

## The Banshees of Inisherin

*God at the Movies 2023, Pt. 3*

### [**Banshees Bumper 2:19**]

Welcome back to God at the Movies 2023. If you joined us last week, we looked at the sweetest movie I'd seen all year – *Marcel the Shell*. And today we swing way to the other side and bring you the bitterest. This is a movie with some tension to it. But I like tension. “Tension makes them pay attention”, as they say. And there's plenty to pay attention to in this film. Visually, it is a beautiful film. At places it is a very funny script and a very heartwarming script. But make no mistake, it is as dark as a dense star. Or as some parts of the Old Testament!

But from a sheer craft perspective, *The Banshees of Inisherin* is an excellent film. It received 9 Academy Award nominations – bested only by the film we will be discussing on Mother's Day – and among them were four acting nominations. Everybody in it got nominated. Although I was disappointed at the snub of Jenny the Donkey. On the other side of the pond, it took home the BAFTA for Best British Film. Great acting, great score, great cinematography, great script, great costumes; everything you could want in a movie...expect the will to live apparently! My sister - who loves movies as much as I do – called it the most depressing movie she's ever seen. So of course I immediately went out and saw it!

It led to – hand's down – the *best* titled film review I've ever seen, when the *New York Times* ran with “Banshees of Inisherin: Giving Your Friend the Finger”. Hang that in the Smithsonian immediately! Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleason play best friends who apparently are “having a row”. But when the film begins everything seems right in the world. In fact, everything appears absolutely perfect.

I want to play you the opening clip of the film. It's set on the fictitious island of Inisherin, just off the western coast of Ireland in 1923. As we watch, I'd like you to try and notice something about camera perspective – be a film student, not just a moviegoer...[**Opening :41**]

The camera comes down through the clouds, seemingly from heaven. The sky is blue, the hills are green, the water is crystal clear. A choir sings uplifting angelic music. Even a rainbow – the Biblical sign of God's promise of peace – descends upon the town. And our main character, Padraic, strolls with a smile upon his face out of the town and towards a crossroads overlooked by the statue of Mary – that's gong to play a key role throughout the film, as we will see later.

At the bottom of the path lies the cottage of Padraic's best friend Colm, who each day as the bell strike two accompanies him up to the pub for their daily pint. A tradition that they have maintained, we suppose, forever. But on this day, Padriac knocks at the door...and Colm doesn't answer. Not because he's not home, no, he's clearly sitting inside smoking and ignoring all attempts to get his attention by Padriac, who eventually goes off to the pub on his own, assuming his friend will join him.

And come to the pub, Colm does. But he gives the silent treatment to his friend. Why? That's what everyone in town wants to know, including Padriac. "Have the two of ya been rowin?", everyone keeps asking. Padriac is confused, "Are we rowin? I didn't think we were rowin? Maybe we're rowin." And he follows his silent friend outside to get to the bottom of things. **[Like Me 1:13]**

And just like that, a friendship ends. Some of you have experienced the pain of a broken relationship that you didn't want to break but seemed out of your control. And Padriac is confused. Eventually it comes out that Colm doesn't want to spend anymore time with his old friend because he is dull. But as everyone says, "But he's *always* been dull!" By all accounts, Padriac is a genuinely nice guy – everyone says so – but apparently nice isn't enough anymore.

It puts me in mind of a passage of scripture where Paul admonishes, (**Romans 12:18**), "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*" I've quoted this passage one-on-one when many of you were having a row. Live at peace with everyone, but there's a caveat, isn't there? "As much as it depends on you." As Christians, we are always to desire peaceful relationships...but sometimes it doesn't depend on you. People have free will. And because of free will, even God can't make peace with everyone.

And Colm simply does not want to make peace with Padriac. At least not any kind of peace that restores their relationship. And as the hurt Padriac continues to try to reconnect, Colm finally issues an ultimatum. If you speak to me again, I'm going to take some garden shears, and cut off a finger from my fiddle-playing hand, and give it to you. That escalated quickly!

Now, clearly Colm is having some emotional problems – despair, depression, it's suggested that he's had suicidal thoughts. He's treating his long-time friend very shabbily. Even the village priest, while in confession, admonishes Colm, "It may not be a sin, but it isn't very nice." So what do we do when people aren't very nice to us? Especially people that we have been close to? That's Padriac's challenge. It's ours as well. And the Bible has a great deal to say about what comes next for both of us.

