Based on the best-selling book by beloved Christian author Janette Oke, Love ComesSoftly tells the story of Marty Claridge, a pioneer widow who is forced into a tough decision: marry a man she doesn’t know and be a mother to a girl she’s never met. Along the way, she learns about the power of faith and love. A treasure for all ages, Love Comes Softly is winning hearts everywhere, being called “a masterful love story that teaches faith in God and faith in other people” (the Dove Foundation).

This free discussion guide draws out the themes in the film, touching on such important topics as relationships, marriage, parenting, prayer, grief, and others. Each topic is complete with thought-provoking questions, related scriptures, and helpful lessons, making this guide perfect for small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, and pastors who are looking for a great way to get their group talking.

To supplement the lessons, clips from the movie have been chosen and are offered as a visual aid. These clips are available for download at www.foxfaith.com or may be shown through a specially made DVD that you can request at the same website. These clips and the guide, used in Sunday school classes, other small groups, or by parents, will provide you with the opportunity to discuss situations that a child may experience as they journey towards adulthood.

For more information and additional Church resource material, go to www.foxfaith.com.
ABOUT THE FILM

As a pastor, you’re very careful about the media you recommend to your congregation. Fortunately, \textit{Love Comes Softly} is a film you can discuss without reservation. Uplifting, family-friendly, and heartwarming, \textit{Love Comes Softly} was created by people who care as much about preserving innocence in our entertainment as you do.

\textbf{Janette Oke}

A renowned Christian author whose first book, \textit{Love Comes Softly}, has sold more than 5 million copies since it was published as an experiment in the Christian marketplace in 1979. She has sold nearly 20 million copies of her 75 books worldwide and helped pioneer the “prairie romance” as a viable genre of Christian fiction.

\textbf{Michael Landon, Jr.}

Son of the famous star of \textit{Little House on the Prairie} and \textit{Beverly Hills 90210}, he’s also the director, co-producer, and co-writer of the film.

\textbf{The Hallmark Channel}

\textit{Love Comes Softly} was originally produced for this entertaining, family-friendly network. The day the movie premiered, it pulled in a record audience, becoming the highest-rated feature film on the network.

\textbf{Awards}

Since it originally aired, \textit{Love Comes Softly} has garnered many awards, including a CAMIE (Character and Morality in Entertainment) Award for being an “uplifting motion picture that provides a positive influence for good.” Dale Midkiff received a Grace Award for his portrayal of Clark Davis. The film also received a special recognition from the Movieguide Awards, earning the Epiphany Prize for Most Inspirational Television Program, an award sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation.

In addition to receiving numerous awards, \textit{Love Comes Softly} has also attracted good reviews. Movieflicks gave the film a glowing review, stating, \textit{“Love Comes Softly} is among Hallmark’s best, which is a high compliment,” and calling it “excellent.” The Dove Foundation gave it 5 stars, saying, “This is a masterful love story that teaches faith in God and faith in other people.”

\textit{Love Comes Softly} is a heartfelt, family-friendly film created from the hugely popular bestselling book by renowned Christian author Janette Oke. Set in the 1800s, the film tells the story of Marty Claridge (Katherine Heigl), a resolute and determined young woman who suddenly finds herself a widow while on the way to a new life. Faced with the approaching winter and no visible support, she reluctantly enters a marriage of convenience to Clark Davis (Dale Midkiff). The deal: he will provide a roof over her head and safe passage back east in the spring; she will mentor his precocious 9-year-old daughter Missie (Skye McCole Bartusiak). In time, they all learn that love doesn’t always announce itself with a shout; sometimes love comes softly.

The film touches on many different topics, making it ideal not only as entertainment, but also as a conversation starter.

Relationships, parenting, coping with grief, prayer, God’s provision — these and other topics are addressed in the movie, which is why we’ve created this Leader’s Guide. This guide can discuss without reservation. Uplifting, family-friendly, and heartwarming, \textit{Love Comes Softly} was created by people who care as much about preserving innocence in our entertainment as you do.

