



Cinderella Man

LEADER'S GUIDE

Discussion Guide and Bible Study

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Dear Friends of Reel Spirituality:

Film has become our culture's primary storytelling medium. Ask a group of people how many have seen *Schindler's List* or *Beauty and the Beast* and almost everyone will raise their hands. Such movies not only entertain, they educate, helping us see what we might otherwise miss. Of course, there are movies that are poorly done and others that survive on adrenalin alone. But many more help us explore life and its meaning through their honest portrayals and engaging narratives. Movies invite conversation and even communion. After watching a movie together with others, many find the film serving as one more "person" in the group, a guest who has sought truth and shared vulnerably. Having sought life at some more central region, movies encourage a similar searching, openness and vulnerability from their viewers.

To help you in this movie conversation, we at Fuller Seminary's Reel Spirituality Institute are publishing online study guides of selected, soon-to-be-released films. We trust you will find these guides helpful in your personal reflections, informal conversations, and ministry settings. Why not take a group of neighbors or friends to the cineplex and then discuss the film over coffee? You not only will get to know each other better, you might be surprised to find yourself in God's presence.

Happy viewing,

Rob Johnston and Barry Taylor
Codirectors, Reel Spirituality: An Institute for Moving Images

INTRODUCTION

Ron Howard's *Cinderella Man* is an authentic cinematic treat— a strong David vs. Goliath story that inspires and entertains. Not everyone will appreciate the boxing sequences, but the story of Jimmy Braddock's perseverance as his family lived through the financial crash of 1929 and faced his diminishing abilities as a professional boxer is compelling.

Cinderella Man is an opportunity for the faith community to converse about ordinary and transcendent themes that touch our daily lives. This guide will consider five themes: character, family, the struggle for faith, identity, and the sport of boxing.

Before the film

If you are planning to create an event to see the film as a group, followed by conversation, invite everyone to visit the film's website ahead of time, www.cinderellamanmovie.com. You can download a photo from the gallery to make a poster to announce the group viewing. Research reviews and background material for *Cinderella Man* on the Internet Movie Database site, www.imdb.com. As the leader, read this study guide in its entirety before the screening.

After the film

Choose a place to gather that is relaxing and not too noisy. Your role as the leader is to facilitate the conversation and show respect for each person's interpretation of the film and response to the questions; you are not required to do all the talking.

The first theme that this study guide considers is Character. The first question in this section is an exercise that will help you break open the film and get everyone talking. The final section of the study guide deals with *Cinderella Man* as a whole and the final question provides a way to conclude the event. Of course, you may find it more appropriate to begin and end your discussion elsewhere. You also may want to focus on certain sections more heavily than others, depending upon the energy of the group.

*In all the history of the boxing game, you'll find
no human interest story to compare
with the life narrative of James J. Braddock.*

—Damon Runyon (1936)
American journalist and writer



Do you not know that in a race, the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

—1 Corinthians 9:24-27, NRSV

THE STORY OF CINDERELLA MAN

It is 1928 and the promising prizefighter Jimmy Braddock (Russell Crowe), the “Bulldog of Bergen,” has just won a big fight. His boxing manager Joe Gould (Paul Giamatti) pays him generously and Jimmy goes home to Bergen County, New Jersey, to his loving wife Mae (Renee Zellweger) and young family. Mae refuses to attend his fights because “every time someone hits you, he hits me”; nevertheless, he knows he cannot win without her support.

In 1929 the stock market crashes. Jimmy begins losing fights, and many think he will never be a great boxer. As America’s economic depression deepens, Jimmy struggles to get work at the docks. His family is reduced to poverty, but Jimmy promises his oldest son that he find a way to provide for the family so they will not need the charity of others.

Joe arranges for Jimmy to fight in a preliminary match for which he will be paid \$50.00, win or lose. He loses badly, and the boxing promoter refuses to pay him and revokes his license to box. When Jimmy gets home, he discovers that Mae has sent the children away to different relatives to be cared for. He finally admits he needs help and goes on the dole in order to bring the children home.