One day, Jesus was speaking to his disciples about people who harm others – who cause others to stumble. You can just imagine everyone nodding their heads, “Yeah, I know some jerks like that.” But then, as Jesus is want to do, he turns it around on them. Look at **Luke 17:3-4**, “*So watch yourselves. “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.*””

This is an astonishing call and – as we’ll see toward the end – the disciples respond in dismay – as I think many of us do as well. But let’s not skip ahead. Let’s not overlook Jesus very first sentence. He says, “So watch *yourselves*...” and then goes on to talk about forgiveness when someone wrongs you. That’s counterintuitive. When someone wrongs us, we pay great attention to the wrongdoer. We think about them all day long, don’t we? You ever have those shower conversations in your head? “Well I’ll tell you what...”

But Jesus says, “When someone does something wrong to you, that’s when you need to be looking especially closely at yourself.” We can almost hear Padriac saying, “*Myself?* I offered to apologize for whatever I’d done to *him*. I’m the nice guy trying to make things right!”

Yes, that’s true. But the premise behind the warning is that it is extremely easy to develop an **unforgiving spirit** and not see it in yourself. What a tragedy when a *good* guy allows a *bad* guy to turn him into a *worse* guy. That’s what Jesus is warning against.

And the antibiotic Jesus prescribes to fight off the infection of bitterness is forgiveness. And so what I want to do this morning is use this powerful film as an illustrated warning – the same warning Jesus would give – and talk about a practical approach to the implementation of forgiveness that might have given our film a much different ending. So let me give you the steps of forgiveness and then the tools of forgiveness – three steps, two tools. We will start with the steps.

### **Number one, you must Identify with the**

**Wrongdoer.** Now, you might have noticed that in our scripture, Jesus says, if someone sins against you *and they repent*, you must forgive them. Some believe this text teaches that you only have to forgive those who have wronged you, if they repent. In this case, it’s Padriac who was wronged – and he even offered to say sorry – but Colm didn’t repent. So the burden is off Padriac, right? Wrong. I mean, remember, according to Paul there is still the “as much as it depends on you” part – the other person’s bad behavior doesn’t excuse our own.

Additionally, Jesus instructs us in **Mark 11:25**, “*And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*”” Notice there is not even an opportunity for them to repent in that moment. The onus is still on *you* to forgive. There’s no need to pit these verses against each other. Real forgiveness always hopes for a restoration of the offender and the relationship. But even if the restoration doesn’t happen – or is impossible, they could be dead, they could be in jail – we still have to forgive them in our hearts.

Why? Not for their sake actually. We must forgive because of what it will do *to us* if we don’t. You may have heard the saying that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Well the scriptures support that. **Hebrews 12:15** says “*See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that **no bitter root** grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*”

When the writers says “see to it”, that’s an echo of Jesus’ “Watch yourselves”. It means we should assume that we are more resentful and less forgiving and more controlled by what people have done to us than we think we are. Hidden roots work in hidden ways; unless you dig around to find them, you may never see what has sprouted *until* you have done or said something cruel that shocks you.

Padriac is a simple man, but everybody agrees he’s a good man. He’s a kind man. He loves animals. He himself takes pride in that. But his self-pity over the slight by his former friend puts him in jeopardy of losing even that reputation. Colm has a new friend it seems, a fellow musician who just arrived from the mainland. And Padriac in a fit of jealousy confronts the newcomer. It’s a story he tells to the village idiot, Dominic, who – at least for a while – is the only friend he has left. Watch what happens...[**Mean 1:05**]

Padriac couldn’t even see how mean he was being until it was pointed out – because it’s a hidden root - but even then he justified it. “Maybe this is the new me.” Why? Because he would not allow himself to identify with Colm. He’d allowed himself to feel morally superior to his old friend. ‘I would *never* do that!’ And so a bitter root grew up that enabled him to do worse.

This impulse to compare yourself and feel superior is an instinctive way the heart tries to push back against the perpetrator. And often our friends will push us to it; “We’re on *your* side, after all.” To look down on a wrongdoer feels like a small victory – a salve for our wounded heart – but it leads to self-righteousness, and self-righteousness in the heart is always deadly.