\textbf{Talking To Mama}

Missie, Clark’s daughter removes one of Marty’s dresses from a trunk, lays it out on the bed, and begins talking to it as if it was her mother. She expresses feelings that she won’t express to anyone else while Marty accidentally overhears. Suggested Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

- Missie gets one of Marty’s dresses and uses it as a way to “talk” to her departed mother. Can you relate to this action? Has there been a time when you’ve “talked” out your feelings to a loved one who is no longer with you?
- Missie expresses feelings of regret for being left out whenever her mother died, hinting that she wasn’t allowed to see the grim effects of the disease that took her mother. Do you think she feels somewhat responsible for what happened to her mother? Why or why not? Have you ever felt responsible for a loved one’s death, even though those feelings go against reason?
- Missie tells her mother that she just wanted to say she loves her. Do you have unsaid words you wish you could say to a departed loved one?
- Missie’s actions are a form of therapy for her, a way she is choosing to grieve. How could Marty and/or Clark have helped her in her grief?

\textbf{LESSON TO LEARN:}

Scripture Reference: Psalm 30:5; Romans 8:35-39; Hebrews 6:19a Almost all psychologists agree that there are four stages of grief and that almost everyone experiences these same stages when faced with grief.

- It starts with numbness, a denial of the current events, typified by the phrase, “This isn’t happening” or something along those lines. Then comes guilt, a feeling of responsibility for the grief, “This is all my fault.” After guilt comes anger, and that anger can be directed in any number of ways: toward others, toward yourself, toward God. The final stage is acceptance, where you finally comes to grips with the reality of the situation and accept it.

You can even spiral through these stages over and over again, but each time you go through them, the process becomes a little easier. But the final remedy comes with hope. The passage in Hebrews tells us that hope is the anchor of the soul.

We all experience grief, we all process grief, but ultimately, healing comes through the hope we have in the Lord. That hope is our anchor that keeps us from going adrift on the seas of grief.
Do you think Clark is used to seeing God’s provision for him and his daughter? Does this lead to his confident attitude that the rebuilding of his barn will be completed?

LESSON TO LEARN:

Scripture Reference: Psalm 104

The equation of faith goes something like this: Big God = Little Problems. If you understand that God is in control, then, like Clark in his “church,” one only has to glance at nature and see that God provides for all of his creation. Psalm 104 gives us a staggering list of the systems and processes God set up to take care of his creation, including humans.

God’s complex plan always includes provision for everything he created, especially those he created in his own image: us. We can be assured that even in the midst of our problems, God will provide for us, just as he always has.

So in the equation of faith, how big is your God? Is he bigger than your problems? He should be.

Grief

Preparing For A Funeral

This clip shows Marty the morning after she learned the news of her husband’s death. She spent all night in their wagon grieving, and now she finds herself faced with the first step in moving on — her husband’s funeral. Suggested Scripture: Isaiah 49:13

Marty sits in the wagon, numb. For her, time has stopped. For her neighbor Sarah Graham, though, time has continued. “It’s time. We need to start your husband’s funeral.” How does this relate to grieving in real life?

Marty begins to accept her situation and grudgingly begins to participate in the funeral. Can you think of a time when you felt the same way?

In what ways did Sarah and the rest of the community comfort Marty?

Just before the funeral, Marty splashes water on her face, looks heavenward, and seems to draw strength from God. Can you think of a time when you drew strength from God in a time of crisis?

The parson makes a reference to Aaron beginning a new journey, meaning the journey to heaven. Do you share this same viewpoint on the subject of death?

DISCUSSIONS:

In an effort to help you reinforce the themes and messages of Love Comes Softly, we have chosen clips from the film that you can show to your group. These clips can be downloaded online at www.foxfaith.com or shown through a specially made DVD that you can request at the same website. These clips are followed up with questions and scripture. These questions should draw your group members into a conversation about what they have just seen. It is not necessary to tackle these topics in a row, or all in one night. If you would prefer to just cover one or two, feel free. It’s all up to you.

You’ll introduce the discussion by saying something like: “Tonight we’re going to talk about (topic i.e. Relationships, Parenting, Prayer, etc.). We have some scenes from a movie called Love Comes Softly that we’re going to look at and then take apart to see what we can learn from them.” Give a brief overview of the film, have your group members read the provided Bible verses, then roll the clip(s) you decide to use. After the clip plays, open the floor up for discussion using the questions we provided, or some of your own. You can close the session by giving the brief “Lesson to Learn” provided at the end of the topic.
NOTE: Since your group members have likely not seen the film, it’s a good idea to provide them with the context of the clip before watching it. This can be found in the text that precedes the scripture reference for that particular clip.

And please keep in mind that this is not a competition; you don’t have to get through all the clips in order to have a successful discussion time, especially if you sacrifice good conversational energy to do so. As we mentioned above, discussion times go best when you let them go wherever they wind up going.

