

WHAT IS A MAN?

Today we are looking at a movie that came out in 2008,
starring Clint Eastwood,
titled Gran Torino.

At that time, Roger Ebert was maybe the best-known film critic in the
country.

He wrote:

Roger Ebert: What other figure in the history of the cinema has been an
actor for 53 years, a director for 37, won two Oscars for direction, two
more for best picture, plus the Thalberg Award, and at 78 can direct
himself in his own film and look meaner than hell? None, that's how
many.

Eastwood is now 92 years old
and since Ebert wrote that review,
he has starred in and directed 5 additional films.

Walt Kowalski – the character Eastwood plays in Gran Torino –
who is he?

Love-able rascal or slur-spewing racist?

A man with a moral code who cannot abide the decaying society he sees
around him or

a bigot who despises everyone who's different?

Deep down a good man who protects himself by being abrasive and
dismissive,

or a hateful s-o-b whose inner pain has transformed into anger and
disgust?

Like his prized Gran Torino,
is Kowalski something of a classic,
a muscle car of a man,
who represents the good ol' days
when this country made things, and
when men were strong and proud and
could be counted on to stand up and perform.

Or is he nothing more than a throw-back to an era that doesn't make sense
anymore?

Like a gas-guzzler in a world of subcompacts, hybrids and EVs,
the world has passed him by;
and it's best that he stay,
if not in the garage under a tarp,
then on his porch with a beer in his hand.

Wherever you come down on Walt Kowalski,
you find Gran Torino opening with Clint in familiar territory.

As was true of the characters he played in his early westerns,
and later as Dirty Harry Callahan,
he is alone.

The film begins with the funeral of his wife,
as far as we can tell the only person he felt connected to.

Quickly we learn he is alienated from his spoiled kids and
his disrespectful grandchildren.
All of his neighbors have moved or died,
and now he is surrounded by people from a different culture
whom he doesn't know or understand.

His wife was active in a church,
but he has no use for it.
And God is the one you pray to when it's all going down
only to find that he doesn't show up,
and you'll have to handle things by yourself.

Like The Man with No Name in the spaghetti westerns that made him famous,
Clint is riding alone,
only this time not on horseback but in his Gran Torino.

And the truth is: he likes it that way.
In fact, he states in one scene: All I want is to be left alone.

But just like those early westerns,
when a group of innocents is set upon by a gang of thugs,
as much as he wants to remain uninvolved,
he ultimately feels compelled to step in,
protect their lives
and put an end to the injustice and the brutality.

There are many themes that run through this movie.
All of them worth discussing.

Racism and how it will be overcome.

How to live with guilt and regret,
and how possibly to find forgiveness.

What is a family?
And why do they so often end up estranged and disconnected?

But I want to focus on one particular theme that runs throughout Gran Torino and that is: What is a Man?

The movie centers around Walt's relationship with Thao,
a fatherless, teenager who lives next door,
part of a Hmong family that has moved into his neighborhood.

Thao and Walt become connected
after Thao tries to steal Walt's Gran Torino.

A gang led by Thao's cousin,
tries to recruit Thao
and his initiation is to steal Walt's car.
Thao fails when Walt shows up in the garage,
rifle loaded and ready to fire,
but the boy is able to escape without Walt knowing who he is.

The boy's mother and sister later reveal that it was Thao,
and they ask Walt to allow Thao to make amends
by doing chores for him around the house.

Over time, Walt and Thao create a bond,
and Walt, who installed the steering column into his Gran Torino
at the Ford plant back in 1972,
in many ways steers Thao into manhood.

Gran Torino is about manhood.

Early in the movie,
Thao's family laughs at the idea of him being a man.
He does the dishes and works in the garden,
things that are considered women's work.
One even says Thao's not a man.

But Clint means to make him a man.
A couple of times in the film Walt says
Clint says that he is "manning Thao up."
He teaches him how men talk in the infamous barber shop scene,
or at least how some men talk.
He shows him the three tools that are all a man needs to do half
of all household repairs.
He talks to him about getting a different, more manly profession
in construction.

There are two questions that provide the foundation for Gran Torino:

1. Can Thao become a man?
2. Can Walt become a different kind of man than he has ever been?

And beneath those two questions,
the most basic question:
What does it mean to be a man?

What makes a boy a man and
how will he know when he becomes one?

It's a question most boys wrestle with.

Our society doesn't do much to help.

We don't send boys out to spend the night alone on some vision quest,
ready to welcome them back as men when they return.

Tribal elders don't take boys out into the woods
to teach them lessons
or put them through physical trials
or mark their bodies in a way
that says these youth left our village as children
but they have come back as men.

Here's a clip from a movie my wife dragged me to
that I had to see a couple of times –
before I appreciated it.

