

Casablanca (1942)

Casablanca: "Hearing the Desire of the Meek"

Theaters in the Dayton area are showing what they call "The 80th Anniversary of Casablanca," so I thought I'd go back into the archives of VP and pull out this from the Summer 2007 issue—not a review, but a "Praying the Movies" entry that I once featured in the journal. You who have my WJK books called Praying the Movies will be familiar with the format of a meditation built around one or two scenes of a prominent film. If the theaters in your area are also showing this, don't miss out on the opportunity to see it sparkle on the big screen: several years ago, my son Dan and I watched it in a theater, and he leaned over and remarked, "This is the way to see it! You miss so many details on a TV screen!")



A wonderful moment of grace
in a legendary film! (c)
Warner Bros.

Scriptures

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;
you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

Psalm 10:17-18

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,
and will be repaid in full.

Proverbs 19:17

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 9:36

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Romans 2:13-16

Introduction/Setting:

During the summer, theaters often show a golden oldie, so we offer this meditation based on one of the best, Michael Curtiz's romantic WW 2 era movie set in the city for which it is named, *Casablanca*. Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart are the ultimate star-crossed lovers destined to suffer for their love as they sacrifice their own happiness for a higher cause. Only after watching the film several times did I begin to see beyond the main story a delightful subplot of grace, designed, of course, by the skillful scriptwriters to make us see Rick Blaine's real nature hiding beneath his thin, cynical veneer.

Rick Blaine owns Rick's Cafe, the one night club in Casablanca where Nazi and Frenchman, crook and saint, exiles and Vichy French mingle together for at least a night in which the war

is laid aside. Rick has several casual friends devoted to him—Sam the black musician, Carl, his portly maitre d', and Sascha, his Russian bar tender—but no intimates. Rick maintains a savoir, cynical air that masks a deep hurt inside of himself. He maintains a friendly but cautious relationship with Captain Renault, the police officer who represents the Vichy government in the city, and also has dealings with the wily black market dealer Signor Ferrari.

The Nazi Gestapo agent Major Strasser has just come to the city, and he also frequents the Cafe with his fellow officers. Also newly arrived is resistance leader Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid)—indeed it is to arrange for his capture that the Major has come to Casablanca. When Laszlo enters the Cafe Rick is stunned to see the beautiful Ilsa Lund with him. The two had been lovers in Paris and then, with the threat of the Nazi invasion, had been separated. Thinking that she had been unfaithful to him by failing to meet at the train station, Rick had erected a shell around his heart, becoming the cynical man of the world shunning any involvement in politics. Later he will learn that she had fallen in love with him during the time when she thought her husband had been killed by the Nazis. Then, just before they were to meet at the train station and leave Paris, she had discovered that Victor was alive. Believing that her husband needed her more than Rick did, she had elected to stay with him.

Rick has come into possession of sets of exit papers, and it is for these that Ilsa pleads. Rick coldly turns her down. However, we see he is not so hard-hearted when an under-age young woman enters his night club bent on a desperate mission. It is her brief story, and how Rick responds to it, that forms the basis of this meditation.

The Video Scenes: Scenes 24 “Is Renault Trustworthy?” and 25 “Les Jeux Sont Falts” *Time into film: 1:04:42 to 1:10:17*

Amidst the buzz of the Cafe young Annina Brandel talks with Capt. Renault, who points to the table at which Rick is seated alone drinking. She walks over and enquires if she can speak with him. Rick asks her how she got in, she obviously being underage. To her reply that she came with Capt. Renault, he says that he should have known and invites her to sit down. She asks what kind of a man is Capt. Renault. "Is he trustworthy?"

Annina tells Rick her story of how she and her husband, who is at the roulette table, had left Bulgaria where conditions are so terrible that they have fled, hoping to go to America. However, travel expenses were so much greater than expected, so they are out of money, despite her husband's attempts to win at the gambling tables. However, she says, Capt. Renault has offered to help them obtain the expensive exit papers. Rick asks, "Does he know that (you're broke), and he's still willing?" She says yes, and then restates her question, "Will he keep his word?"

Rick answers that the Captain always has. And then, in a guarded way Annina reveals how she will pay the captain for the papers, when she asks, "Monsieur, you are a man. If someone loved you very much so that your happiness was the only thing she wanted in the world and she did a bad thing to make certain of it, could you forgive her?" We can read on his face that Rick is thinking of himself and Ilsa as he replies that no one ever loved him that much. As she continues pouring her heart out, Rick brusquely advises her to go back to Bulgaria. She answers that going to America means too much to them. Seeming to brush her aside, he says that everyone in Casablanca has problems, that hers may work out.

