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Life Through Death: Jesus, the Gospels and Walt Kowalski

Introduction

“That movie is on my ‘never need to see again’ list.”

My wife Molly said this after watching *Gran Torino* a few years back, as she has many other times over our thirteen married years of film viewing. Though it sounds like something a person would say after seeing a bad movie, that’s not what Molly means. Nor is she the kind of person who, on some kind of unfortunate principle, refuses to watch any movie twice (as our viewing count of *Ocean’s Eleven* can attest).

Interestingly, Molly’s “list” consists of many excellent films that she truly appreciated. However, because of her tender conscience, films with significant foul language and violence make “the list.”

Molly is wise enough to know that films with distasteful elements can still be worth seeing. This distinction between what former radio host and amateur movie reviewer Andrew Tallman calls “superficial” and “significant” content, is important.¹ Otherwise, Christian viewers are inclined to disregard a movie—and its message—simply because it has swearing, violence, or sexual content.

One popular Christian movie reviewing website, Christian Spotlight on Entertainment,² attempts to make this distinction by giving each film a “moral” rating and a “moviemaking” score. “Moral” is an interesting word to use when evaluating a film, and Christian Spotlight gives each film a moral rating of excellent, good, better than average, average, offensive, very offensive, or extremely offensive.

What, according to Christian Spotlight, constitutes a morally *excellent* film? “A truly biblical, Christian film, actively promotes Christ’s work and values and is biblically accurate (secular films virtually never qualify for this rating—not even all Christian-produced film’s qualify).”³ A *good* film is one that is “clean, nothing offensive biblically,” and a *better than average* film is “only slightly objectionable.” The editors at Christian Spotlight recommend that viewers stick with films that have a *better than average* moral rating. While the website never defines what composes an *offensive* film, we can surmise that it would be a film that does not “promote Christ’s work and values” and is “unclean” (biblically).

¹ Until a few years ago, Tallman regularly reviewed movies as part of his then-daily radio show on KPXQ 1360 AM in Phoenix, Arizona. The archives of his reviews are available at <http://andrewtallmanshowmovies.blogspot.com/2007/12/dvd-reviews-index.html>.

² <http://christiananswers.net/spotlight/home.html>.

³ <http://christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/titles-a.html>.

Using this standard, Christian Spotlight rates *Gran Torino* as *very offensive* morally while still receiving 4.5 out of 5 stars for moviemaking. Because of pervasive smoking, drinking, cursing, violence, racist remarks and gang life, Christian Spotlight would recommend that Christians avoid the film.

But Christians should see *Gran Torino*. While the “superficial” elements of the film are revolting, its “significant” messages will resonate deeply with Christians who love Jesus and know his ministry as described in the New Testament Gospels.

Synopsis

Gran Torino opens in a Roman Catholic church, where Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood, who also directed the film) and his family are attending Mrs. Kowalski’s funeral. Kowalski is a gruff, grumpy relic of a man who grunts and growls in disapproval of his granddaughter’s exposed midriff and his grandsons’ cavalier attitudes. Kowalski has two sons and neither of them are close to him or want to have a meaningful relationship.

The funeral is overseen by a young priest that Walt does not respect, Father Janovich (Christopher Carley). He’s a “boy out of the seminary,” Walt says, an “over-educated, 27 year-old virgin who likes to hold the hands of old ladies who are superstitious and promises them eternity.” At the funeral, Janovich drones on with boilerplate comments about the bittersweet nature of death. Only the camera’s zooming in when Janovich asks “What is death?” and “What is life?” indicate that these comments matter at all. Walt hears it and grunts.

Though Walt’s house is filled with people after the funeral, it’s clear that he would be happy if they all went home. The only time his granddaughter is kind to him is when asking about who will get his beautiful 1972 Gran Torino when he dies. At this reception, Janovich indicates that Walt’s wife wanted him to look after Walt (who insists the Father call him “Mr. Kowalski”) and have him go to confession.

During the reception, a neighbor boy, Thao (Bee Vang) knocks on the door to ask if anyone has jumper cables to help an uncle start his car. Walt quickly shoves him off, calling him “zipperhead” (the first of dozens anti-Asian epithets from Walt).⁴

While Walt mourns his wife’s death, Thao’s extended family is gathered next door to celebrate the birth of a new baby. Thao is a Hmong teenager who lives with his mother, grandmother, and older sister Sue (Ahney Her). He struggles to be considered the “man of the house” because he often does “women’s work” like dishwashing and gardening.