Yep, you heard right,
she dragged me to it twice –
once when I didn't know what we were going to see
and a second time when I did
and I didn't want to go.

And here I am teaching on being a man (good grief).

But it does a great job of raising the question of manhood
and how hard it is to determine in our society.

Lars and the Real Girl Ch 19 1.14.51 – 1.16.04

How do you know?
Do you become a man when you shoot your first deer,
 drink your first beer,
 get your first car,
 or bed your first woman?

Is it reaching a particular birthday,
 or moving away from home?
Is it when you get married
 or have a child?

I'm sure we all know guys who have done all those things
 but we would say are still a long way from being men.

So, what does it mean to be a man?
And is Walt's portrait of manhood
 anything like the picture we find in the Bible?

This obsession with being a man,
 I once saw a tweet from a woman,
Who said, "The way you guys are obsessed with being men
 and being respected as men – it must be draining.
 I can't imagine anything more exhausting."

I wanted to write back,
 I didn't,
but I wanted to write back:

Compared to being obsessed with
 mom guilt, body shaming, trying to find a bra that fits,
 which I understand is an all-consuming and infuriating quest,
 and having to have and express an opinion on every topic imaginable,
 including ones that have nothing to do with you,
 like what it means to be a man,
I'll take being a man any day.

But I digress.

What do we learn from Gran Torino about being a man
and how does it measure up to what the Bible teaches?

Here's the first thing we can say.

1. TRUE MANHOOD REQUIRES STRENGTH.

Walt Kowalski doesn't run,
he doesn't hide,
he doesn't cower.

He's not a nice man.

You can debate whether or not he's a good man.

But one thing that's beyond question is that Walt Kowalski is a strong man.

Going into battle, he's the man you want next to you.

In a foxhole, you want him by your side.

And if you ever got left behind,

he'd be the one who would come for you.

That phrase "Man Up" –

it means,

quits whining,

face what's coming your way, and

take on the challenge before you.

There's more to being a man than strength,

but without it,

there's no real hope of being a real man.

I love this little scene.

It's later in the movie

after Walt has mentored Thao in the ways of manhood a bit

and Thao has grown in self-confidence

and has started to see himself as more than a boy.

And in the project they take on together,
 they both want to be the man,
 which, of course, means
 taking on the role that requires the most strength.

Ch 17 1.07.43-08.36

Manhood is about strength.
 Deep down men and boys know this. (boys in Honduras)

Here's something interesting.
 The Bible describes the foundation for manhood the same way.

1 Corinthians 16.13: Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.

Be men, Paul tells the Corinthians.
 And what does that entail?

Standing firm.
 Being courageous.
 And being strong.

A thousand years earlier the warrior-poet King David spoke his final words to his son Solomon who would reign after his death. Of all the things he needs to tell his son, he begins by saying:

1 Kings 2.2: So be strong, show yourself a man.

Men were created to be strong.

A juvenile understanding of manhood focuses on physical strength.
 Muscles and mass.
 That's one reason teenage boys put so much emphasis on lifting weights and bulking up.
 They're becoming men
 and their psyches tell them that manhood has something to do with being strong.

Their instincts are right;
 manhood is about strength.
 But their definition is wrong;
 the strength that makes us men is not how much we can bench press,
 it's about how much we're willing to risk and suffer and bear
 to live by our principles
 and fight a battle that matters.

Walt crosses paths with two gangs.
 One terrorizes Thao and Sue and their family.
 The other is a group of corner thugs molesting Sue and humiliating her
 boyfriend as Walt leaves the barbershop.

The corner bullies possesses the strength that comes from size and physical
 prowess.
 The Hmong gang's might is found in the firepower they carry.

What kind of strength makes you a man?
 Is it the kind of strength that bullies and brutalizes?
 Is it the power to intimidate and frighten?

That's not the picture of manhood we see in Walt or in the Bible.

What does Walt say: I finish things; that's what I do.

Being a man is the strength to persevere.
 It's the fortitude to live by your principles when it's costly.
 It's the determination to stand up and
 the ability to stand alone to do what's right all the way to the end.

True strength is not the capability to take another man's life;
 it's the ability to give your own life if that's what's required.

Our picture of manhood in the Bible has been so sissified and feminized
 by our culture and by sweet little songs about a precious little Savior
 that it's hard to think of him this way.

But our example of manhood,
 the perfect man,
 is Jesus Christ.

And what we find in him is the ability
 to speak truth to power when he knew it would mean his death,
 to choose the cross when he could have run away, and
 to endure pain, rejection and humiliation
 and to do it in such a way that with his last breath he could say to his Father,
 “It is finished.
 The mission is completed.
 All that you have given me to do, I have done.”
 And then to die not as a victim
 but as a warrior,
 giving his life in a battle
 that would save everyone of us..

