

The Godfather

God at the Movies 2021...Pt. 1

[Godfather Trailer 1:38]

Welcome to SWFF and the start of our annual *God at the Movies* series. Each year we select some of the previous year's films to explore for hints of spiritual truth. And since there were not many movies out last year, we're doing a unique twist this time around – a classics edition. Now, what constitutes a classic is often in the eye of the beholder, but any way, you slice it, today's selection is a given. In addition to being *this* beholders all-time favorite film, it is also number three on the American Film Institute's list of the "100 Greatest Movies of All Time" finishing just behind *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane*.

And it almost didn't get made! American writer Mario Puzo released a novel in 1969 called *The Godfather* that was roundly panned by critics. Paramount Pictures bought the rights and took a risk on a little known film maker named Francis Ford Coppola. They wanted an Italian director so that, as the studio head instructed, they could "smell the spaghetti." They gave the film a \$2.5 million budget. Which was nothing. Everyone says *Star Wars* – made six years later – was on a shoestring budget and they had \$11 million.

But while the film was in preproduction, the book suddenly became a best-seller and public scrutiny increased. Now the film was a hot property and shouldn't a more seasoned director be at the helm? To make matters worse, the young inexperienced director would end up tripling the cost of the film and the studio constantly threatened to fire him. If you listen to the directors commentary, he's constantly saying things like, "they were going to fire me after the weekend, so I wanted to get this scene finished." It was a constant battle. They fought him over casting choices. He wanted Marlon Brando – who would go on to win, but not *accept*, the Best Actor award that year – and Paramount wanted...Danny Thomas! Can you imagine.

But in the end, *The Godfather* was a huge success, both at the box office – it set an opening week record of \$10 million dollars, this when the average ticket price was \$3! And with the critics, winning Best Picture in 1973, along with Screenwriting for Coppola and Actor for Brando. Of the five nominees for Best Supporting Actor, three were from *The Godfather*. None of them won, by the way.

At its heart, *The Godfather* is the story of a family headed by Don Vito Corleone, the “godfather” of a powerful Sicilian-American mafia clan in the 1940’s and 50’s. Some trivia for you, in the sequel we learn that Vito – upon arriving at Ellis Island as an orphan – chose his last name from the Sicilian village where his parents and brother were murdered by the local crime boss, the town of Corleone. As it happens, my paternal grandparents, both the Scomas and the Digilios, immigrated from...Corleone, Sicily. So I share the bloodline!

Anyway, Vito’s family is made up of hot-headed eldest son, Santino – or Sonny - , the unfortunate Fredo – “Fredo has a good heart but he’s weak and stupid” –, Tom Hagan, the German-Irish orphan who was taken in off the streets as a kid and grew up to be the family lawyer, and spoiled baby sister, Connie – played by the director’s real-life sister, Talia Shire, who would cap her 1970’s stardom by playing Adrian of “Yo, Adrian” fame

But the most important member of the family, and thus the film, turns out to be the thoughtful, educated middle son, Michael Corleone. The whole trilogy is built around him. And no one ever fit a Bible verse better than he: **Mark 8:36**, “*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*”

Of course, *The Godfather* is a movie riddled with quotes. Oooh, “riddled” is a poor word choice with this film. But there are so many lines that have entered the cultural vocabulary; Coppola made a meme movie 40-years before we knew what a meme was! “I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.” Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes.” “Leave the gun, take the cannoli.” “Don’t ever take sides with anyone against the family...ever.” “May their first child be a masculine child.” “What is this? A center for ants?! How can we be expected to teach children to learn how to read... if they can't even fit inside the building?” Sorry, that last one is actually from *Zoolander*.

