

COMPANION GUIDE
TO THE VIDEO

The TOUCH OF THE
MASTER'S
HAND

Gateway Films
VISION  VIDEO

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INTRODUCTION

The Touch of the Master's Hand is a beautifully filmed parable illustrating the worth of the individual. Expanding on Myra Brooks Welch's famous poem, filmmaker Tom Christensen eloquently affirms that all persons are of value and have great potential, even those regarded by society as washed up and useless.

From time to time we all have wondered about the history of some old object — an ancient book or coin, an old chest or lovely dish. "If only it could talk, what tales it might tell," we have thought. In the case of the violin in the original poem, the filmmaker "tells" the story of the battered old instrument that nobody wanted.

SYNOPSIS

In a workshop filtered with light like a Rembrandt painting we see a master craftsman lovingly carve, assemble and polish a new violin. Once it has dried, he strings it, puts it to his chin, and begins to play a beautiful classical melody. Satisfied with the quality of its sound, he places the shiny instrument in a new case.

The violin is first bought by a mother for her young son, but it soon becomes obvious that he is no budding Itzhak Perlman. Even the cat crawls under a chair to escape the awful noise. The boy's carelessness inflicts the first scratches on the instrument, and after his mother's fruitless attempts to make him practice, the violin is stashed away in the attic. Eventually it is sold to a pawn shop, and from there it passes through the hands of one careless owner after another.

After many such owners have battered and banged it beyond recognition, the instrument is put up for auction. People in the audience vie for used pianos and pink lawn flamingos, but not even the auctioneer is interested in the violin, so terribly marred is it in appearance. The auctioneer pleads with the audience and attempts to point out some of the attributes of the instrument. Some, bored, drift out of the room. It looks as though the auctioneer will be lucky to get even a dollar or two for it. And then an old man comes forward. He takes the violin, tightens and tunes the strings, and plays a haunting rendition of Dvorak's "Humoresque." Suddenly the audience is captivated. People begin to return to their seats, entranced by this unexpected performance from a master. The tone and beauty of the music that he is able to produce on even this old and battered instrument deeply moves the audience.

The old man finishes and gives the violin back to the auctioneer. Slowly he finds his voice again and asks, "And now what am I bid for the old violin? How about a thousand dollars?" The crowd comes to life, and the bidding rises until the violin is sold for \$3,000. Someone wonders, "What changed its worth?" The swift reply is, "The touch of the master's hand."

The poem and scene shift, and we realize that the violin has been a metaphor for all who have sunk in life to the point where others consider them worthless. We see an alcoholic old man trudging dispiritedly through the city streets. He climbs up onto the railing of an overpass above a busy highway. Three young men, who see only a worthless vagrant about to provide them with a spectacle, motion for him to jump. But at the last moment, a gentle hand touches his shoulder. Encouraged, he climbs back down, and the disappointed thrill-seekers move on. Another person has been saved from the brink of destruction by the touch of the master's hand.

BEFORE SHOWING THE PROGRAM

1. Preview the program, twice if there is time, so that you will be thoroughly familiar with each scene.
2. Read through this guide, and select the parts that are suitable for your group and your purpose. Add your own ideas, as well.
3. Borrow an old, beat up violin or other musical instrument, and place it so that the group members will see it as they come in.
4. Check your video equipment in advance to make sure everything is working properly.
5. Introduce the program very briefly by picking up the old instrument and saying that often what many regard as worthless can become very valuable — if the right person comes along.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Go around the group and let each person share a favorite scene or moment from the program. Ask what contributed to its appeal — the photography, the music, the actors, etc.
2. Is this story just about a violin? If not, for what is the violin a metaphor?
3. Do you ever see people on the streets like the vagrant in the film? How does society regard them? How are the young men who urge the old man to jump an extreme example of this? What are they looking for?
4. The filmmaker gives us a history of the violin, one implied, but not told, in the poem. What do the scenes of the violin being constructed contribute to the story?

In the same manner, create a history for the old man in the story. Divide into three or more teams and make up a biography of the vagrant — his name, when and where he was born, something about his childhood and adult past. Was he ever married? Did he have children, a good job, etc.? How did he reach the point at which we meet him?

After ten or fifteen minutes, each team should share its biography. Then show again the section of the program following the auction. Do the biographies add more to the story — that is, has the old man become more than just a face?