Being a man requires strength.
 Strength of character
 and an unbending commitment to live by our principles and our beliefs.

We see that in Walt
 and we see that in Jesus.

Let me transition to the second point I want to make about manhood,
 with this clip.
 It’s the answer that comes in Lars and the Real Girl
 to the question: What is a man?

Chapter 19 1.14.51 – 1.16.04

2. REAL MEN ACT TO FULFILL THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES.

A roomful of boys,
 at any age,
 is altogether different than a roomful of girls.

It's full of energy and activity.
Stuff is getting knocked over,
toys are getting grabbed,
things are getting broken,
and guys are getting shoved.

Though it differs from guy to guy,
it's part of our nature to be active.
It's written into our male DNA.

Being a man and being passive are a contradiction in terms.

Look at Genesis chapter two.
For those of you familiar with the term,
this is before the fall.
It means the charge here is not the result of sin,
but part of God's original plan.

Genesis 2.15: The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Men were put on this planet to do stuff
and to be active with the strength they were given.

With Walt, it's the same thing.

Ch 13 49.41-51.57

I fix things.
Of course, when Walt says that, we know he's going to have to fix much
more than a dryer and a door, before the film is through.
But that's what men do.
They fix things.

They don't ignore life's problems.
They don't look for a way out
or a reason not to do what's required.

They act to fulfill their responsibilities,
like working on the Ford assembly line for 50 years,
like going to war when your country calls,
like loving their wives and
like stepping up when a neighbor's in trouble.

One of the most puzzling dynamics I have witnessed working with men
is that the same man who is incredibly active in his professional life
can be extraordinarily passive in his personal life.

At work,
he takes charge,
makes a plan,
makes decisions,
commits himself and his resources to the plan,
and works at it until it's done.

But at home,
where his wife needs him to be the initiator in deepening their
relationship,
where his kids need him to be actively involved in their lives and their
growing up,
where his family needs a spiritual leader who will provide an example
and who help them grow in their relationship with God,
this same guy becomes passive and unengaged.

Where he's needed most,
very often he's MIA.

Jesus, our example.
He fixed things.
He acted.

He stepped out of heaven,
 he engaged the powers of darkness,
 he challenged the powerful
 he healed the broken,
 he walked to a cross,
 and he offered himself as a sacrifice.

True men are not passive when it comes to what matters most.
 They are not disengaged
 or clueless about what's going on in their families and in their world.

Boys are active.
 But men are active in fulfilling their responsibilities
 and in using their male strength
 to do their duty
 and to make the most of the opportunities God puts before them.

3. REAL MEN POSSESS SELF-CONTROL.

Any two-year-old
 can insist on getting his way.
 Any teenager can give you the finger and say,
 "You can't make me."
 Any punk, young or old,
 can give into his desires.

But it takes a man to deny himself,
 master his passions,
 and control his actions.

The strongest man in the Bible was Samson.
 His feats sound Herculean.
 As a young man he killed a lion with his bare hands.
 On one occasion, he killed thirty men single-handedly.
 Another time, with his only weapon the jawbone of a donkey,
 the Bible says he killed a thousand men.

The strongest man alive.
But he wasn't strong enough to master himself.

If you read his story, you'll find that he was self-centered and headstrong.
He disobeyed his parents.
He disobeyed the vows he made to God.
He couldn't master his lust or his anger,
and he wouldn't learn from his mistakes.

Because of his foolishness,
he was captured by his enemies.
Look how he spends his final days.

Judges 16.21: Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.

His eyes gouged out – humiliated and incapacitated.
Bound with shackles – enslaved by his enemies as before he had been
enslaved by his passions.
Grinding – if he used a small grindstone, he was doing work reserved for
women.
If it was a large millstone, it was the work reserved for beasts.

Either way, the message is clear: Samson is no longer a man.
Really the message is: he never was.

How did he end up here?

A man of immense strength.
Chosen by God to be a leader of Israel.
With the purpose of rescuing God's people from their enemies.

How did he end up humiliated and enslaved?
He never learned self-control.

This picture is given to us for a reason.
 It tells us that true manhood isn't about outer strength.
 It's about inner strength.

More than winning the war out there,
 manhood is about winning the war in here.

After Thao's sister Sue is beaten and raped,
 everyone thinks they know what Walt is going to do.
 And Thao wants to be there by his side.
 He wants vengeance
 and he wants it now.

Ch 24 1.33.21 – 34.47

The difference between a man and a boy –
 whether it's with his anger,
 his lust,
 his appetites,
 his desire to succeed,
 or his strength,
 is the ability to control one's passions
 rather than be controlled by them.

Back to our example of true manhood.