Thao also struggles for respect with peers, and Hmong gang members badger him relentlessly. Soon, as a gang initiation, Thao attempts to steal Walt’s Gran Torino. Walt hears noise in the garage, gets his gun, and only Walt’s misstep in the dark garage allows Thao to run away and escape. A few nights later, the Hmong gang shows up at Thao’s home, harasses him and beats

⁴ One YouTube user edited every insult from Walt Kowalski into a three-minute and five-second clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXnEeNgIiN5g>

him up until Walt shows up on the lawn, cocking his gun and aiming it in their faces. The gang runs away and Thao retreats to safety.

The next day Walt's front porch is flooded with food and flowers, offerings from a number of Hmong families who are thankful for how he saved Thao's life. When Thao apologizes for trying to steal Walt's car, Walt realizes that the thief he chased away was Thao, and Walt threatens Thao that he is "done" if he ever comes over again.

In the meantime, Father Janovich continues to pursue Walt, while Walt continues to ridicule him for his shallow, schoolbook understanding of life and death. After Walt shares what he experienced as a soldier in the Korean war, Janovich says, "Sounds like you know a lot more about death than you do about living." Walt replies with his first indication of respect toward the young priest, "Maybe so, Father. Maybe so." The more that Janovich challenges Walt, the more respect he earns.

One afternoon, after a banter-filled haircut at the barbershop, Walt sees Sue being harassed by some young men on the street. When they start pushing her around, Walt pulls up in his truck and intervenes, saying, "Ever notice how you come across somebody once in a while that you shouldn't have f-d with? That's me."

On the ride home, Sue explains the background of the Hmong people (they fought alongside Americans in Vietnam). Walt talks tough and so does Sue, which earns Walt's respect. After she pops off to him, he says, "You're alright."

A few days later, on Walt's birthday, Sue invites him over for family barbecue. He is out of beer, so he reluctantly attends. Though he continues to find Hmong culture strange, he mutters to himself, "I have more in common with these gooks than my own spoiled rotten family" (who had just that day encouraged him to think about moving into a retirement community). A bizarre friendship is forming.

Soon Thao's mother comes over to insist that he work for Walt to atone for trying to steal the Gran Torino. At first, Walt is not interested, but he eventually puts Thao to work cleaning up many of the neighborhood homes that are in disrepair that Walt is "tired of looking at." Walt becomes a kind of mentor to Thao, teaching him to use tools, work hard, and fix things. He even takes him to the barbershop for a lesson in "how guys talk." Thao eventually uses these lessons in a successful interview for a new construction job.

Along the way, Walt develops a bad cough (from years of smoking) and often spits up blood. He eventually heads to a doctor and gets a bad diagnosis. Though the details of Walt's condition aren't clear, it is not good.

When Walt sees that the Hmong gang has again attacked Thao, this time beating him up and burning his face with a cigarette, he drives to their house and beats up the gangbanger who was responsible. Some time later, Sue is missing until she comes home badly beaten and having been raped. Walt is furious, punching the glass cabinets and cutting his hands. Father Janovich, who also knows the Hmong family, comes over and says he's "pissed off." When he eagerly accepts a

beer, the whole dynamic changes and Walt says the priest should call him “Walt” (rather than Mr. Kowalski).

Thao shows up the next day thirsty for revenge. Walt tells him that he has a plan and to be patient. Then Walt does a number of things he hasn’t done before, the most surprising of which is going to confession with Father Janovich. He confesses to a surprisingly short list of sins and Janovich is concerned that Walt intends to seek revenge and harm the Hmong gang-bangers.

After Walt locks Thao in his basement so that he cannot participate in the plan, he arrives to the house where the gang-bangers live. They see him approach and pull their guns. Walt calmly talks as neighbors open windows to see what the commotion is about. Walt tells them that he is going to reach into his pocket to get a lighter for his cigarette, though everything about it suggests he will grab a gun. As Walt reaches into his pocket, his body is riddled with bullets and he collapses on the ground, arms extended in the shape of a cross, with a cigarette lighter falling out of his hands.

Soon Thao pulls up in Walt’s Gran Torino (the first time somebody in the film actually drives it) and realizes that Walt’s plan was to die so that the Hmong gang would go to jail and leave Thao, Sue and their family in peace.