But there’s one line from *The Godfather*, that stands with the best of them. You heard it twice in the trailer a few minutes ago, but it gives me an excuse to play probably my favorite scene from a film full of favorite scenes. Towards the end of the film, the Don’s lieutenant, Salvatore Tesio – played by the wonderful Abe Vigoda – has been discovered to be a traitor to the family. And now, in this scene, he comes to know that *they* know. Let’s watch.....[**Only Business :51**]

Sometimes one of my children will ask me to do something they already know the answer to and I love to reply, “Can’t do it, Sally.” But of course, the key line there is “Tell Michael it was only business.” This is the key refrain of the film, over and over, “It’s not personal, it’s only business.” Even the assassination attempt on the family patriarch, “It wasn’t personal, Sonny!” I don’t know, you shoot me in the street with my bag of oranges and I’ll probably take it personal too.

This divide between what is business and what is personal is powerfully portrayed *visually* in the opening images of the film. We immediately find ourselves in the dark – the dark-brown to black, shades drawn, offices of Don Corleone. Because no Sicilian can refuse a request on the day of his daughter’s wedding, there are a stream of supplicants coming before the Don, asking for *all manner* of favors. “You come into my house on the day my daughter is to be married and you ask me to do murder for money. This is not justice.”

Meanwhile, just outside, the sun is shining, the band is playing, people eat, drink and make merry. It’s a beautiful celebration of family love – Italian style. As the scenes cut between the inside and the outside, the contrast couldn’t be more stark. The legendary film critic for *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael, absolutely nailed the theme in her 1972 review. “The visual scheme is based on the most obvious life-and-death contrasts; the men meet and conduct their business in deep-toned, shuttered rooms, lightened by lamps even in the daytime, and the story moves back and forth between this hidden, nocturnal world and the sunshine that they share with women and children... The light and dark contrast is so operatic and so openly symbolic that it perfectly expresses the basic nature of the material.”

You think you can just do your dirty deeds in the dark and then emerge into the light of vibrant family love with no consequences? Can’t do it, Sally. In fact, this is the thread that runs through the whole *Godfather* trilogy. There are a lot of bad elements in the film – it’s rated R for a reason – but Francis Ford Coppola is a profoundly moral filmmaker. In fact, in an early interview for the sequel, he admitted his disappointment with audience reactions to the first film. Cheering on Michael as a hero.

He says, “I felt I was making a harsh statement about the mafia and power at the end of the *Godfather I* when Michael murders all those people, then lies to his wife and closes the door. But obviously many people did not get the point I was making. And so if the statement that I was trying to make was outbalanced by the charismatic aspect of the characters, I felt *Godfather II* was an opportunity to rectify that.” You can make the argument that this film opened the door to now routine storylines where we cheer for the bad guys, from *The Sopranos* to *Breaking Bad* to *Ozark*. But make no mistake, Michael Corleone is a man who has sold his soul to the devil.

I say this is my favorite film, please don't misunderstand, I'm no fanboy, I know what it is. I'm captivated by Michael Corleone, not because I admire him, but because I'm afraid of *becoming* him. Never forget, in the beginning he is clearly "the good son." But why do audiences have a hard time owning up to the monster that he truly becomes? I think it boils down to a fundamental principle of religious psychology. If, as Jesus noted, it is easier to see the speck in another's eye than to acknowledge the plank in your own, it is safer by far to ignore the other's speck altogether – if seeing it is going to require admitting one's own plank.

You see, the underlying theme of this movie – the underlying flaw in all the Corleone children – is hypocrisy. Saying one thing and doing another. This is what "it's not personal, it's only business" is all about. The juxtaposition of darkness and light. But it's not just the Corleone's. It's not just those greasy, thieving Italians – I can say that, you can't! No, hypocrisy is the human condition.

The Bible begins with the repudiation of hypocrisy. In Genesis chapter one, God *separates* the light from the darkness, and in just two short chapters the human race mixes them back together. Genesis chapter three is literally the first instance of a coverup in human history. After the man and his wife have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes are opened and they realize their nakedness. So they cover themselves and hide from God as He walks through the garden in the cool of the evening.

