

## **Good Will Hunting (1997): Without Love, I am Nothing**

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Opinion of film: Limited Recommendation

There are two aspects of *Good Will Hunting* that are consistently talked about in the reviews that I have read of the film; its commendable tackling of the subject of repressed fear, which I will address further on, and its use of profane language. This latter aspect seems to divide people into two camps; those that feel the language is over the top and inexcusable, and those that feel it is necessary to provide realism to the film. Until recently, based in-part upon my spending far too much time in the gym in years past, I fell into the latter camp. And to a degree I still do think that some use of bad language is understandable. Jesus told us "...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart..." (Matt 15:18) therefore if hearts aren't set towards God, it is only natural that swearing, cynicism etc will come forth from the mouth. And so I believe films such as *Good Will Hunting* have the potential to help the audience to understand the offensive behaviour of others and more importantly its root causes. Yet I feel this is where the film falls short, for the use of bad language isn't portrayed as the output of a corrupted heart. If it were, the use of such language would have been confined to the characters of Will and his friends; but it isn't. Sean the therapist, and to a degree Skylar (Will's girlfriend), spout out a similar level of profanity. There is also no moderation in the use of this profanity as the film progresses and even after the final breakthrough moment in the film Will is still using foul language.

The second major flaw of the film as I see it is the poor characterisation of Skylar and her implied role in Will's future salvation. Though not attractive qualities, I could bring myself to overlook her own use of bad language and participation in crude jokes – these were balanced out for me by the fact that she didn't appear to be concerned as to the poor background that Will and his friends came from. However, what I really found hard to swallow was the attempt to give her character depth by mentioning the death of her father when she was thirteen years old and the money she inherited from him. During the exchange in the bedroom Skylar says to Will "Nearly every day I wake up, and I wish that I could give it back, that I would give it back in a second if it meant I could have one more day with him, but I can't and that's my life and I deal with it." The fact is though that she could give it back. If the death of her father affected her to such a degree why not have donated the money to a charity that helps other children that have lost their fathers? Jesus told us "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). Skylar may not have had the chance to see her father in person once more, but the peace of mind she would have received by following Jesus's teaching would have been equally as comforting to her.

With respect to the implied role that Skylar has to play in Will's future salvation, at the end of the film we see Will driving off into the horizon to join up with her, presumably for them to live together happily ever after. Yet the likelihood of this happening without Jesus in their lives is simply not realistic. In the Fourth Century Saint Augustine wrote "You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" and this remains as true today as it did in Saint Augustine's time. Our hearts will always be restless until they fully come to know and accept Jesus Christ and the love and peace He has to offer us. That peace and happiness cannot be found elsewhere, not in a job, a passion, a place or a person. A marriage blessed by God takes people one step closer to living in unity with Christ and finding that peace He has to offer us, whereas cohabiting with a partner out of wedlock (as is the implied outcome of *Good Will Hunting*) takes people further away from Christ and from God's natural law. It is therefore no surprise to hear that studies consistently show that living together before

marriage significantly increases the risk of breaking up after marriage, and that unmarried couples have lower levels of happiness and well-being than married couples have<sup>1</sup>.

The film though does have significant merits in its favour. The story tells us that Will is a modern-day maths prodigy sitting on a goldmine of a gift. However as this story unfolds we also come to understand that his underlying hurt and loss - the result of abuse and a lack of love in his childhood - ensure that he neither puts this talent, nor any other good things that come his way, to proper use. His frustration and fear manifest themselves in cynical answers, defensive monologues, abusive language (whether intentional or not) and outbursts of physical violence. The absence of Will receiving love in his childhood, has lead him to withhold the giving of love as an adult. And this is the very thing that is so holding him back in his life. As Sean says to him during their encounter in the park "You don't know about real loss, because that only occurs when you love something more than you love yourself. I doubt you've ever dared to love anybody that much". The situation Will finds himself in is one where he has everything, and yet at the same time he has nothing. Or, as Saint Paul states in his First letter to the Corinthians "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (13:1-2). For me this is as relevant today, especially in understanding the problems of our disaffected youth, as it must have been in the time of Saint Paul.

Fortunately for Will love does come his way in the form of his therapist and his best friend – both of whom challenge him to face the truth in his life. Will's first encounter with Sean is not a harmonious one though and ends in Will directing a highly offensive personal insult to him regarding his late wife. However, just as there is nothing that we can do that will make Jesus turn his loving hand away from us, so too Sean does not turn away from Will. This understanding is the fruit that comes from a man who himself has experienced great loss in his life. In a world that teaches that suffering should be avoided at all cost and has no worth in the world, Sean attests that despite the pain he went through during his wife's battle with cancer, even when she became really sick, he has no regrets in marrying her. And Sean is not the only one prepared to make a sacrifice in order to see Will fulfil his potential. In a selfless display of honesty, Chuckie tells Will that the best part of his day is when he gets to Will's door every morning and for ten seconds he hopes that Will won't be there - that he's moved on to a better life where he can put his gifts to good use. The scene serves as a good reminder of Jesus's teaching "...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18).

In these respects the film provides a strong testament to the fact that although life as an orphan may well not be easy; it doesn't mean that it isn't a life worth living. And with help, love and appropriate guidance the lives of even the most disadvantaged in society have the potential to bear much good fruit. As we are reminded in the Letter of James "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27). It is a truth that *Good Will Hunting* comes close to discovering, but not quite close enough.

Mark Banks is the Editor of Soul Food Cinema. He has ten years experience watching character study and faith films (the latter since returning to the faith two years ago). Mark previously worked as an Economist and Researcher for central and local government in the UK. Essay written: April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008. Bible quotes from NRSV Catholic Edition, Darton Longman and Todd (published 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Should We Live Together?' (2002), National Marriage Project, Rutgers University.