

Crash (2004)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 5; L-6 ; S/N-5 Running time: 113 minutes

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12 Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Acts 10:34-35 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

Paul Haggis, another of the many Crash film talents that Canada has given to the USA, who adapted the script for Million Dollar Baby, joins with co-writer Bobby Moresco to give us the most insightful look into race relations ever brought to the screen. They bookend Crash with fender benders, and in between chronicle the far more serious crashes between individuals trapped by their prejudices and stereotyping of one another. Like the excellent Grand Canyon, Short Cuts, and Magnolia, this film features an outstanding ensemble cast of characters. Each in his or her own way is

infected with some form of racism against blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, or "Arabs. (I place parentheses around the latter because the person accused of this is actually an Iranian—but you know those Middle Easterners, they all look alike.)

The film demands total attention, with the director cutting back and forth among the various stories. The storylines are often infused with a touch of grace. The sordid characters we least expect suddenly act in a kind way toward someone of a different race. And then, upsettingly, we see one of the "good guys" do something ugly, and in one instance, horrifying. This is not your usual, predictable film so beloved by liberals who are looking for simple answers to the terribly complex problem of racism.

We know we are in for a good ride when, at the beginning of the film L.A. Police Detective Graham Graham (Don Cheadle), says as he sits in his car with his partner and lover, Ria (Jennifer Esposito), "We're always behind this metal and glass. Nobody touches you. I think that people miss that touch so much that they crash into each other just so they can feel something." In this film people certainly do crash into each other, and they feel, deeply, as a result—but the feeling is all too often anything but positive because of their stereotypes of other races and nationalities they carry around in their heads. Those concerned with race relations ought not only see this film but also gather others around it and discuss the important issues it raises. This really is one movie that matters.

Rather than try to describe the intertwining plots in the review, I am listing the various characters with some questions that can help explore the issues of the vignettes.

Beware; there are SPOILERS in this section, so wait until you have seen the film before reading further. Also, if using the questions with a group, the leader should feel free to rearrange their order or to pass over some of them.

For reflection/discussion

1) Officer Graham (Cheadle), romantically involved with his partner Ria (Esposito), makes a remark that sets her off. Why does his calling her "Mexican" offend her? Do you think this lumping together of all brown skinned peoples by Anglos is pretty widespread? What is Graham's relationship with his mother? Why is it so unsatisfying? How does a parent's favoring one child over another affect the siblings? What irony do you see at the end of the episode with his mother?

2) When we first see Anthony (Chris "Ludacris" Bridges) and Peter (Larenz Tate), two young African-Americans, they are leaving a crowded restaurant. What is Anthony complaining about? Do you think his feeling is widely shared by African Americans? How does this make it difficult in hiring or firing a member of another race? (One of this writer's daughters, a human resources director for a large company, says that this is often the hardest part of her job in dealing with employees who are members of a minority group.) How does his comment about why the windows on busses are so large reveal the depth of this feeling? What part do you think this feeling had in the jury's "Not Guilty" decision in the O.J. Simpson case? What about Anthony's remark in regard to the white couple approaching them? (For those who are Caucasian) Do you feel a shiver of fear when at night you are out walking, and a couple of black youth approach you?

3) The white couple accosted by the two black youth is Rick and Jean. What do we see of Jean's prejudice in her various scenes? How does the car-jacking strengthen her racism? How does this affect her relationship with her maid Maria? And yet, finally, what does the distraught woman say to Maria? How

is this similar to the finale of *Driving Miss Daisy*? What do you make of Jean's confession, "I am angry...I wake up like this. I am angry all the time, and I don't know why!"? What signs do you see that this feeling is pretty widespread in our society? (More on husband Rick later.)

4) What is the Persian storeowner Farhad (Shaun Toub) trying to buy when we first meet him? What is he constantly mistaken for? How does this affect the way others see him, such as the proprietor of the store they are in? How does his daughter (Bahar Soomekh) feel about her father? What later impact does her choice of bullets have?