Philippians 2:8: When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in
obedience to God.

All men are tempted to put their will and their desires first.
 Even Jesus was – on more than one occasion.

In the Garden the night before his death we read:

Matthew 26.39: ... He fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My
 Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will,
 but as you will."

The difference between Jesus and Samson was not what they felt inside.
It's what they did with what they felt.

Samson never learned self-control or obedience to God,
and he was always a child.
Jesus mastered his desires and obeyed the Father,
and do you remember what a Roman centurion said about him as he died
upon the cross?

Mark 15.39: And when the centurion ... saw how he died, he said, "Surely **this man** was the Son of God!"

4. REAL MEN LOVE OTHERS THROUGH SERVICE AND SACRIFICE.

I know it's funny to say,
but slur-spewing,
f-bomb dropping,
how-about-I-shoot-you-in-the-face-and-then-go-to-bed-and-sleep-like-a-
baby,
Walt Kowalski taught Thao and he teaches us that real men love, serve and
sacrifice themselves for others.

What redeems Walt's character,
is that, almost in spite of himself,
he loves.

He probably wouldn't call it that.
And he'd certainly never say it,
but he comes to love Thao and Sue
and ultimately to care more about their lives
than he does his own.

What he can't say,
he does.

He shows love,
maybe not the way women are prone to do,
but the way men do.

He teaches Thao the lessons he needs to learn.
He believes in him and tells him that he can get a job in construction,
working with real men,
when Thao thinks he's fit for women's work and little more.

He puts his reputation on the line and vouches for him with the construction
foreman;
he loans him tools.

And when he scores a date with Yum Yum as Walt calls her,
he insists that Thao take his Gran Torino.

He schools Thao in how a man meets another man
and how men talk to each other.
And he does for Thao what every boy needs as desperately as he needs air to
breathe and food to eat,
he invites and initiates Thao into the brotherhood of men.

Women can't do that.
Passive weak men can't do that.
Only real men can communicate to a boy,
you're one of us,
you're accepted,
you are a man.

It happens quickly, but for me it was a moving scene.
Walt tells Thao,
You've come a long way and I'm proud to call you my friend.

Men aren't friends with boys.
They're mentors maybe,
but friendship with a man like Walt means you're a man.
And Walt gives Thao that most important of gifts.

What makes Thao a man?
It's love.

Walt Kowalski's love –
given through acts of serving and ultimately sacrifice.

The climatic scene of course is the shoot-out with the gang that has
threatened Thao,
shot up their family's home,
and raped Sue.

Walt knows that as long as that gang is out there,
Thao and Sue will never have a chance.
And he won't allow that.

Not a man like Walt Kowalski;
he will not;
he simply cannot allow that to happen.

And you feel it coming.
Just like the Man with No Name,
just like Dirty Harry Callahan,
Walt will act,
the problem will be solved
and wrong will be righted.

Clip 1.32.38 – 1.33.14

Stinking right, Clint.
Pull out your .44 magnum,
the most powerful handgun in the world,
and ask those punks if they feel lucky
and then let them have it.

But as you know, that's not what happens.

Ch 27 1.43.30 – 1.46.40

Who would have ever thought that Walt Kowalski
 would teach us
 that sacrifice is more powerful than vengeance;
 that strength often appears as weakness
 and that ultimately what provides security and life for others
 is not a bullet coming from the barrel of a gun
 but love coming from the heart of a man.

The very lessons taught to us by
 the truest, strongest man who ever lived
 when he stretched out his arms and
 willingly gave himself to death that we might live,
 shortly after he spoke these words;

John 15.13: Greater love has no man than this – that he lay down his life for
 his friends.

The male heart within you – God created it strong enough to
 to be courageous in the face of danger;
 to act decisively when action is required;
 to be uncompromising when it comes to principles;
 to rise up against evil; and
 to be noble and honorable in all it does.

But at the heart of the male heart
 is the ability and the need to sacrifice itself in a cause that matters and for
 the good of others.

That means in our marriages,
 with our wives we are expected to make the sacrifices necessary to make
 our marriages good.

That means fathering is about making sacrifices for the good of our children.

Being a friend,

caring about others,

serving God,

to be men

we must be willing to make sacrifices to bring life and blessing to others.

You and I have a responsibility to use our strength to love and serve and
sacrifice for others.

Until we do, we will be nothing more than boys.

But once we do, we will be men.

Just because I love it and it seems the fitting way to end,

I'm going to show you one last clip.

And what you'll see is that the very thing Thao tried to steal,

as his initiation into the gang

and into their version of being a man,

what you'll see is that manhood cannot be stolen,

but it can be given and imparted,

it can be bestowed upon a boy

by a man like Walt Kowalski.

1.49.53 – 1.51.05