As the movie approaches the end, everyone is back at the church but Walt is now in the casket. Father Janovich gives a more mature message, saying, “I knew nothing about life or death until I met Walt. And, boy, did I learn.”

Finally, the family is gathered for the reading of the will and the last item on the will, the Gran Torino, is given to Thao, who is told that he must not “chop-top the roof like one of those beaners, don’t paint any idiotic flames on it like some white trash hillbilly, and don’t put a big, gay spoiler on the rear end like you see on all the other zipperheads’ cars.”

As the credits roll, Walt’s voice is heard singing a song as Thao drives the Gran Torino into the distance.

The Gospels and Gran Torino

Gran Torino thoughtfully explores a number of themes that also emerge in the Gospels like true righteousness, standing up for justice, disciple-making, sacrificial death, and resurrection—all the while causing the viewer to reflect on the meaning of life and death.

What is True Righteousness?

Throughout *Gran Torino*, the viewer is forced to wrestle with a key question: “Is Walt Kowalski a good man?” He is so unlikeable: scowling, grunting, denigrating, and cursing at every opportunity. He unashamedly tells racist jokes. Just a few scenes after he turns Thao away for asking for jumper cables (Walt says he has none), he is outside using his jumper cables to help restart the car of somebody he knows. Even his initial rescue of Thao seems tainted by his selfish

motives, as he growls, “Get off my lawn.” Walt fails any kind of external test of a good or righteous man.

One of the triumphs of Eastwood’s acting and directing, however, is that Walt becomes likeable. Even his crude, racist banter with the barber or construction super become endearing by the end of the film. This increased likeability has little to do with his personality and more to do with his noble actions. Walt protects the weak, even if he doesn’t like them. He values hard work. He admires chivalry, smiling to himself when he sees Thao help a neighbor with her groceries. In the end, Walt sacrifices himself so that his former enemies can experience a full life. Walt often rises to the occasion, serving and sacrificing when it’s needed most.

The question of Walt’s goodness gets addressed directly about halfway through the film when Sue says, “You’re a good man, Walt.”

“No I’m not,” Walt replies.

Those who view *Gran Torino* and those who read the Gospels will wrestle with similar questions about true righteousness. The Pharisees were greatly concerned with external righteousness—tithing at the herbal level (Matthew 23:23), praying and fasting to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1, 5, 16), and griping about hand-washing (Mark 7:1-4). This externally focused hypocrisy earned one of Jesus’ most blistering rebukes:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:23-28, ESV)

Jesus standard of true righteousness compels much more *others-focused action* than the Pharisees demonstrate. Walt Kowalski may neglect pure speech and warm demeanor—and even attending confession at the church—but he keeps the “weightier matters” of justice and faithfulness. Comparing Walt to the Pharisees makes one think that he is truly righteous. He does the “big stuff” with goodness. One could imagine Jesus telling the Pharisees, “You should be *more* like Walt Kowalski.”

At the same time, however, Jesus’ standard of true righteousness compels much more *inward-directed holiness* than Walt demonstrates. Jesus said, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). This Pharisee-exceeding righteousness is both more outward and more inward than was commonly thought. In Jesus’ view of righteousness, murder is a big sin. But so is anger. Jesus goes so far as to say that “Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew

5:22). Uh-oh. Walt would be in trouble. Here one could imagine Jesus telling the Pharisees, “You should be *less* like Walt Kowalski.”

Though the question of Walt’s righteousness is never answered completely, it seems that Eastwood’s argument is something like, *It’s okay if you’re rough around the edges. People in our overly politically correct society won’t like it, but as long as you stand for the noble things—chivalry, hard work, and sacrifice—you’re a good person.* This seems like a view that Jesus could both appreciate and critique.

Standing Up for Justice

One of Walt’s most admirable (and Christ-like) qualities is his willingness to stand up for justice, especially for the weak and vulnerable.

The most obvious instances of Walt’s standing up for justice have to do with providing physical protection to Sue and Thao. When young black men hanging out on the street are harassing Sue, Walt intervenes. In contrast to Trey, the young white man walking with Sue at the time who quickly backs down and lets them harass her (interestingly played by Eastwood’s son, Scott), Walt steps forward and defends her honor. When Thao is attacked and harassed by the Hmong gang, Walt gets involved. After Sue is brutally raped and beaten, Walt’s self-sacrificing plan becomes the ultimate undoing of the gang.