He goes over to look at the guest list and then sees Ilsa and her husband Laszlo enter. Seating them at a table, he asks Sam to play "As Time Goes By." Entering the gaming room, Rick passes the roulette table where Emil the croupier is about to start a new game. The intense looking young man seated at the

table is obviously the young woman's husband. This is confirmed when Annina comes up and watches while Rick leans toward the man, who has just declined Emil's invitation to play. Rick asks, "Have you played 22 tonight?" He repeats the number, and the young man places his chips on 22. Emil has caught on to Rick's intention and spends the wheel.

The winning number is 22. Several facial close-ups are inter-cut: the anxious young woman, now smiling; Rick's maitre d' Carl, looking very pleased; and Capt. Renault, surprised. Rick suggests that he leave his chips there. Another spin of the wheel, and he wins again. Telling him to cash them in and not come back, Rick leaves, stopping by the attendant to ask how things are going. "A couple thousand less than I thought there would be." Rick smiles knowingly and turns to leave.

Annina runs up to thank him with a hug and a kiss, but he removes her arms and says that her husband is "just a lucky guy." Her smile shows that she knows better. Carl wants to reward Rick by getting him a cup of coffee, but Rick declines. On their way out, the young couple talk with Capt. Renault and arrange to meet him the next day for the exit papers. A good loser, the Captain says that he is happy for both of them. "Very strange that you won," he observes, but then adds as he looks in Rick's direction, "Well, maybe not so strange." Carl apparently is telling the Russian bartender what their boss has done for the couple, because the latter goes up to Rick, kissing him on the cheek as he says, "Boss, you have done a beautiful thing." The last thing that the unsentimental Rick wants is this, so he dismisses him with, "Go away, you crazy Russian." Carl is at the bar with Rick and gives him a knowing smile, but, when Rick looks sternly at him, he too goes away. Captain Renault comes up and declares, "As I suspected, you are a rank sentimentalist."

Reflection on the Scene

We have all known people who seem to be outwardly hard or

cynical but who inwardly are warm and caring. Rick Blaine certainly is one of these, reminding us again not to judge people by their appearance. Although it is doubtful if he ever read Psalm 10, his act of kindness to Annina, certainly one of "the meek" so dear to God's heart, is just what the psalmist would approve. And so the Captain is right, Rick is "a rank sentimentalist."

The film reminds us that there are two kinds of people who do God's will on this earth: those who do so knowingly, and those who, though they might not be aware of God, still do the Lord's will. The apostle Paul recognized this when he wrote to the Romans about Gentiles "who do not possess the law do instinctively what the law requires" as having the law "written on their hearts." Rick has many flaws, but the plight of one of the meek touches his heart, and he does the right thing. Fittingly, it does not go unnoticed.

None of us probably will ever live such a romantic or adventuresome life as Rick, but whatever our lot, we will cross paths with the meek and become aware of their desires. There are the homeless in our own community, and around the world. There are the elderly in retirement centers longing for a visitor. There are women fleeing abusive mates. There are children starving for the attention of an adult. There are others, seemingly well off, who need someone to listen to them and say the encouraging word.

At the same time, there are those unsung compassionate ones who are like those described by the apostle, "Gentiles, who do not possess the law." They might not be present in our churches on Sunday mornings, but they help feed the hungry, shelter and clothe the homeless and the naked, thereby making our community more human. We ought to rejoice that they also care, and join in with them when we can. They share the compassion of that Good Shepherd who, long ago, saw the crowds, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." If you sometimes feel that the world is devoid of

all warmth and care, especially after the news headlines scream of so much killing and stealing, it is good to know that you are not alone in your concern. God raises people up to do God's will all over the world, even, as in this great story, in a night spot where people gamble and drink.

Further Reflection

1) Who are the meek that I encounter—at work; in my community; at church? Am I aware of their desires, or do I pass them by with scarcely a thought? What can I do?

2) What act of kindness (grace) have I received in the past that made a big difference in my life? Was the person a Christian, or just “a good person”?

3) Who are the one outside the church who also engage in works of compassion? How can I encourage and support them, affirming that all efforts of helping “the least of these” us honoring God?

Hymn: “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak”

Prayer

Gracious God, you have raised up witnesses to your love and justice everywhere, in and out of church. Open our eyes so that we can see those who, like you, “hear the desire of the meek,” that we be encouraged to join them.

Amen