In 1934, Jimmy wins a fight because of the “hook” he developed while working at the docks with a broken hand. One fight at a time, Jimmy earns the right to fight the world champion, Max Baer (Craig Bierko). Jimmy becomes a symbol of hope for those who are down on their luck, out of work, and homeless. Baer has attitude and pride and does not think much of his smaller, older opponent. Periodically Mae encourages Jimmy to come to church with her, but he declines. Mae is distressed because Baer has already killed two men in the ring, but Jimmy is determined to fight and win for his family. By this time, Jimmy has made enough money to pay back all that he received while on relief.

At the last minute before the fight, Mae goes to the dressing room at Madison Square Garden Bowl on Long Island to see Jimmy and then returns to be with their children. Townspeople gather at the church to pray, along with the priest, as they listen to the fight on the radio.

Jimmy Braddock made history on the night of June 13, 1935, when he boxed Baer for all fifteen rounds and won by unanimous decision. That night the famous American writer and journalist, Damon Runyon, called James J. Braddock the “Cinderella Man” because of his fairytale return to success as a boxer.

Themes

Of the many themes found in *Cinderella Man*, this study guide will consider:

- Character
- Family
- The Struggle to be a Man
- The Struggle to Believe
- Boxing and Boxing Movies: Metaphors for Struggle

CHARACTER

By purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love...
—2 Corinthians 6:6

One of the greatest gifts that Scripture gives us is Paul’s list of virtues that identify Christian character—the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives (cf. Galatians 5:22)

- Charity
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Perseverance
- Gentleness
- Self-control

You can measure a man by the opposition it takes to discourage him.
—Robert C. Savage, *Life Lessons*

Cinderella Man portrays a man who loved his family and would do anything for them—and boxing is how he achieved the purpose of his life.

Character is defined as making a habit (virtue) of doing the right thing when no one is looking. Spiritual writers suggest a process of developing good character:

- Thoughts become acts
- Acts develop into habits
- Habits define character
- Your character shapes your destiny

1. Assign the name of a major character from the film to each person present, repeating names if necessary. Reflect on how that person expressed what it means to have a good character (or not) by living one or more of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives as shown in the film. Share your insights with the group.

2. How important is it to develop character that is built on the fruits of the Holy Spirit so that interpersonal, family, business, and school relationships grow and thrive?
3. What does this phrase mean: “Character is what you do when no one is looking”?
4. How did Jimmy Braddock’s character shape his destiny?

FAMILY

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband...bring [your children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

—Ephesians 5:25, 32-33; 6:4



The purpose of marriage is the mutual growth in holiness of the man and woman, and the procreation of children. From the film, we see that Jimmy and Mae’s marriage was a true covenant of love.

1. Talk about some of the key scenes in the film that express the meaning of Jimmy and Mae’s marriage. What did their marriage mean to them in times of plenty and in times of want?
2. How did Jimmy and Mae show their respect for one another? How did their covenant of love and respect grow over the duration of the film? What challenges did their covenant have to meet so that the Braddocks could stay a family?
3. What were Jimmy and Mae’s beliefs about their family, their children? What did you think about the scene in which Jimmy has to take his son to return the salami he has stolen? What did the scene tell us about Jimmy’s character and his relationship with his son/children?