When you are self-righteous, you no longer think you need grace, and grace is what the gospel uses to keep our hearts humble. Without it, you'll be mean just like the rest of them. Honestly, Padraic looks down on poor Dominic, with the same condescension that Colm redirects towards him. But because he can't identify with that he is hardened himself.

Miroslav Volf is one of my favorite theologians – he's at Yale – and he lived through the Croatian-Serbian violence of the 1990's. He wrote a powerful book about it called *Exclusion and Embrace* – one of the best books on forgiveness and reconciliation I've ever read. He says, "Forgiveness flounders, because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans, even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion...When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to discover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for him. And when one knows that God's love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself...and so rediscover ones own sinfulness." (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 124). If you are going to forgive, you must identify with the wrongdoer. As Volf says, you must realize you are co-sinner and they are co-humans. That's the first thing.

The **second** element of forgiveness is to inwardly **Absorb the Debt** of the wrongdoer yourself. The Greek word that Luke records here as "forgive" – *apheimi* – is not the word that is usually used for forgiveness. It's a word most often used in financial terms to "release from a debt". It's used to make something "tax exempt". It means you don't have to pay.

Now, Jesus is not using the word financially in this context. But there is still a debt. When you are wronged, the perpetrator owes you a debt. It may be literal – a house guest clumsily breaks an expensive lamp, and you say, "Don't worry about it". But there is always a cost to wrongdoing and it's going to fall on someone. Either the wrongdoer bears it or someone else must.

To forgive is to deny oneself revenge, the absorb the cost by not evening the score. And therefore forgiveness is always expensive to the forgiver. And it takes time. I heard a great metaphor for forgiveness. Forgiveness can be like buying an expensive gift for someone on credit. The gift is received the very moment you give it – when you say, "I forgive you" – and the gift will be enjoyed from that moment on. But the giver will continue to pay the unseen bill until the debt is satisfied.

I want to read you a case study, this is from a man who describes how he and his fiancé forgave each other over time after a painful breakup. “Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her...But only in small sums over a year...They were made whenever I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past. Done whenever I saw her with another man. Done when I had to renounce, jealousy and self-pity, when I prayed for her as she moved into other relationships. Done when I praised her and spoke of her value, though I wanted to slice away at her reputation.”

“Those are the payments – but she never saw them. And her own payments were unseen by me... But I do know that she forgave me... Forgiveness is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender. Forgiveness is to deal with our emotions... By denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them, or fondling them in our minds... Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it.”

When his friend no longer wanted to be his friend, Padriac was going to experience pain – no getting around that. And the healthiest thing to do would be to absorb the pain, turn to others – his sisters, other acquaintances in the village, get more animals! – to

fill the void. But he couldn't do that. He kept pestering Colm for more and more explanations. Until Colm escalated things with his infamous threat – which he carried out. Disgusting! But not the film's lowest moment.

Because Padriac – to the great frustration to everyone in the village – cannot absorb the debt. Ok, so finally Colm maims himself completely by cutting off the other four fingers on his hand – which he proceeds to chuck at the door of Padriac's house. Of course, by throwing away his fingers, he's throwing away his musical pursuits as well. There are some clear problems there. *Still* not the film's lowest moment.

Because before Padriac can come home to find the severed fingers, someone else does. Jenny the Donkey! The poor sweet beast who is more like a pet than a farm animal. Her loving owner comes home to find Jenny lying dead...choked to death...on a discarded finger. *Now* we have reached the film's lowest moment! I want to play you a clip – don't worry, it's not the gross one – but I do want you to remember the opening scene. The view from heaven, right? Compare that to what you see here. [**Donkey :33**]

It's the reversal of our opening image, isn't it? The camera pans, not from heaven down, but starting at the cold earth and moving up. The music is more somber, the colors less vibrant. And when the camera turns to Padriac there is no rainbow and certainly no smile. Just the anguished grief of a man holding a dead donkey. And in that moment something changes, something dark and dangerous.

Our English word "wrath" comes from the same Anglo-Saxon root as our word "wreath". What's a wreath? It's vines twisted into an unnatural shape. Wrath means to be twisted out of your normal shape by your anger. And the same Anglo-Saxon word also gives us the now archaic (unless you read *The Lord of the Rings*) "wraith". But it's an old word for a ghost, a spirit that can't rest. A banshee!

