

The Great Debaters Study Guide

Overview: Inspired by a true story, *The Great Debaters* plunges us into the Jim Crow South of the mid 1930s—a time when blacks endured the daily indignity of discrimination, and racial violence always simmered just beneath the surface. The film tells the story of the debate team at Wiley College, a small Black college in Marshall Texas. Washington plays the part of the brilliant but unpredictable English professor and debate team coach, Melvin B. Tolson. Professor Tolson teaches his students the power of reason and words and forges an indestructible debating team, able to go head to head and mind to mind, against any other team in the country. At the height of an incredible run in 1936, the team even travels to face off the Harvard debate team in Boston. (The historic debate was actually against the reigning champions, the University of Southern California debate team.)

1. Were you familiar with the story of the Wiley College debate team? Why do you think their story has not been told before?
2. At the start of the film, Professor Farmer reads to incoming freshmen from 1 Corinthians 13:11. Why do you think he chose that verse? How did it apply to the students? What 'childish' ways do you need to 'put away'?
3. *The Great Debaters* demonstrates the importance of training your mind for battle. Young people need determination in the face of opposition. They must learn to keep cool under pressure, even when wrongly or falsely accused. What battles take place in your mind? When have you been tempted to lose your cool? How might you "find, take back and keep your righteous mind"?
4. Perhaps the most important lesson imparted by Tolson is the difference between our perceived enemies and our legitimate challenges. Tolson trains the Wiley Debate team to repeat a series of questions: "Who is the judge? The judge is God because he decides who wins or loses. Not my opponent." "Who is my opponent? He doesn't exist. He's just a mere dissenting voice against the truth that I must speak." What does all this mean? Explain
5. Farmer also says "We do what we have to do, so that we can do what we want to do." What do you think that means? What things did the debate team "have to do"? What things did they gain the right to do?
6. Tolson said Jesus was a "radical." What did he mean? Do you agree? Did Jesus defy the established order of his times?
7. Which debate topic did you find most interesting? Did you side with the "pro" or the "con" argument?
8. Why do you think Tolson explained to his students the historical source of the word lynch? What did that have to say about the power of words and their connection to real life?
9. In the critical debate with Harvard, James Farmer, Jr. quoted St. Augustine, who said, "An unjust law is no law at all." These words were echoed by Henry David Thoreau and Dr. Martin Luther King. Discuss how we as a person should approach a law that we believe is unjust. What criteria do we use to determine whether a law is just or unjust?
10. Professor Farmer was obviously a Christian. Do you think Tolson was? Was Tolson a communist? Does that exclude him from being a Christian?
11. If you had to debate a social issue, what would it be? Who would you debate? What position would you take?
12. What is the theme of the film *The Great Debaters*? Ans. Racial inequality, civil disobedience, justice

Directions: Answer the questions above on your own paper. Attach this study guide. It is due at the conclusion of the film.

Great Debaters Study Guide Questions

Richard Bailey



Great Debaters Study Guide Questions:

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