Relationships/Marriage

Marty & Sarah Talk About Love

Marty and her neighbor Sarah Graham discuss babies and the nature of love. Sarah, the older, wiser woman lets Marty in on a secret and what she’s learned from the decisions she’s made. Suggested Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:39

Sarah Graham asserts that “sometimes, love isn’t fireworks…sometimes love just comes softly.” What do you think of this assessment of love?

Is there such a thing as “love at first sight”?

What about the common perception of “one right person” as a mate? Both Sarah and Marty find themselves in positions where they have been widowed. How does this relate to your concept of “one right person”?

So many people believe their love will keep their commitment together, but in actuality, it’s commitment that keeps love together. What are your thoughts on this idea?

LESSON TO LEARN:

Scripture Reference: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

There are many different ways people use the word “love.” “I love those shoes.” “I love this car.” “I love that movie.” “I love you.” The same word can be used to describe a lot of different things, but when it comes to love between people, it basically assumes three different meanings.

The first is the “if” love. “I love you if ______.” Wholly conditional, “if” love relies on the performance of the other person to remain alive. A lot of acquaintance-type relationships are based on this type of love.

The second is the “because” love: “I love you because __________.” Similar to “if” love, because is a little more personal, and isn’t necessarily task-oriented. It may exist because of a person’s physical attributes, attitude on life, or proximity. Still, this love, like “if” love, is conditional. As long as the conditions are met, then the love exists, but if the conditions change, so does the love.

God’s Provision

Clark’s Proposal

Marty has just buried her husband and is beginning to face the grim reality of the approaching cold winter and her lack of preparedness for it. Clark introduces himself and has an unorthodox proposition for her. Suggested Scripture: Isaiah 55:9.

Clark shows amazing boldness by proposing a marriage of convenience while Marty smoothes out the dirt over her husband’s grave. Clark, who knows the pain of losing a spouse, can sympathize with her. What gave him the boldness to propose in the way that he did?

Clark mentions that their marriage will be beneficial to them both. Can you recall a time where God’s provision was a win-win situation for everyone involved?

Marty accepts the proposal strictly so she can gain passage back home. God knows she needs love and time to heal, but he hides his provision through the promise of passage home. Can you remember a time where God hid his provision in a way that surprised you later?

Marty, Clark, and Missie all need love, although none of them are completely aware of it. God, however, is, and provides a means for that love through Clark’s and Marty’s marriage. Can you recall a specific instance when God provided something you didn’t even know you needed?

After The Fire

NOTE: This clip is used as well in the “Prayer/Faith” topic, but it is used again here to draw out a different aspect of this particular scene. It isn’t necessary to show this clip in its entirety for this particular discussion. If you choose, you may end it before Marty and Clark leave the barn.

A fire has just claimed Clark’s barn, and as he cleans up, he expresses his confidence in God’s provision to Marty. Suggested Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11.

Clark lists the ways all his neighbors are going to help him rebuild the barn. Do you see this simply as the good nature of the community or God working through the community?

Clark says things are going to be fine and that he just keeps praying for answers. Do you look to God for your provision as he does? Does God provide for you?

Clark seems amazingly resolved as he stands among the ruins of his barn. He isn’t daunted by the huge task of rebuilding. Why?
The third type is the perfect love that God speaks about in the Bible, called the “period” love: “I love you, period.” There are no conditions to meet, no tasks to perform, no mitigating circumstances, just love. Period. End of statement.

Clark was demonstrating this type of love to both Marty and Missie, totally honoring both of them, sacrificing for them. Even when he didn’t have the hope that anything would become of the marriage, he was faithful and had no expectations beyond what had been agreed upon.

Sarah Graham talks about this type of love when she talks of her husband. She says they got together out of sheer need, but love grew between them, even when that need had passed. They now have “period” love for one another, a love that knows no conditions.

What type of love are your relationships based on? Is your love conditional or unconditional?

Conditional love always breaks down in the end, because circumstances and people change, but unconditional love will remain throughout any change.

Parenting

I Can Survive You
Marty and Missie are at odds with each other throughout the film. In this clip, things come to a head when Missie plays a practical joke on Marty. Marty lets Missie know just what she thinks. Suggested Scripture: Proverbs 15:1

Why is Missie showing disrespect to Marty? Have your children ever done something of that nature?

