to learn.
Remember how he ended his story?

He said ...

*"Learn a lesson from this
unjust judge." Luke 18:6 (NLT)*

We're supposed to be looking at the judge
not the widow ... which is what Jesus does in
his next statement.

Jesus said ...

*"Even he rendered a just
decision in the end.*

*So ... don't you think God will
surely give justice to his
chosen people who cry out to
him day and night? Will he
keep putting them off? I tell
you, he will grant justice to
them quickly!" Luke
18:7-8 (NLT)*

In other words, “if even the most self-absorbed judge you can find will eventually deliver because you nag him to death, why would your Heavenly Father who loves you do any less in the end?” He won’t, Jesus says. He *will* keep his promises. The day is coming.

And that *might* be the lesson Jesus intended in this story, but I think there’s another lesson that’s even more powerful. And we’re going to see it illustrated in the closing of the movie.

Ned and his gang take off but he decides to leave Mattie behind with Tom Chaney. He warns Chaney that if anything happens to her, he will lose his share of the loot. But Chaney is angry – and nothing’s going his way anyway – so he tries to strangle her. Just

then, however, the ever-stalwart Texas Ranger, LaBouef, shows up and knocks him out!

He explains to Mattie that he ran into Cogburn and Cogburn told him what had happened and to go fetch her while he, Cogburn, doubled back. But as they are talking, Chaney wakes up and knocks out LaBouef.

Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 3>

Video Clip - 08 I AM BIT (2.1 min)

B: LaBoeuf hit over head by Chaney

E: Cogburn: "I have her. Up with us!"

Now, remember, in Jesus' story, the widow gets the judge to act in spite of himself because she's shrewd and persistent, like Mattie has been up to this point. She gets

what she needs because of *who she is* – a person of “true grit.”

But anything good that’s going to happen to Mattie from here on out isn’t going to happen because of *who she is*. She’s dying. Whatever good that will happen will happen *because of who God is*.

And that, I think, was the real lesson Jesus wanted us to learn from the dishonest judge. If all you have is a dishonest judge (or a Rooster Cogburn), then it’s all about who you are; how shrewd and persistent you can be. But, Jesus was saying, “*you have God!*” and it’s all about *who He is*.

And who is He? He is a Father full of love and grace who acts on our behalf not because we’ve figured out some formula and now He “owes us.” God acts on our behalf simply because we need it and He

loves us. And He will graciously and lovingly carry us even when we can't walk on our own. Even when we don't even know what's happening, which is what we see in this final scene.

Video Clip - 09 LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS (4.0 min)

B: The ride begins

E: Light comes on in the house

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

<BAND GET INTO PLACE>

I just love that scene. I know it's a little gruesome for those of you who are horse lovers. What a picture. What a picture of a God who loves us so much that He'll do whatever it takes, including picking us up and carrying us.

Did you recognize the music? "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," an old hymn – that's

what Mattie was doing (she was leaning on the everlasting arms of God in the unlikely person of Rooster Cogburn) ... and that's what we are invited to do: *to lean on and trust in not a formula for blessing, but a Person who gave it all for us on the cross.*

This is part of what we need to understand in this part of the journey of faith: *obedience to God is extremely important and God does bless it.* But it's not the magic key to manipulating some "divine vending machine." Obedience ultimately must become something we do simply because we love God – not because we get a certain result.

As Jesus once put it:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command." John 14:15 (NIV)

You will obey what I command, not because it gets you the result, not because it's how you put the coin in the divine vending machine, but you do it because you love me. Friends, this is what it takes to move from this stage to the next stage, which is what we're going to talk about in next week's movie, *The King's Speech*.

Let's pray together.

God, I thank you for the example that's illustrated to us in this movie. I thank you for the story that Jesus told which helps us to see the comparison of the Heavenly Father to this dishonest judge, and how you, our Father, carry us in your arms. And, I think, today, some of us just needed to see that scene. I know I did.

God, some of us this morning, maybe we're new at this. We've made the decision to go "all in" with Jesus and

we've accepted him as our savior, but we've never come to the point where we say "we need to obey." We need to find out what you want. We need to become people who are firm in the right. I pray for some of us today that maybe that's the decision we'll make. That we're going to get serious about "what does the scripture say? What are you telling us? What do we need to be doing?" And letting that influence our choices.

God, some of us have done that for a long time and we've seen your hand of blessing and we've got this little unconscious formula in our head and sometimes it works, and maybe sometimes it doesn't work so well. And we're kind of questioning "where are you? what's the deal?" And we're thinking about quitting. God, I pray that we would learn from the story of the

dishonest judge and not quit, but to keep going because of who you are and not because of who we are.

God, whatever the message is that we need today, I pray you would burn it home in our hearts and thank you for loving us so much. We pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Feature – “When Trials Come”

1. Next series – EMS

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/Q/QU002.html>