When God asked the man if he has eaten of the fruit from the forbidden tree, the husband blames his wife – with some side-eye at God himself – (**Genesis 3:12**) "*The man said, 'The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.'*" And when God asks the woman, "what is this you have done?" She points to the serpent and says it's all his fault. Thus supplying human culture ever-after with *the* go-to comic relief statement of the hypocrite – "the devil made me do it."

Without further questioning, God passes judgement, working His way back along the accusatory line, punishing serpent, woman and man in succession – all without exception to blame. A three-fold curse for a three-fold hypocrisy. You can see shadows of this in the New Testament narration of the three denials of Peter leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. And the shadows are played out in our film as well.

Again, Pauline Kael helps make the connection with the biblical material, "We see the ethnic subculture, based on a split between the men's conception of their responsibilities - all that they keep dark - and the sunny false Eden in which they try to shelter the women and children." In *The Godfather*, one woman in particular is our way into the story. Kay begins the film as Michael's girlfriend and she ends as his wife. As a non-Italian, she is clearly the outsider and her relationship with Michael progresses along three key scenes which reveal his steps from the light into darkness.

When we first meet the couple at the opening wedding – sitting alone at a table far from the action – Michael tells her stories about his family – some comical and some horrifying. But that’s not his life. He left all that behind when he joined the army against his father’s wishes. As he says, “That’s my family, Kay. That’s not me.”

But Michael does make the choice to enter the family business to avenge the attempted assassination of his father. To everyone’s surprise, the “good son” manages to kill a rival mob boss and a crooked police captain in the middle of a public restaurant. He immediately heads to Sicily for a period of exile and hiding until it’s safe to return. So it’s some years before he again finds Kay. She’s working as a school teacher out of the city and he goes to pay her a visit. [Naïve :47]

Michael justifies his duplicity with an “everyone does it” mentality. Besides, it’s only for a short while. I’ll make it up within five years. Listen, everyone I have ever counseled over major sin has told me a story of an “I can stop anytime” justification. I once met with a woman who had embezzled over a hundred thousand dollars from a local church while serving as the church secretary. She said, “Every time I took a little I’d say, ‘I’ll pay this back. It’s just this once.’” Deeds of darkness always bleed out into the light eventually.

Well Michael’s “eventually” is revealed in the greatest scene in the film – some would argue the greatest scene in the *history* of film. And Coppola didn’t even win Best Director – talk about organized crime! But in the pomp of high church for the Christening of his nephew, Michael Corleone becomes the godfather in two ways – big “G” and little “g”. I would play you the scene, but it’s long and to cut it down would be a travesty – akin to cutting the Mona Lisa in half so it fits in your kitchen. Plus it’s an extremely bloody and violent scene – and I try not to offend your sensibilities in church at least.

But the contrast between the deeds of violence and the words of the priest as he baptizes the innocent infant is absolute genius. Again, the darkness and the light. Business and family. And it all evolves around a three-fold blessing and cursing, just like in Eden. Now, some of you come from Catholic backgrounds, so you’ll be more familiar with the ceremony.

There is a profession of faith in which the parents or godparents – in this case Michael – are asked if they believe in God the Father and God the Son and in the Holy Spirit? To which Michael thrice replies “I do believe”. And then, the Catholic Rite of Baptism includes an *exorcism*. I had to go look that up to see if it was a real thing, and it is! I don’t know if it’s just a pre-Vatican II thing – some of you can fill me in after – but you’ve got to get the devil out of that baby!

And so I want to describe for you the imagery of the following scene. Again, the juxtaposition of family and business is brought to the forefront. The three-fold renunciation of Satan is the final act before the actual baptism. So the priest uses his full name, “Michael Francis Rizzi, do you renounce Satan?” (Cut to a scene of Victor Stracchi being gunned down in an elevator.) Michael replies without emotion, “I do renounce them.” (Mo Green, laying on a massage table, looks up to be shot in the eye through his glasses.)

