



The Count of Monte Cristo

Kings and Pawns, Revenge and Justice

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Jim Caviezel plays Edmond Dantes, the sailor who persuades the crew to row to the isle of Elba when his captain falls ill. When they come ashore, Dantes and his best friend, Count Fernand Mondego (Guy Pearce, *Memento*) meet Napoleon, who is exiled there. In private, Napoleon gives Dantes a letter, a communiqué that subsequently causes Dantes to be accused of treason.

Later, arriving back home, Dantes is rewarded for his initiative and plans to marry his childhood sweet-

heart, Mercedes (Dagmara Dominczyk). But Mondego loves her, too, and is consumed with jealousy. He betrays his friend, and Dantes is arrested and secretly carted off to the dreaded Chateau d'If, an island prison from which there is no return; a sort of historical Alcatraz but with less creature comforts.

The Count of Monte Cristo is, at its core, a story of betrayal and vengeance. And jealousy is at the heart of this betrayal. Jealousy eats away at a person's character, causing him to harbor

a growing resentment of another until that other seems to become a bitter rival. Jealousy shows up in the Old Testament book of Genesis between two sisters, both being married to Jacob (Gen. 30:1). We see Saul jealous of young David (1 Sam. 18:9). In general, it is a negative emotion, and Paul warns against it in Gal. 5:20. Yet, we also see God described as a "a jealous and avenging God" (Nah. 1:2). His jealousy, though, is warranted. He is envious for our love and worship,

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The issue is control. A chess piece, the king, forms a metaphor for this throughout. Earlier, Napoleon offered sage advice to Dantes, “In life, we are kings or pawns.” We tend to want to be the king not the pawn. As king, we can command and control. We can execute justice, our own justice, and no one can question us. But a pawn has no control and must bow before the king. Dantes wants to be king. He wants to rule the game.

We have our own decision to make. Will we be pawn or king? There is a king already and his name is Jesus. We can accept him now as Lord of our life (Rom. 10:9) or we can wait till a future time when this acceptance will be forced but inevitable (Rom. 14:11). At that time it will carry with it the consequence of punishment (Rev. 20:15). When we yield the rule of our heart to Jesus’ reign we willingly become his pawn, allowing him to move us about the big board of life as he sees fit. It is counter-intuitive, but freedom and life is found in serving and carrying our cross (Lk. 14:27).

Eventually, Dantes does escape. Fourteen years have passed. When he discovers a fortune on the island of Monte Cristo, with the help of Jacopi (Luis Guzman), a pirate he saved and who has committed his life to him (“I swear on my dead relatives -- and even on the ones who are not feeling too good -- I am your man forever!”), he is ready to take on the persona of the Count of Monte Cristo. He is ready to return to France to find his betrayers and ruin their lives.

Jacopi is the jester in the film, offering the comic lines. When the Count shares with him his complex plan, Jacopi responds, “Why not just kill them? I’ll do it! I’ll run up to Paris -- bam, bam, bam, bam. I’m back before week’s end. We spend the treasure. How is this a bad plan?” And he has a good point, even if it is delivered in a New Jersey accent.

As Dantes’ plot develops, and the flies get stuck in his intricate web, he comes face to face with his former love: “If you ever loved me, don’t rob me of my hate. It’s all I have.” Hatred and revenge have

consumed him. They have devoured what little faith he had.

When he first entered the prison, the warden, about to whip him unconscious, taunted him, “If you’re thinking just now ‘Why me, oh God?’ the answer is: God has nothing to do with it.” But Dantes still carries some faith and hope: “God has everything to do with it. He’s everywhere. He sees everything.” He is correct, of course. God is omnipresent (Psa. 139:7). Yet, after years of imprisonment his faith is shattered, “I don’t believe in God.” The cruelties of life can do this to a man.

The apostle James addressed this at the very start of his letter: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Jas. 1:2-4). Faith untested is a weak faith. It is only when it faces the crucible that it’s true character can be tested and seen.

The Count of Monte Cristo sums it up unwittingly when he offers a toast at a society dinner. Although giving these words to a young friend, he is really talking about himself: “Life is a storm, my young friend. You will bask in the sunlight one moment, be shattered on the rocks the next. What makes you a man is what you do when that storm comes.” Character is developed or destroyed in the storms of life. When his storm came, Dantes made his choice. When your storm comes, how will you choose?

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