According to legend, these are spirits that stay in the place where something was done to them that they can't get over, can't stop reliving. If you don't deal with your wrath through forgiveness, it will turn you into a wraith – a restless spirit, someone who is controlled, who is haunted by the past.

Well Padraic is close to becoming a wraith - the Banshee of Inisherin. He goes to the pub and informs everyone that the next day at a specified time, he would be coming to burn down Colm's house – whether his former friend was in it or not. And sure enough as the sun rises, he loads up his cart with wood and rags and gasoline and sets off. Now, I mentioned that the movie centers on a crossroads – a physical crossroad that in this moment becomes metaphorical.

There's a moment where Padriac stops his cart in front of the statue of Mary. One road goes up to the town – to community and possible salvation. The other road goes down – to the cottage and possible damnation...literal flames. Will he choose the high road or the low road? Well, I already told it it was one of the most depressing movies ever made, so *of course* he chooses the low road.

We see him torching the place, while Colm sits calmly inside. And then he leaves. The next day he comes back to the ashes of the cottage, to find Colm in singed clothing standing on the beach – apparently he got out. Colm says, "Well I guess this makes us even; my house for your donkey." But no, Padriac says only his death would make them even. "Somethings' there's no moving on from, and I think that's a good thing."

The nicest man in town – lover of animals and simple folk. By the end he is twisted into a monster. A bitter, broken, mean man. And he didn't start it. He didn't do anything wrong initially. But when someone did something wrong to him, he didn't watch himself. He didn't see to it that the bitter roots didn't take hold of his heart. He refused to identify with the wrong doer, and he refused to absorb the debt.

Now, quick note before I move to the last step; some people mistake forgiveness for abandoning justice. I think that's why people tend to get so upset at the Biblical idea of forgiveness. "You mean we have to let my abuser go free?" In terms of the law and justice? Absolutely not. Justice involves calling the wrongdoer to bear whatever penalty God's law or human law requires. Justice is pursued for God's sake, for other potential victims sake, for the sake of greater society. It is not loving to allow someone to go on sinning in a way that brings harm to others.

But people tend to either seek personal revenge in a belief that that *is* justice or not to seek any justice at all so as not to rock the boat. One is vindictiveness, the other is cowardice, and neither have a place with Biblical forgiveness. It is possible to seek justice without seeking revenge. You can testify against someone in court, see them sentenced to prison...and still forgive them from your heart.

In our movie, Padriac could have requested that Colm make restitution for his dead donkey – that would have been an appropriate and just request and it would be up to the official courts to decide on the merits. That would be the high road. But what you *can't* do is take vindication on yourself and burn down a man's house with murder in your heart. Then *you* become as bad, or worse, than the original perpetrator.

Ok, third step, **Will their Good**. Willing the good of the wrongdoer is a kind of test. If you have both identified with the wrongdoer (they are a flawed human being just like me) and begun the process of inwardly paying down the debt (I will refuse the temptation to continue to execute you in my imagination) then you will be freed to will their good.

Why? Because you are able to see the difference between evil and someone who does evil. Our true enemy is the evil in the person – and in *us* – and we want it defeated in him or in her or in us. When we do that, the spread of evil is checked - at least in us. The poison – the hatred and pride – will not infect us. But in addition, the spread of evil may be checked in the evildoer.



See, if someone slaps you...and you slap them back. Congratulations you're now Israel and Palestine. You'll be slapping each other around for the next three-thousand years. But if they slap you and you turn the other cheek...you've at least interrupted the cycle of anger and payback. The perpetrator might even be softened – we can't know that for sure, but if it's to happen, that's the only way it will happen.

How can this be done? Jesus says it happens through the active will of prayer. (**Matthew 5:44**) "*But I tell you, love your enemies and **pray for those who persecute you**,*". If you force your mind to pray for them – not for their punishment, but for their blessing – eventually your heart will start to mean it.