The priest continues, “And all his works?” (Carminio Cuneo is riddled through the glass of a revolving door.) Michael again, “I do renounce them.” (Philip Tattaglia and his mistress are strafed through the sheets of a hotel bed.) The priest asks finally, “And all his promises?” And Michael expressionless as always responds for the third time, “I do renounce them.” (The cut climactically is to the assassination of the chief rival, Emilio Barzini as he descends the courthouse steps to his waiting car. It’s a scene Shakespeare could have depicted at the Roman Senate.)

The ritual expulsion of demons – that is to say, of enemies – completed, the priest asks, “Michael Rizzi will you be baptized?” The new godfather responds “I will” and after a brief shot of the priest pouring

water on the innocent baby’s head, there is a rapid triple cut scene of carnage and dead bodies corresponding to the priests’s voice-over invocation of the Trinity – “*in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.*” Some of you are like, “Oh, that sounded like church!”

I want to read you a quote from an essay on religious imagery and film. “Michael Corleone’s threefold renunciation is a solemnized lie signaling the demonic bond of hypocrisy that holds together the human race; the matter and form of his sacrament of rebirth as the Godfather are not water and the Spirit of truth, but blood and deception.”

The hypocrisy that holds together the human race. It really does. All the way back to the garden. Jesus recognized our tendency to hypocrisy when he commanded in the Sermon on the Mount – specifically talking about false oaths like Michael has just undertaken – **Matthew 5:37**, “*All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*” What does that mean? It means always be who you are. Don’t be one thing in the shadows and another thing in the sunlight. One thing with business, and another thing with family.

The opposite of hypocrisy is integrity. Those of you who are math minded know the word “integer” - the English words “integer” and “integrity” are related – it means a whole number as opposed to a fraction. A person without integrity is fractured, and a person with integrity is whole. Are you something different where you work than what you are in church? Are you different with your friends than you are with your family? Don’t make the mistake of thinking that just because you’re not a mobster and have people killed that you’re no Michael Corleone. The relative anonymity of social media has given so many of us the actual experience of darkness vs. light.

Are you different online than what you are in reality? Are you a snarling lion online and a wimpy little lamb in reality? That’s never been more true than in our Instagram-Facebook-Twitter age. We have the technology to do just that, to invent ourselves. You create yourself. You brand yourself. You determine the image you want. What will get them to swipe right? Or is it swipe left? – I don’t know, I’m a happily married man.

Do you lie on your resume? It’s not personal, it’s only business. I read an article that said technology is the reason why people have fewer qualms today about padding résumés, and falsifying achievements. Of course the technology makes it more likely that you’ll be *discovered* in the lie as well – the internet giveth and the internet taketh away.

Of course, it’s not new – technology just exaggerates it, but it’s part of the human condition. C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, said, “... we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible... We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.” And what he means is we tell everybody that truth is culturally relative – what is true for you may not be true for me, we spew our “alternative facts”, right and wrong are just social constructs - and then we’re *shocked* when people lie and cheat. So we have a big cultural problem.

And it’s destroying us. Let me show you three ways that a lack of integrity, that hypocrisy, is destructive. **First, hypocrisy destroys human identity.** Every time you do anything that lacks integrity, you’re also eating away at human identity. Who are you? The only way to answer that is to find something that is *always* true of you. You have many roles. You have many hats, but the only answer to who you are is something you do, something about you, something you believe, something about you that *always* stays the same. Both at the office and at the wedding.

Deanna and I saw a pretty good movie this week about the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker church scandal – do you remember that? Good intentions, but then they get in a pinch and one lie leads to another, one financial irregularity leads to another. And the big theme of the movie is “who have we become?” It wasn’t any one big decision, just death by a thousand little integrity cuts.

