

INTRODUCTION

A heart-pounding, uplifting, latter-day “Rocky,” **WARRIOR** is an emotional crowd-pleaser that packs a hefty spiritual punch. The film transcends others of its kind by dramatizing *actual* love in practice, as opposed to shallow attachment; *actual* forgiveness, as opposed to mere lip service; and *actual* family unity, with all the messy real-life challenges that entails.

The film centers on a failed husband and father who turns to God for help in repairing his broken life and cleaning up the relational messes he’s created. It involves conquering addiction, the struggle to provide for one’s family, listening to the still small voice of our conscience, and engaging in the spiritual battles that confront us whether we acknowledge them or not.

Moreover, **WARRIOR** is about keeping our marriages together in an age when the institution of marriage is threatened by easy divorce and other stresses. It’s about the indomitable nature of a father’s love and the lengths to which a parent will go to support and reconcile with his children. It’s about taking risks and stepping out in faith vs. surrendering and giving up the struggle. Most of all it’s about the beautiful things that can happen when you get back up after falling hard and losing it all, firm in the conviction that nothing is impossible with God.

WARRIOR is a riveting father-son story, a thrilling underdog/hero sports journey, and a first-rate family drama for faith-based audiences.



A POWERFUL FILM WITH A CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

In many respects, the movie **WARRIOR** is a contemporary cinematic retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son(s) from Luke 15. It involves an “extreme sport” popular in military circles today—Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)—cage fighting. The Dad, played by Nick Nolte, is an Irish Catholic war veteran who has been fighting in a cage of his own making ever since Vietnam. He has two estranged sons, each of whom are also fighting in locked cages largely of their own making.

The multilayered family story deals with the stresses these characters experience when they re-enter each other’s lives after a lengthy and soul-crushing absence.

The film breaks open scriptural principles that inspired us to prepare this Companion Guide. Faith-based and military audiences will respond passionately to **WARRIOR** because of how these principles elevate the tense, high-stakes storyline.

ABOUT THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

WARRIOR is an excellent vehicle for both personal reflection and discussion in young adult, marriage, and recovery groups. It provides an opportunity to discover the many ways in which we can challenge ourselves to be more loving and responsive to those whom we’re sometimes most likely to neglect—our own family members.

With this booklet in hand, anyone is able to profitably reflect on the film’s rich Judeo-Christian themes. It can be used for ministry, personal scripture study, or as a means of more deeply appreciating the cinematic arts. Reading this guide is a great way to use a first-rate Hollywood movie to grow in the Faith.

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KEYS TO HEALTHY FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Nick Nolte plays Paddy Conlon, a Vietnam vet and boxer-turned-steel mill worker whose family was torn apart by his alcoholism. He eventually returns to his Catholic faith and enters Alcoholics Anonymous, whereupon the now sober and remorseful dad welcomes back his youngest son Tommy (Tom Hardy) and trains him to compete in a major MMA tournament. Tommy and his older brother Brendan (Joel Edgerton), who are estranged from each other, end up on a collision course in the ring that could tear them, and their father's heart, to pieces.

Every family has eternal significance because it reflects the Holy Trinity itself. It is an arrangement that comes from the hand of God, who brings a man and a woman together to love, support, and help each other and their children get to heaven. Families are the fruit of that love, created with the help of the Lord. They are "little churches" that parallel the love of Christ for his people. They are intended to represent lifelong commitments, a safe harbor to build strong ships, and a dwelling place of God's spirit.

But as **WARRIOR** also reminds us, families also represent a demanding vocation that requires mutual support, encouragement, and self-giving in order to thrive. It is a place where the virtues are learned and practiced and the Golden Rule first applied. It is where we learn to accept people as they are and deny ourselves for the good of others. The well being of society is closely tied to the healthy state of family life. If our homes are filled with conflict we can be assured that we have a long way to go in our growth as people of faith.



READ: Psalm 127:3-5

"Behold, children are a gift from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he contends with his enemies at the gate."



The Judeo-Christian tradition celebrates the love between husbands and wives. This special, sacramental love is caught up in divine love and is essential not only for the happiness of the spouses, but also for the health and stability of children—and, indeed, the culture. As a result of the weakening of the Faith over the past decades, many couples have entered marriage without a deep understanding of the beauty and true meaning of this wonderful vocation. Consequently, destructive patterns have been allowed to take root in their households. Fear not, however, for with the Lord these challenges can be overcome. It is never too late to begin the process.

QUESTIONS:

Is your home and family life marked by peace or turbulence? If the latter, have you ever considered that the discord may be the result of your own self-centeredness? How much of an effort have you made to develop an interior life, a life of prayer and self-giving? Is this a course that you would consider possible with God's help?

READ: Ephesians 6:4; Col. 3:21

"Parents, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord... Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."

Parents should not purposefully do things that make their children scornful, angry, resentful, or discouraged. There is a difference between appropriate discipline and angering your children unnecessarily.