But Walt’s Christ-like justice is also demonstrated in the way he becomes an advocate of Thao. Walt has connections. Thao has none. So Walt uses his connections to help Thao get a job and uses his resources to help Thao get the necessary tools to begin working.

In both big ways and small, Walt reflects Jesus, who stepped forward to help the weak and vulnerable, whether they be blind men who couldn’t see, a man plagued by a legion of demons, a woman caught in adultery, or millions of ordinary people enslaved to sin. Jesus is our Protector and Advocate, two qualities seen in Walt Kowalski.

Follow Me

Walt’s friendship with Thao might be the most obvious evidence of Walt’s changing heart. When Walt locks Thao in the basement so he can fulfill his plan alone, he tells the protesting Thao, “I used to kill little gooks just like you” and “it’s a stain on the soul” that nobody wants. But this comment reminds the viewer how far Walt has come. The man who killed young Asian men and developed real hatred for them became a kind of father-figure to an Asian young man. Walt mentors Thao, cares for him, challenges him and eventually lays down his life for him. This relationship reminds the Christian viewer of Jesus relationship with his disciples.

Jesus’ disciples were unimpressive fishermen, tax-collectors and ordinary guys. These men eventually worked miracles and led a global church. Similarly, Walt takes a young man who is good for nothing but counting birds (Walt’s first “job” for him) and molds him into a young man who he’s willing to loan and, ultimately, give his prized possession, the Gran Torino.

Jesus equips his disciples for the life that is ahead of them. He constantly teaches and equips his disciples to think differently about God, the world, and people. He models what he wants to teach and then gives them opportunities to try it out. Comparably, Walt teaches Thao how to fix things and literally gives him the tools to do the job. He models “how guys talk” and then gives him opportunities to try it out. Walt is constantly challenging Thao to become more of a man, and Thao responds well.

Jesus eventually leaves his disciples an inheritance, and so does Walt. To the amazement of his grown sons, Walt leaves his prized Gran Torino to Thao. Thao gets the inheritance of a son.

As compelling as Walt’s “discipleship” with Thao is, Thao’s “sonship” highlights the lack of relationship that Walt has with his actual sons. This family breakdown is one of the most disappointing aspects of the film and presents a striking dissimilarity between Walt and Jesus. In his confession to Father Janovich, Walt admits that he regrets his lack of relationship with his sons. It has “plagued him most of his life.” Walt’s sons, Mitch and Steve, have grown weary of how difficult their father is. He has exasperated them. He cannot be pleased. Even when Walt receives a devastating diagnosis and musters the effort to call Mitch, he cannot bring himself to share the news. Perhaps Thao represents the redemption of Walt’s fatherhood, but the disappointment remains.

Sacrificial Death

Eastwood’s most explicit reference to Walt as a Christ-figure is in his sacrificial death. Permeated with bullet holes, he collapses to the ground with his arms extended and feet together. The overhead shot reflects that Walt’s body resembles the crucifix.

This sacrificial death is a shock. Partly because of Walt’s actions up to this point and partly because of the tough-guy characters that Eastwood always plays, the viewer expects Walt to reach into his coat, pull a gun and light the gangbangers up. As Walt takes his dog next door before the climactic encounter, we sense that he thinks he may not return from this encounter. But, even if he were to die in the action, we expect that he’d get a few good shots off. Instead, he dies helplessly.

Like Jesus’ death, Walt’s sacrifice is intentional and purposeful. A few scenes before his death, Walt comments that Thao and Sue’s lives will never be fulfilled until the Hmong gang is done away with—for good. In the same way, Jesus knew that his coming to bring abundant life required laying down his life for his sheep (John 10:10-11). When Walt responded to Thao’s abuse with violence, it only escalated the violence and Sue was subsequently beaten. Ending the violence in the short-term and opening opportunity for the long-term required the cycle be broken, and it could only be broken by sacrifice.

Additionally, Walt’s death transfers the inheritance—the Gran Torino—to his “adopted” son. Thao receives the prize that Walt treasured, because Walt was willing to sacrifice himself for Thao to have it. Importantly, the first time we see the Gran Torino actually driven is when Thao pulls up following Walt’s death.