And televangelist movies are almost as dangerous as gangster movies – too easy to explain it way as “those kind of people”. But don’t avoid your own eye. Because when you lack integrity. When, in tough situations, you always do what is most advantageous to you - if it means you lie, cheat, or break promises - you always do what is most advantageous to you. In the end, there’s no *you* left. There’s no you. Integrity is vital for human identity.

But then **secondly, hypocrisy destroys human dignity**. If you don’t have integrity, you violate human dignity. What is so wrong about a lie? What’s wrong about it? When you lie to somebody, you are exploiting them. You’re not allowing them to see reality. You’re putting them at a disadvantage. You’re *using* them. You’re turning them into instruments for your purposes and you’re withholding the grasp of reality they need to have as human beings. You’re violating their dignity. You’re treating them as children, at best, and as objects at worst.

I quote C.S. Lewis a lot, but let me give you one from his *wife*. Joy Davidman was an American poet who wrote a book about the Ten Commandments and said about “thou shalt not lie”, “There are the lies of gossip, which make haters out of us; the lies of advertising and salesmanship, which make money out of us; the lies of politicians, who make power out of us.”

In other words, lies turn us from human beings into objects to be used. Every lie demeans, destroys, and violates the dignity of the person you’re talking to.

And then **finally, hypocrisy destroys human community**. Well of course it does. I mean a relationship has to have a me and a you – Martin Buber’s “I and Thou” – but if a lack of integrity has destroyed *my* identity and *your* dignity, what’s left to have any relationship? Every time you lack integrity, it destroys human community.

One scholar put it like this. He says something like, “Imagine a society in which no one trusted another to keep a promise, in which every leader was expected to lie as a matter of course, in which every teacher was suspected as an academic cheat, and every preacher a moral fraud, and in which all contracts were never expected to be honored. No partner could ever bank on the loyalty of another. No one would make decisions in assurance of having the facts in hand. Life would be brutalized. We would go from a community to a jungle.” And every single time you engage in a lack of integrity, you are eating away at the fabric of community.

This is the story of *The Godfather*. The first film mirrors Genesis chapter 3 – hypocrisy in the garden. And the second film is the natural progression – Genesis chapter 4, fratricide, one brother kills another. In that second film, Michael reveals his internal struggle as he asks his mother, in Italian, “Mama, I want to ask you a question about Papa. When he was bring strong for his family, did he ever fear losing his family.” To which his mother replies, “You can never lose your family.”

But she’s wrong. Of course you can. And Michael does. That’s the story arch. Watch the third and final film in the trilogy, Michael Corleone dies alone with no one for company but a dog. He loses his family. And all because because of hypocrisy, because of a lack of integrity – he’s not whole, he’s fractured – he buys the lie that he can do dirty deeds in the dark and then simply walk out into the light of love. Can’t do it, Sally.

The movie fittingly ends where it began, in the Don’s serious office – now occupied by the son rather than the father. After the business at the baptism, Michael returned home to purify the family as well, dealing with the traitorous Tesio as we’ve seen, but also ordering the murder of his sister’s husband – having just stood godfather to their baby.

Carlo’s betrayal earlier in the film over some petty resentment had led to the murder of Sonny. And as Connie rushes in to confront him after the fact – “Michael you lousy cold-hearted bastard, you killed my husband!” – Kay is there and hears the whole accusation.

And now I do want to play for you the final scene of the movie. First up, we have our symbolic triad yet again – Francis Ford Coppola is such a good Catholic! – just like the threefold denial, the threefold blessing and the threefold curse. This time, Kay will ask her husband three times to bring her into the inner circle – to tell her the truth. Let’s watch...[**My Business 1:30**]

Let me quickly interrupt. Michael lies. He will cling to his hypocrisy. He will continue to fracture his integrity into the world of family and the world of business. We’ve devolved from “it’s only business” to “never ask me about my business!” And what are the results? Well, what did we say are always the results of hypocrisy? Destruction of identity, destruction of dignity and finally...destruction of community. I told you that Kay was our way into the film; well, in this closing scene, the camera shifts and we truly see the world through her eyes. Pay attention to the symbolism. [**Closing Scene :45**]

The door closes in her face – in our face. It is the beginning of the end for their marriage and ultimately for Michael’s beloved family. Hypocrisy always closes the door to intimacy. Because intimacy requires as it’s primary ingredient, vulnerability. And you can’t hide *and* be vulnerable at the same time. The door is closed on Kay. The door is closed on Michael. The door is closed on you and me. This is the price we pay as the human race for our great hypocrisy, for our life in the shadows.

