

Easy A (2010)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V -1; L-3; S-7;N-1. Running time: 1 hour 32 min.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:1-2

Olive (Emma Stone), like Juno in *Olive* tells her story via a live webcast.

school student smart enough to make the "easy A's" of the title. Then, when she tells her best friend Rhiannon (Alyson Michalka) a lie about how she spent a weekend, the "easy A" takes quite a turn in its meaning. Olive does not want to go camping with Rhi, so she tells her that her older brother has set her up for a date with a college buddy. She actually spends the weekend at home alone, but when on Monday Rhi grills her about how the date went, Olive, feeling trapped, says that they went all the way. The more experienced Rhi, who had worried over her friend's lack of sexual adventures, is thrilled that Olive has lost her "v-card," meaning her virginity. (Some friend, you say?)

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However the Queen Bee of the school Jesus Freaks, Marianne (Amanda Bynes), overhears her, and before you can say, "What would Jesus do?" Marianne has texted/twittered the news to virtually every member of her Cross Your Hearts Club. Soon everyone else in the school also knows that the girl that hitherto has drawn little attention has done "it." Everywhere Olive goes people stare after her. As embarrassing as it is, Olive soon comes to enjoy somewhat the attention – at first.

Brandon (Dan Byrd), spurned because others suspect his homosexuality, comes asking if she will be his date for a large party, where they will pretend to have sex in one of the rooms. For a store gift card Olive agrees to do so, and there follows a crazy scene of grunts, groans, and bed shaking while a crowd of kids listen outside the door, a scene that will either have you roaring with laughter, or shuddering because of its raunchiness.

A gaggle of other school outcasts (the over-weight, the geeks, the not very attractive, etc.) are soon bringing gift cards to trade for Olive's pretend favors. Convinced that Olive is Super Slut, the campus Christians are in an uproar, picketing her with insulting signs. Her English teacher Mr. Griffith (Thomas Haden Church), who has been teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to the class talks with her, suggesting that the large monogrammed A she wears on her breast is going a bit far. His wife (Lisa Kudrow), who is the school counselor, also calls her into the office—and before long, Olive knows a dark secret about her. She even assumes the woman's blame for something she did that was so wrong that it could wreck her career and marriage. At this point we might even be led to compare this intelligent and compassionate teenager to the Galilean rabbi who ate and drank with the outcasts of his day.

Meanwhile Olive's liberal-minded parents Dill (Stanley Tucci) and Rosemary (Patricia Clarkson) and her younger brother haven't a clue as to what their daughter is going through. The

parents bend over backward to accommodate and support her, and yet Olive apparently cannot discuss her dilemma with them. She wants to get off the merry-go-round she has created, but finds this is not easy to do, none of the people she has helped feeling able to help her. Fellow classmate Woodchuck Todd (Penn Badgley), who was the first boy she kissed many years ago, is around to lend his support, but he seems to have gone off the deep end dressing up in outlandish costumes and painting his skin blue while leading school pep rallies.

The movie is cleverly framed as a live webcast, Olive telling the entire community about her lies and its results. She has become an outcast, and observes that it is harder to be an outcast than she had imagined. She goes to a Roman Catholic Church to make a confession, and then to a Protestant pastor—but both experiences fail to satisfy for funny reasons. The frank sexuality, as with Juno, makes the film a risky venture for youth leaders to take their group to see, and yet these—and parents also—are the ones who would benefit most from watching and talking about it. Director Will Gluck and screenwriter Bert V. Royal have given us one of the most intriguing films about high schoolers since the good ole days of John Hughes. But what a difference in communication and sexual mores between the 1980s and today!

For Reflection/Discussion

May contain spoilers.

1. How can this be seen as one of those stories of unintended consequences? What has happened when you told a social lie in order to get out of something, as does Olive?
2. How do the adults here come off a little better than in most movies made from the teen point of view? What do you think of Dill and Rosemary's parenting style? How are they trying to be open and understanding? (Maybe trying a little

too hard?) What do you think of Mr. Griffith as a teacher? Is he anything like a teacher that you have liked and respected?

3. Before her big lie, what seems to be Olive's social status at school? How does the attention she receives from the gossip about her bear out the old Hollywood adage that bad publicity is better than no publicity (in Olive's case that it's better to be talked about negatively than not at all)?

4. How does Olive become the means of a strange form of grace? Note it is "the outcasts" of school that she helps: at one point she remarks, "It's become a habit with me, to help the downtrodden." What do you think of what she does for Mrs. Griffith? How is this similar to "taking up the cross" ?

5. What are the parallels between Olive and Hester Prynne, and what are the differences? How do Olive's fellow teens exhibit an ambiguous or double-minded attitude toward sexual promiscuity? How does our culture show both a Puritan strain and an "anything-goes" attitude? Check out ads on cable, TV, and in magazines. What commodity is often used to sell a product, from cars to medicines and clothes and beverages?

6. How have our children and youth been led by advertising and the media to fashion themselves into sexually attractive packages at an earlier age than ever before? What do you think are some of the results of this trend? (It might be fun to obtain an old Andy Hardy comedy and compare teen life as depicted in the 30s and 40s with today.)

7. How do the ones she helps show that they are made of less noble stuff than Olive? Do you think this is pretty true to human nature?

8. How are FaceBook and cell phones used at your work or school to get the word around? Usually seen as forming on-line communities, how are they used in this film in an anti-community way? That is, how is Olive in a sense kicked out of community? What real life stories have you read in which this

has happened, in at least one case even leading to a girl committing suicide?

9. A youth group, or even a movie-loving adult one, could make this an opportunity to study the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7.

A word of caution: A youth leader should talk this over with a colleague first, explain the plan in the bulletin and/or church newsletter, and then the week before the screening, send a letter of explanation home with each youth, and a form signed by a parent granting permission to see the film with the group. My experience has been that those who fail to do this soon feel the wrath of parents who do not understand a leader's intentions or have full trust in their dealing with risqué materials.

Ask such questions as: Whom do you think Jesus would most enjoy being with, Olive or Marianne? Why?

On a blackboard or newsprint sheet make two columns labeled "Olive" and "Marianne." Give the group time to scan through the three chapters of the Sermon: or, to save time, you might divide the members into 3 groups, each taking a different chapter. Their mission is to read the chapter and discover which passages relate best to Olive and/or Marianne.

Call the group(s) back together to make their reports. Write under each name the verse references that apply to each character. Get the members to talk about why a passage applies to the character.

Which of the two do you think would be the most surprised by the verses applied to them, especially 7:21-23?