While it is a mother's role to be nurturing and supportive, it is more often due to a father's neglect that children carry heavy emotional baggage into adulthood. Many fathers are either too busy or too selfish to properly rear their children. Others can be too overbearing or abusive, both physically and emotionally. These things can and will eventually provoke a child to wrath. The problem traces to the fact that too few fathers are spiritual men, a situation that has created a crisis in our culture.



LESSON TO LEARN:

We all experience times when we fail to love our family members properly. The key is to communicate love in your home with action and by example. By all means learn to pray as a family! Make every effort to treat your spouse with love and care to set an example for everyone else in the home. Attend church together and insist on a common family meal time. Fill your children's emotional tanks and correct them with gentleness. Pray for the patience to do all this, and for the Holy Spirit to be your guide.

RELEASING THE BITTERNESS

Hard-bitten Tommy Conlon has serious issues with his formerly abusive father. Based on his hostile behavior toward the now contrite Paddy, we can only imagine the suffering Tommy endured in his childhood before Paddy ultimately abandoned the family. Heroic forgiveness—not only of his father but of his absent older brother as well—is the giant challenge suddenly thrust upon Tommy if he is to discover the life God has planned for him. And he's plenty upset at God as well, as he harshly points out to his newly pious father in the distressing opening sequence.



QUESTIONS:

Have you ever been so lost that you've given up on your Christian faith rather than pushing through your "cross" to find your "resurrection"? What were the consequences? Are you aware that ventilating angry feelings is addictive? Have you ever considered the effect that habitual loss of self-control has on others in your life?

READ: Ephesians 4:32

"Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."

Tommy and Brendan Conlon were victims of their father's alcoholic rages. Torn apart as teenagers when their parents split, they're suddenly thrust back into each other's worlds while fighting in the same tournament with a major cash prize at stake. Brendan expects a warm reunion but finds his brother carrying a serious grudge against him. Tommy will not—cannot—subordinate his immediate passions for the sake of family healing. His bitterness towards both his father and his brother reflects a smoldering resentment that seems impossible to overcome.

READ: Mark 11:25

"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

What is natural to "the flesh" when we have been hurt or abused or insulted is to strike back, to plot revenge, or to simmer in bitterness. This is only human. But God requires forgiveness as a condition for forgiving us. If we are unwilling or unable to forgive others, then there is no use asking God to forgive us. For believers, dealing with the sin of unforgiveness is a top priority.

READ: Matthew 5:44-45

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may

be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Forgiveness and reconciliation is God's antidote for anger and bitterness. It is a rational act that is simpler than you may think to execute. Often it serves as the solution for such seemingly intractable problems as hurt feelings, guilt, depression, sexual abuse, child rearing issues, and divorce. Thus, forgiveness is a key principle of Christian living. No matter how serious the sin against us, we ought to be very careful about directing hostility toward others, for we need tolerance and understanding for ourselves, and what goes around comes around. If we are of a giving and a forgiving spirit we will reap the benefit, both in this life and the next.

READ: James 4:6

"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"

We are living through a period of epidemic narcissism in our culture. So we must learn to recognize and eliminate our own selfish tendencies. Growth in self-knowledge—and maturity—is essential to understanding the personality weaknesses that wind up causing huge problems in our lives. Humility in all things is the answer for Christians. We deserve credit for nothing; everything good in our lives came as a gift from a loving God. Let us therefore declare open season on our pride, attacking it through growth in the virtues.

LESSON TO LEARN:

Bitter, proud, resentful people keep score of wrongs committed against them. Don't be such a person; it only leads to misery. Love doesn't keep score because love has a bad memory. Love finds a way to cover a multitude of sins. Raise your awareness of anyone you may silently be holding a past resentment against and allow yourself to release them from your grip. If we're serious about our faith, we need to forgive others no matter what they did to us. This, after all, is what God continually does for us. Even though we sin time and again, He is willing to forgive us each time—and not begrudgingly. The Father *runs* toward the prodigal son, with joy, and declares a feast!



COMMITMENT AND DEVOTION IN MARRIAGE

Tess and Brendan Conlon suffer serious tension in their marriage as a result of the impending loss of their home and Brendan's choices on how to resolve their deteriorating financial situation. Despite the pain, isolation, and hopelessness Tess is feeling, she decides to subordinate her immediate passions and support Brendan for the sake of their children and each other. This requires extreme self-denial and submission on her part, since it will require that she put her best face on while her beloved competes in brutal cage fights. It's a high price to pay to maintain a stable marriage, but she pays it out of love in fidelity to her lifelong vow.

QUESTIONS:

Are you in the habit of setting aside your own needs in the interests of serving those of your spouse, or do you look at marriage as an institution basically designed to serve your own needs? Do you think you can change your mindset to expect and even welcome the challenges and difficulties of self-giving marriage? Did you ever consider that God chose your spouse for you from the beginning of time? Do you encourage your children to pray for their future spouses, wherever they may be?