Unlike Jesus' death, however, Walt was at peace in preparing to sacrifice himself. The agony facing Jesus is evident as he sweats blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking the Father to remove the cup of suffering from him (Luke 22:41-44). He is willing to accept the Father's will, but it is agonizing. In contrast, this sacrifice finally grants Walt the peace that had long eluded him. Earlier in the film, when the Hmong shaman "read" Walt, the conclusion was that he was a man "whose food lacked flavor...he was not at peace." Then, after his confession, Father Janovich tells Walt to "Go in peace." Walt turns, pauses, and says "Oh, I am at peace." Perhaps Walt's illness, which would soon cause his death anyway, allowed him to more easily cope with the reality of the situation.

Another discontinuity between Walt's and Jesus' sacrificial deaths is the nature of what they atone for. Jesus' death atones for the sins of others, "giving his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The Gospels emphasize the sinlessness of Christ repeatedly. On the cross, Jesus is not dying for his own sin, but for the sins of his sheep. In contrast, Walt's death seems to atone for his own sin. He is the one who had previously killed innocent, teenage "gooks"—an offense that had plagued him for most of his life. Now he was dying in the place of one, Thao. While Walt's death does purchase many remarkable benefits for others, it does not atone for their sin in the same way as Jesus' does.

Despite these few dissimilarities, Walt's sacrificial death is compelling and meaningful. Those who would so easily dismiss *Gran Torino* because of its foul language might be surprised how "Christian" this aspect of the movie is.

Resurrection

Walt does not rise from the dead like Jesus did. Nonetheless, his "resurrection" is symbolized by the *Gran Torino*. No longer does it sit under cloth in the garage, or even on display in the driveway, but instead it hums along Lake Michigan. Thao drives, Walt's dog rides shotgun, and the *Gran Torino* heads out into the distance. Walt is dead. But his spirit lives on in the car he built and loved and "paid for" with his life.

Life and Death

While a number of themes emerge in *Gran Torino* (including masculinity, chivalry, and hard work) the most saturating theme is the issue of life and death. Beginning with Father Janovich's homily in the opening scene, life and death are front and center.

As noted above, the cinematography of the opening scene highlights the importance of the life and death theme. Most of the shots are wide-angle and feature multiple people. The camera zooms in, however, when Janovich asks, "What is death?" and "What is life?" This not-so-subtle cue indicates the importance of the theme.

Life and death is also evident in the opposite reasons for the family gatherings at the beginning of the film. Walt's family gathers to mourn a death. The Van Lors gather to celebrate a new life.

Nearly every encounter between Walt and Janovich includes a discussion of life and death. Even when the priest rebukes Walt for not calling the police during one of the front-yard dustups, he exclaims, “It could have been life and death!” Their other conversations build on the theme. Finally, Janovich’s homily at Walt’s funeral completes the inclusion as he says, “I knew nothing about life or death until I met Walt. And, boy, did I learn.”

At one point along the way, Janovich tells Walt that he seems to know more about death than about living. Walt agrees. In the end, however, Walt seems to have found life. But how did it happen?

Not through the pursuit of comfort and ease, the way many attempt to pursue it. Walt had most likely had a comfortable life all those years in his Detroit suburb, safely tucked away from anyone different than him. Surely, he was tempted to experience that comfort again as the neighborhood swelled with foreigners. At one point his son Mitch even tries to sell him on the idea of moving to a retirement community, because “there’s nothing wrong with making things a little easier.” Walt doesn’t take the bait.

The idea that the good life is pursuing comfort is part of the American Dream and has always been the way of the world. In contrast, the synoptic Gospels all record Jesus saying, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24). Only when Walt began building relationships and sacrificing for those unlike him, did he actually find life.

Conclusion

Gran Torino gave me a delicious taste of the gospel of Christ and made me long for more. Not only did Walt’s life and death remind me of Jesus but it also encouraged me that love can change even the hardest of people. At the same time, *Gran Torino* caused me to treasure Jesus even more. If my emotions welled up by seeing how a *mean, hard-hearted* man sacrificed his life for others, how much more should my heart soar in worship to a *sinless, innocent* man who sacrificed his life for me?

Walt Kowalski is not a perfect image of Christ. But he’s a true image of Christ. That’s why my wife was thankful to break her rule recently and watch *Gran Torino* a second time.