Now, if all of this sounds ridiculous to you, I understand. If it helps, it sounded ridiculous to his followers when Jesus originally said it! Look at how they responded to our opening passage about forgiving people 70 times 7. **Luke 17:5-6**, "*The apostles said to the Lord, "**Increase our faith!**"*" – in other words, we need supernatural help! This isn't natural. – "*He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."*"

Did you realize that the "faith as small as a mustard seed" bit was about forgiveness? Not believing in God, no, but forgiving those who sin against you. What does this mean? Well, it means a lot, but there's certainly a gardening theme whenever you are talking about seeds. And seeds have to be planted. They are no good in the bag; got to get them into the soil.

And so if you want the seeds of forgiveness to take root in the soil of your heart, it's not enough to know the principles, you need some tools to implement them. So two tools of forgiveness, quickly. The **first tool is Spiritual Humility**. The Bible is explicit in instructing us to (**Ephesians 4:32**), "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, **forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***" There is no better way to get the humility necessary to forgive than to accept what the gospel has to say about us.

It tells us that we were made by God and thus we owe Him everything – we owe it to God to put Him first in our lives. None of us have done that. None of us love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind – which Jesus said was the greatest commandment. Jesus also told a parable about a man who was forgiven a great debt that he owed – he was facing prison - only to turn around and shake down a man who owed him a small amount. It did not end well for that ungrateful man.

Jesus asks us to compare the debt we owe God with the debt anyone owes us. We are to say, “Lord, you didn’t exact payment for my debts from me, but Jesus paid for them with his life. Now, what right do I have to exact payments for their debts to me? With your help, I want to absorb the debt for Jesus’ sake.”

Also, when we try to exact vengeance, we are putting ourselves in God’s seat. God is the judge, not us. When I go to Presbyter meetings, there is a big chair up on the platform for the District Superintendent. Can you imagine how arrogant it would be if I just went up and settled down in his chair? So humility reminds us that only God is qualified to judge, and that Jesus took the judgement of God for us.

And the **second tool** for planting seeds of forgiveness is **Spiritual Wealth**. People who are rich in their experience of God’s love in Christ can be generous to others. Think about it, for those who belong to Christ, the Bible repeatedly says that you have the ultimate good reputation. Your names are written in heaven. Your names are embroidered on the garments of the great high priest, Christ, as he prays on your behalf before the throne of heaven. Romans 2:29 says you have the applause and praise of God. You also have ultimate riches as children of God and joint heirs with Christ.

So let me ask you? When you have all that...who cares who snubs you down at the pub? What if you are swindled out of some money? Some opportunity? Now, for God’s sake - and for the perpetrators sake actually – you should confront and seek justice. But you should be spiritually and emotionally wealthy enough to bear those losses without bitterness.

If you are a poor person who is not sure where your next meal is coming from, and someone steals a \$5 bill from you – that is deeply traumatic, maybe the last straw. But if you are worth \$50 million dollars and you lose a \$5 bill...well you wouldn’t even know you had it. You’d be mad that it was taking up space in your pocket to begin with!

Spiritually and emotionally, Christians are like the wealthy, not the poor. But only if we grasp what the gospel tells us about who we are and who we will be in Christ. So spiritual humility and wealth. We say it all the time, but the gospel with humble you to the ground and lift you to the heavens...at the exact same moment. When we know who we are in Christ, we can look at anyone and say, “You can hurt me, but you cannot ruin me. You can’t ultimately do anything to my *real* wealth and reputation.

Do you see, in the end, forgiveness – like everything else about the Christian life – is all about Jesus. Do you know why Jesus knew that the disciples would have the ability to forgive, when they didn't have the faith to believe they could? Because he knew that in just a short time, he would do it for him.

Because when he was hanging on the cross, betrayed by his friends, unjustly condemned by his enemies, cruelly tortured by a tyrannical empire...he could have burned down every one of our houses. Instead he prayed, **(Luke 23:34)** “*Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*” I’ve said before that that might be the hardest thing anyone has ever done. The actual dying on the cross is not as hard as forgiving the people that put you there.

Because after all, in that moment, no one had repented, no one had asked forgiveness, no one had owned their evil in any way. And still, Jesus identified with the wrongdoers...Jesus absorbed our debt...and Jesus willed our good before the God of the universe. Think about that. Meditate on the cross. Plant your seeds of faith in Jesus. Until you can do the same to those who hurt you. *Forgive each other...just as Christ has forgiven you.*

Let’s pray...