LESSON TO LEARN:

Scripture References: Psalm 121:1-8; Psalm 37:4; 1 Kings 3:4-15. Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Part of faith comes with delighting yourself in God, as Clark did at his “church,” just spending time in God’s environment, singing and communing with him. When you have that delightful sort of communion with God, he will give you a divine desire. And when you meditate on that desire in prayer, you’re acting in faith, praying God’s words back to him.

The passage in 1 Kings gives us a slightly unorthodox example of this concept. Solomon went to Gibeon to offer a thousand burnt offerings, but he didn’t offer them all at once. More than likely, there was only one altar at Gibeon, so Solomon would place an offering on it and then minister to the Lord while his sacrifice burned down. After it was completely burned, he would offer another one. Repeat 999 times.

Solomon spent a LOT of time ministering to the Lord during this time, just basking in his holy presence. And it was during this communion, this fellowship, that God offered him whatever he asked. But since Solomon had been spending so much time close to God’s heart, he knew the best answer to God’s offer; he had a divine desire for wisdom. And because he acted on that desire, God gave him all the other things, too.

When we spend quality time with God, we begin to learn his heart for our lives, and he imparts a divine desire to us, a desire that will guide our lives.

The Person You Are

Clark and Marty talk about Missie. Suggested Scripture: Proverbs 3:11-12

Marty is obviously dealing with many issues that are clouding the way she relates to Missie. Has there ever been a time where you had difficulty relating to your kids because of personal issues?

As you can tell, Missie is a very strong-willed child. How do you relate to your own strong-willed child?

Are there times when the stress of parenting has led to your own feelings of “surviving” your children? Describe them.
After Clark hugs Missie, he looks at Marty and mouths, “Thank you.” Why is he thanking her? What did Marty do that Clark couldn’t?

LESSON TO LEARN:

Scripture Reference: Proverbs 22:6

This particular scripture has been used for years in the church, often interpreted as, “bring your child to church so that when they get older they won’t leave church.” But instead of this slant on the idea, the original language of the text points to the phrase “train up a child” as meaning “teach them the tricks of the trade.”

If a parent will instruct, train, and teach their children how to succeed in life when they’re a child, then they’ll remember that when they get older. Envision your children with good goals, and then show them how to achieve those goals. Let them know early on what things in life they need to avoid, then show them how to avoid those things. Setting up these patterns of success early in life will pay off later when the stakes are higher. This lets them know at an early age that you have their best interests at heart, and they can see fruit of that as they grow older.

Dealing with the strong-willed child is similar; you can lead them by showing them you have their best interests at heart. Usually the strong-willed child wants to learn by their own experiences instead of the experiences of others, but if they can be convinced that their parents truly love them and have their best interests at heart, then they can be led by being shown their potential for greatness and a consistent challenge to exhibit that potential.

In the film clips, Missie didn’t understand how Marty could have her best interests at heart. She felt like she and her father were doing fine until Marty showed up. But when Marty took the time to extend love to Missie, showing that she truly cared for her, Missie’s resolve melted and she accepted Marty for who she was.

Teach your children at a young age how to succeed in life. Show them you love them and that you have their best interests at heart. Encourage them to showcase their full potential. Then when they see success in their older years, they will bless you and thank you for it.

Prayer/Faith

Clark’s Church

Marty spies on Clark as he goes to his “church” service, a bench on the top of a hill, where he sings a hymn and prays. Suggested Scripture: Psalm 40:5

- When Marty first hears Clark singing, she stifles a giggle. What is it about worship that Marty, a non-believer, would find humorous? Is it just to hear Clark’s off-key singing, or does it go deeper than that?

- Once Marty realizes the depth of Clark’s devotion to God, she becomes more somber and begins to walk away. Why?

- Would you like to experience a “church” service like Clark’s? Why?

- In the clip there’s a wonderful view of a beautiful vista. Do these types of images inspire you to think of your Creator? Why or why not?

After The Fire

A fire has just claimed Clark’s barn, and as he cleans up, he and Marty talk about the nature of God and prayer. Suggested Scripture: Deuteronomy 11:13-15

- A fire has just claimed Clark’s barn, and as he cleans up, he and Marty talk about the nature of God and prayer.

- Would you like to experience a “church” service like Clark’s? Why?

- In the clip there’s a wonderful view of a beautiful vista. Do these types of images inspire you to think of your Creator? Why or why not?