THE STRUGGLE TO BE A MAN

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

—Genesis 1:26-27; 31

1. Richard Rohr, in *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* says that, “Many people are so angry at patriarchy, or false male power, that it makes them afraid to recognize the good power and the good passion of men. ...Maleness is half of the mystery of God, and if we do not enjoy it, we are missing out on something ‘very good’.” How does *Cinderella Man* show male power and passion that is both true and false? What is your attitude toward what is called the vocation of men?
2. It has also been said that men obtain their identity from what they do instead of who they are as persons made in the image and likeness of God. Would you agree that this was an underlying cultural, practical, and spiritual problem for men in the film, as shown in the conversation between Joe Gould's wife and Mae at the Gould's empty apartment? Why or why not? Does the problem continue to exist today? What are the consequences of men who leave or are absent from families?
3. In the tradition of Swiss-German psychoanalyst Carl Jung, male archetypes include King, Warrior, Magician, and Lover, while female archetypes include Mother, Mediatrix, Companion, and Amazon. Novelists and screenwriters often employ Jung's ideas of archetypes in their writing. How do you think Jimmy and Mae Braddock, as portrayed in the film, correspond to these archetypes? Archetypes also have a shadow, or a negative side to them. In particular, what were Jimmy's shadows (and those of the other characters)? How did he struggle to become the best man he knew how to be?
4. Re-read the opening quote from 1 Cor 24–27. Talk about how Paul's use of the sports analogy, shadowboxing in particular, provides insight into Jungian analysis of character as well as the Christian life.



THE STRUGGLE TO BELIEVE

*We're not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us;
we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.*

—C.S. Lewis, British scholar and novelist (1898-1963)

1. Why did Jimmy Braddock struggle with his faith? What made him turn away from prayer and worship? Do you think he began to doubt God? Did a sense of failure have anything to do with it? Why?
2. If you had been in Mae's place, would you have said anything different to encourage Jimmy in the practice of his faith? Do you think Mae showed wisdom in how she talked to Jimmy about faith and going to church? Why or why not?
3. Talk about how the baptism scene in the film symbolizes Jimmy's struggles to be a man: his identity as a man, his faith, his ability to work, to care for his family, his concern for others, and to box. Besides religion, how does the baptism scene function as a metaphor for initiation into family, community, society, and the culture of a nation?

BOXING AND BOXING MOVIES: METAPHOR FOR STRUGGLE

*Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven
with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'*

—Genesis 32:28

1. What do you think in general of boxing as a sport? Share your thoughts on movies about boxing. Does this sport with its violence have intrinsic value?
2. Hollywood director Charles Robert Carner (*Judas, Vanishing Point*) wrote: "My brother was a boxer. Those who like it love it. Those who don't, it can't be explained to them. They call boxing 'The Sweet Science' because at its best it is not about who is physically stronger—it's about who is smarter, and has the greater heart.... Men must have physical courage. They must be able to defend their wives and children from predators. Boxing provides a ritualized form of that test of manhood in a way that nothing else really does."

Do you agree with this assessment of boxing as a sport? Why or why not? How does Carner's view of boxing compare with what has been said about masculine identity, struggle, family and character? Is there a difference between the voluntary violence in sport vis-à-vis the violence of war or crime? How can boxing be something Christians can embrace or tolerate?

3. Suswella Roberts began boxing at the age of seven to soothe the pain of her father's early death, and is now a professionally ranked welterweight. She thinks boxing is "a metaphor for the Christian life and spirituality." She does not believe that boxing is about violence but about strategy, science, and calculation. She prays God will use her as his tool: "Give me the strength to win, the discipline to run and train, to be celibate, and give me the courage to engage in the struggle." She claims a responsibility to be a good role model for children.

What are your opinions of women boxing? Reflect on films like *Million Dollar Baby* and *Against the Ropes* and Suswella's explanation and motivation for boxing. Do you agree? Is it okay for both men and women to box? Why or why not? Does our faith have something to say about sports where people are regularly injured and sometimes killed?

CINDERELLA MAN: THE FILM

1. How well do the visual texture of the film and the music combine to tell this Depression-era story?
2. How do the visual and audio aspects of the film create meaning? What did the film mean to you?
3. Describe how the film made you feel.
4. Did you like the film? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Cinderella Man: James Braddock, Max Baer, and the Greatest Upset in Boxing History, Jeremy Schaap, 2005, Houghton Mifflin

Braddock: the Rise of the Cinderella Man, Jim Hague, 2005, Chamberlain Brothers



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