This verse provides the key to achieving true unity in marriage: We must sacrifice ourselves for one another. Self-surrender is the essence of godly love. If we are not willing to give of ourselves to meet the needs of our spouse, then we are not showing love. It is as simple as that. The attitude of godly love—being willing to put our spouse's needs before our own—must be our underlying attitude as we interact with one another in a marriage covenant. It is the way we serve one another and carry out God's plan. It is the way we fulfill our vows.

READ: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

"Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

READ: Ephesians 5:22, 25

"Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. ...Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her."

This first line (v. 22) is arguably one of the most misinterpreted passages in all of scripture. But that's because it's usually not presented within the context of the

second line (v. 25)! Certainly wives need to support their husbands, who face a difficult and challenging world each day on behalf of their families. A man's self-worth is largely derived from the unconditional love he receives first from his mother and then his wife. BUT, husbands in return must love their wives! And we're talking the kind of love described in 1 Cor. 13:4-7 above (*"Love is patient, love is kind..."*). That's the deal, and the arrangement simply does not work as designed if either party reneges. The secret is to try to maintain good cheer through the difficulties of life. Cheerfulness is an undervalued virtue born of faith, hope, and love.

READ: Proverbs 18:22

"He who finds a wife finds happiness; it is a favor he receives from the LORD."

All human relationships run hot and cold, including marital relationships. We can usually overcome the tough periods of marriage through a combination of self-giving, trust in God, and hard work. The key is to keep your eye on the prize when the going gets tough. If you set your mind on living for your spouse and making his or her path to heaven your top priority, then you will enjoy a lifetime of love blessed by God.

LESSON TO LEARN:

Though it may cut against our nature to do so at times, we should treat time with our spouses delicately and with an eye towards eternity. Instead of surrendering to despair in her moment of crisis, Tess Conlon resolves to move forward and persevere in her commitment to Brendan. She decides to submit and be there for him in his moment of need. We don't always make the noble choice, of course. In fact, we fall over and over again in marriage and in the Christian life. The key is to keep getting up and asking our spouses' forgiveness. This is what life is all about—the struggle, making the right choices, choosing love, giving of ourselves, seeking grace, discerning God's will, pursuing the narrow path. We fall, but we get back up. We persevere, we forgive...we love.



UNLOCKING CAGES & FULFILLING OUR DESTINY

Brendan's old friend and trainer Frank Campana is happy to see him again but shocked at his request to coach him through the extremely risky and violent MMA championships. But after considering Brendan's circumstances and the near hopelessness of his position, Frank steps up and provides the kind of love and support that only a true friend can provide. It's because of Frank's compassion and cooperation with God's grace that Brendan can be freed from his trap and able to fulfill his destiny.

QUESTIONS:

When was the last time you stepped out of your comfort zone to assist a friend in need? How aware are you of the role we're all called to play in doing Christ's work on earth, in being His hands and feet and ears and voices to love and serve those He places in our lives?

READ: John 15:12-15

"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you."

Our lives are a mixture of good and evil, of unwarranted suffering, joy, and beauty that move us to ask God for the inner light and strength to sustain us on earth and hope for happiness beyond death. There is an innate openness to God in the human heart. But sometimes we lose sight of the fact that we have been placed in community and must reach God through others. We are called to *action* in the messiness of this life and must therefore resist getting so caught up in "heavenly things" that we're no earthly good!

READ: John 8:31

"Jesus said to those who believed in him, 'If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.'"

The fact that Jesus so willingly embraced His cross confounds the modern mind since we're so conditioned to shy away from suffering. But isn't it true that as soon as we face up to our own "crosses" and stop fearing them, we find the ability to move beyond our debilitating worries? The Cross of Jesus is in fact our key to inner freedom. *"My yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matt. 11:30) takes on new meaning when we actually hand our cares to God and face our struggles with courage. Since life burdens us with cares anyway it only makes sense to take up Christ's yoke, whereupon our small sorrows fade and we're strengthened in the knowledge that we are cooperating with a larger plan.

READ: John 14:27

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled."

The Conlon family was ripped apart by forces that get unleashed when we turn away from God and resist His plan for our lives. It seems absolutely impossible at the beginning of the film that there can ever be reconciliation between the parties. But peace does come, largely as a result of Paddy Conlon's decision to repent and his patient faith that God will work things out in His own way. The fact that a violent sport like MMA can be used to heal a broken family underscores the reality that we should never place any limits on God. Every crucifixion can bring a resurrection provided we cooperate with prudent decision-making and confident steps toward the light.

LESSON TO LEARN:

As a result of original sin, life on earth will always be a struggle, and to deal with it we need to develop a certain toughness. But the wise among us also develop an inner docility that allows us to humbly, cheerfully accept the challenges that come our way. Sometimes we're tempted to wallow in dark places, thinking this will somehow allow us to move forward and progress. But in reality this traps us in cages that can take us decades to unlock. When our eyes are clouded and sight obscured, we need to go to the Light. Get to know Jesus and He will place in your soul a yearning to shine your light, truly love others, and embrace the destiny He designed for you from the beginning of time.