I’ve already told you the door stays shut for Michael. Sorry for the spoiler alert but he will not be redeemed. But what about the rest of us? Is there hope for us behind this dark door? At the end of the Bible, in his great Revelation, John the Apostle has a vision of Jesus appearing to seven churches.

One of them was in Laodicia, about which he says, **(Revelation 3:15)** *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!”* That’s a lack of integrity. Trying to live between the darkness and the light just makes you a shadowy figure. That’s what this church was.

They think they have it all together. From their perspective, business is good. **(Revelation 3:17)**, *“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”* But Jesus has some advice for them, **(Revelation 3:18)** *“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”*

There’s that “shameful nakedness” again. Do you hear the echos of our great garden tragedy? In fact, let me show you something else from Genesis 3 before we close. Right after God pronounces the curse and just before they are exiled into the wilderness, **Genesis 3:21**, *“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”*

Now that is really weird. The Lord God took animal skins and clothed Adam and Eve. Now, on one level, those would have been way better than fig leaves. Obviously, by the way, you know, you can’t walk around without clothes in a world in which nature is no longer your friend, you die of exposure. One of the relationships that was murdered by hypocrisy was our relationship with nature.

So God is graciously going to cover their nakedness and animal skins provide more protection than plants. I have a pair of hemp shoes – they are better for the beach than for the jungle. But there is a cost to leather shoes. You don't get the animal skin without killing the animal. Now to survive in this world, something has to die. That's a lesson that Michael Corleone well understood. But those first animal skins were pointing to something.

Look back at that passage in Revelation, Jesus famously ends his message to that church with an invitation, **Revelation 3:20**, "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.*" We've closed the door on Jesus, but he's still there waiting for us. In fact, he has provided the key to our coming back in. He has provided the clothes we need to cover the shameful nakedness of our hypocrisy.

At the marriage.

When Jesus Christ went to the cross, he paid the price it took for God to forgive us. He was stripped. You know, the only thing he owned in the end was his garment. And they took it from him. He was naked, he was put up there, he was shamed. He was naked, and he was mocked. Why? He was stripped naked so that we could be clothed, or when he cried out, "My

God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The door to the Father was being closed in *his* face...so that it could be opened to us.

There is a price to be paid to restore integrity. A price to make the family whole again. The third *Godfather* film is all about Michael trying to pay that price – he literally gives a hundred million dollars to the Catholic Church. But it doesn't work. No amount of money in the world can repay a debt that stretches back for hundreds of thousand of years.

But Isaiah chapter 53 prophecies about the coming "suffering servant" who, though innocent of any wrong doing – Jesus always walked in integrity, his business was always personal, always in the light, never in the shadows – and it says that in spite of that he was "led like a lamb to the slaughterer". His skin for ours. He died to cloth our nakedness.

It says "for the transgression of my people he was punished". Even for the transgressions of monsters like Michael Corleone? Yes. And even for the transgressions of you and me. Are there areas in your life where the personal and the business don't meet up? Where the flesh and the spirit go in different directions? You don't have to let the door close on you for good.

You can come out of the darkness and fully into the light. Not because you finally take the family business legit – there will always be hints of hypocrisy as long as we remain in a fallen world – but because you embrace Jesus who paid the price to open the door. **2 Corinthians 4:6**, *“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”*

You can come out of the darkness. He’s knocking this morning. Will you open the door?

Let’s pray...