5. In the Old Testament there are several stories of people generally regarded as of low value or from despised groups. See if anyone can think of such a character. Here are examples:
 - a. Rahab the Harlot (Joshua 2 and 6:17).
 - b. Ruth, the Moabitess. (To see the prevailing view of Moab, look up Jeremiah 48 or Amos 2:1-3.) Whose ancestor was she? (Ruth 4:16-17)
 - c. The widow at Sidon who gave shelter and food to Elijah (1Kings 17). What did the law and customs say about relationships with Gentiles?
 - d. Gomer, the wife of Hosea (Hosea 1-2). What should Hosea have done with his unfaithful wife according to the law?
 - e. Even Jacob the Patriarch; what was his character like before his conversion experience? (Genesis 25:19-34; Genesis 27) Would you have bought a used camel from such a man?

6. In the Gospels we see many people whom Jewish society held in low esteem over 1900 years ago. List as many as you can think of — or the stories in which they figure. The list might include:
 - a. Lepers (Matthew 8:1-4). How were they treated by society?
 - b. Roman centurions (Matthew 8:5ff). What was the relationship between the Jews and the Romans? (Also see Matthew 5:38-45 for Jesus' teachings about how his followers should relate to enemies.)
 - c. Tax collectors (Matthew 9:9-13 and Luke 15; 18:9-14; and 19:1-10). Why did the Jews hate them so much? How did the tax collectors fit into the Roman scheme of occupation?
 - d. Children (regarded by some as not important enough to take up the time of a busy man like Jesus — Matthew 19:13-15; and also 18:1-14).
 - e. A woman sinner (which is all Luke says — we only assume that her sin was sexual. Luke 7:37-50).
 - f. The poor (Luke 21:1-4, and 16:19-31).
 - g. Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30).
 - h. Samaritans (who are cast in a favorable light in Luke 10:29-37 and 17:11-19?)
 - i. Adulterous woman (John 8:1-11).
Why were these people outcasts? What did Jesus see in them that others failed to see?
7. Note how closely Jesus identifies with the “outs” of society: Matthew 25:31-46 and Luke 4:16-21. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews sees significance in Jesus' being executed outside the gates of Jerusalem (Hebrews 13:11-13).
8. Who, besides the vagrant in the program, are “outside the camp” today? Some have referred to these as “disposable people.”
9. What are the ways in which society shows its rejection of those “outside the camp”? What risks do you run if you befriend them or take up their cause?
10. When the old man is about to jump, he is stopped by the touch of the master's hand. Why do you think the filmmaker doesn't show more than the hand of the one who saves him? Was this a wise decision? Christ works today through those who belong to his body, the church, both those who belong to the visible church and those who might not knowingly belong yet who still do his will. Use your imagination for a moment and make up an ending in which you describe the person who reaches out to the old man. Is the person a law officer? a social worker? a pastor? a person walking or driving by? even a child?
11. The credits are shown at the end of the film as the violin is cleaned and polished, restoring it miraculously to its original luster. This is similar to the description by an early father of the redemptive work of Christ — through his death on the cross Jesus restores mankind's *imago dei*, almost defaced by sin, the way an artist takes an old painting, so faded that it is scarcely recognizable, and restores the image to lustrous new life. Discuss this as an apt metaphor for what happens to a person touched by the Master's Hand. Have someone read II Corinthians 5:17.

A good illustration to bring in from literature is that of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's novel "Les Miserables." Valjean, reduced to a subhuman level by his cruel imprisonment, steals the candlesticks from the kindly bishop who gave him food and shelter the night before. Stopped by the suspicious police and brought back to face his benefactor, he is overwhelmed when the prelate pretends that he had given the candlesticks to him — an act of grace that transforms his life.

12. The noun in the title of the program is widely used. How has it come to be used for more than just physical contact? List some of the uses, such as "Keep in touch," "Reach out and touch," "That was touching", etc.

Have several large concordances on hand so that the group can look up the word "touch" and see how it is used in the Bible. Note how many times it is used in connection with the idea of sacred vs. profane, clean vs. unclean, with all contact being forbidden. How does this lend all the more meaning to Jesus' touching such people as lepers? (Much later one of the great stories of Francis of Assisi's conversion process includes his embracing a leper.) How does such touching become an act of grace?

Let those who have experienced any such "touching moments" share them with the group.

The Touch of the Master's Hand

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought is scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bid, good folk," he cried.
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"
"A dollar, a dollar"; then, "Two! Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three. . . ." But no,
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said, "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.

"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
 Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
 Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice,
 And going, and gone," said he.
 The people cheered, but some of them cried,
 "We do not quite understand
 What changed its worth." Swift came the reply:
 "The touch of a master's hand."
 And many a man with life out of tune,
 And battered and scarred with sin,
 Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
 Much like the old violin.
 A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine,
 A game, and he travels on.
 He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
 He is "going" and almost "gone."
 But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
 Never can quite understand
 The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought
 By the touch of the Master's hand.

- By Myra Brooks Welch,

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