5) What do both Jean and Farhad think of Mexican locksmith Daniel (Michael Pena)? That is, with whom/what do they lump him in? How does the Iranian's prejudice result in calamity for him and his store? What kind of a person is revealed by Daniel's telling of the fairy story to his fearful little daughter? How did you feel when Farhad catches up with Daniel? (Here we see the result of Farhad's daughter's decision about bullets!) Of what is the little girl convinced of by this incident? How might Christians see this as an act of God's grace?

6) How did you feel when Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon) pulled over the prosperous black couple? Expect some violent conclusion? How does the policeman's partner Officer Hansen (Ryan Phillippe) react? What do you think Ryan means when he tells the younger policeman, "Wait till you've been on the job a few more years. You think you know who you are; you have no idea." How do you think a policeman's job could be dangerous to his soul?

7) Were you surprised by how Officer Hansen's superior, considering the latter's race, reacted to his request for a transfer? How have minorities in police forces generally related to their fellow officers—and to civilians who are members of the same minority group? How similar might their

milieu be to what the apostle Paul meant in Ephesians 6:12?

8) Cameron (Terrence Howard) and Christine (Thandie Newton) are the black couple pulled over by the two white policemen. Although it is Christine's body that Ryan violates in his supposed search for a weapon, who is his real target? How is this an example of ways in which black males have so often been humiliated through the years? Given this type of example of a policeman stripping a man of his dignity, is it a wonder that juries composed largely of blacks, such as in the O.J. Simpson case, often refuse to believe white police officers testifying against a black defendant?

9) What do you make of Cameron's assistant director challenging his directive that the scene just shot is "a wrap"? How is this white man more sensitive to the racial scene than Cameron? What do you think of Cameron's giving in and reshooting the scene? Could the latter be in danger of selling out by denying his blackness? What has his relationship been with Christine since their horrific experience? What hope do you see for them?

10) Rick is running for re-election as a district attorney: how does race enter into his election plans? Why is he afraid that the car-jacking incident will be harmful to those plans? What do you think of him and his scheme to fix the problem? How and when have you seen the race issue exploited by politicians?

11) What is Officer Graham's dilemma in pondering the job offer from Rick's associate? How could this be a selling of his soul? But is his really a free choice? What do you think you would do if you were in a similar predicament?

12) What good things do we learn about the racist Officer Ryan? How in his telephone conversation and his meeting with the black insurance officer (Loretta Devine) does his racism thwart his objective of helping his father? (Similar to Psalm

7:14-15?) How does it almost cost a life?

13) How does Officer Hansen handle what could become a tragic situation? And yet what racial stereotypes does this “good guy” apparently hold to? How does this lead to a tragic result?

14) What do carjackers Anthony and Peter do when they hit and drag under their car the “Chinaman”? How is this another “moment of grace”—that is, what could they have done with him? How does Anthony surprise you later when he discovers the “cargo” of the “Chinaman”? What did he give up had he followed his usual, greedy path? (And yet even in this moment of grace, what racial stereotype does his remark to them contain?) What irony do you see in the revelation as to who the driver of the other van was and what he was transporting?

15) How are the remarks about crashing, made at the beginning by Officer Graham, borne out by the various stories? Have you had similar “crashes” involving racism with either members of your own race, or with a person of a different race or ethnic background? How did you deal with them, and what were the results? What does the film, and your experience, show about the progress we are making toward the fulfillment of Dr. King’s dream of “the beloved community”? What are you and your church doing to work toward this?

16) How are the characters conflicted or torn? See Paul’s Letter to the Romans for insight into this (Romans 7:14-21). Do you feel this way at times? That is, when you see a member of another race doing something wrong or upsetting, do some of the old epithets and stereotypes rise up in your mind? How might it be helpful for whites to regard themselves as “recovering racists” helpful?

17) At what points in the film might you say that the hand of God is at work? How can faith in God contribute to progress in race relations?