



Wanted Control, Identity and Purpose

Sometimes, especially after a hard week at work, it's time to kick back with a Friday night action movie. *Wanted* fits the bill perfectly. It's slick and superficial. And even though not a great movie, this mindless entertainment is actually surprising in its depth when reflected upon later. Is it worth seeing as escapist nonsense? Yes. Is it worth thinking about to draw philosophical and theological insight? Absolutely! It is a good example of "seeing" a movie and moving from passivity to wonder and encounter. As John Dillenberger author of "A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities" says, "Seeing is essential in order for one to be illumined beyond the sensory embodiment." So, let's consider *Wanted*.

Wanted is the story of geeky account manager Wesley Gibson's (James McAvoy) life transformation from cube dweller to professional killer. With an opening sequence that is derivative of *The Matrix*, the rush is on.

Gibson is humble, lacking self-confidence. Abandoned by his father before he was a week old, he is also lacking a self-identity. He thinks that he is a nobody. Belittled at work by his boss, betrayed by his girlfriend, he is a wimp plagued by anxiety attacks that leave his heart racing at 400 beats per minute.

When sexy Fox (Angelina Jolie) appears alongside him at his pharmacy one day the boredom of his life's routine is irrevocably shattered. She rescues him from an attack by Cross, a shadowy assassin. But Cross steals a truck and they embark on a gripping car chase, one to rival the best in recent cinema. Indeed, *Wanted* has several

set pieces, including this chase, a fantastic train wreck, and the finale that is choreographed better than some musicals. Bullets as ballet!

When Fox brings Gibson to meet her boss, Sloan (Morgan Freeman), he explains that Gibson is the son of an assassin recently murdered. The blood of assassins courses through his veins. He just needs to get in touch with his killer side. Commanded to shoot the wings off several flies flying in a waste basket or be shot himself; Gibson discovers that he can do it. His anxiety attacks are actually his body giving him enough blood and adrenaline to allow him to take control.

Control is one of the issues emphasized in *Wanted*. Sloan's first pep talk to Gibson introduces this: "It's a choice, Wesley, that each of us must face: to remain ordinary, pathetic, beat-down, coasting through a miserable existence, like sheep herded by fate - or you can take control of

your own destiny and join us.” Gibson chooses to take back control of his life. We all want to control our lives, although control might be a myth. What control do we really have? How much of our life is beyond our control? We do have a circle of influence but the rest is outside this circle, with others acting on us.

Beyond control, though, fate is a crucial theme in this film. Sloan makes it clear: “Our purpose is to maintain stability in an unstable world - kill one, save a thousand. Within the fabric of this world, every life hangs by a thread. We are that thread - a fraternity of assassins with the weapons of fate.” Known as The Fraternity, these people led by Sloan are assassins led to their victims in a crazily unconventional manner: “We get orders

from a loom; fate. And we’re supposed to take enough faith in what we’re doing is right. Killing someone we know nothing about.” But fate is predetermination.

In some sense this strange picture parallels and illustrates biblical truth. Predetermination, in a biblical sense, focuses on the one behind the decree: God. He has set history on its present course. As followers of his son Jesus we do take things by faith. We must have faith enough to believe in God’s sovereign control (Acts 17:24-26).

As much as Wanted is a high-octane thrill ride, it is full of one-dimensional caricatures of people, whose names are nothing more than descriptors: Fox, The Repairman, The Exterminator, and Mr. X. And the plot has holes so large you would need



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a giant loom to darn them. How do Fox and Gibson evade the law even though they are “Wanted,” with their photos on the front of all the newspapers? Why did the bullets that took the wings off the flies not ricochet back to cause harm? How did the mysterious loom survive for thousands of years? Indeed, how did it come to America, a country only centuries old?

Perhaps the largest plot hole is its intriguing premise: curving bullets. When Fox tells Gibson, “I want you to curve the bullet,” he answers her, “How am I supposed to do that?” This seems a reasonable question. Sloan answers him, “It’s not a question of how. It’s a question of what. If no one told you that bullets flew straight, and I gave you a gun and told you to hit a target, what would you do? Let your instincts guide you.” This is taking control to the max: over-control. Playing out the logic, if no one told you that you cannot fly, could you fly? The opening sequence implies that you could. Nothing is impossible if you let your instincts guide you. Obviously this is plain nonsense, but simple fun. Yet, there is a grain of truth in this nonsense. We are back to faith once more. And Jesus, in a famous lesson on faith to his disciples just days before his death, told them (Matt. 21:21-22): “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

The key issues raised by *Wanted*, though, are identity and purpose. In his training, before being released to kill on demand, Gibson is beaten senseless. Between beatings, he is asked, “Why are you here?” Repeated again and again, it is only when he asks in response, “Who am I?” that the beatings stop. These are two questions fundamental to humanity. They are at the core of our beings. At one time or another, we all have faced,

or we all will face, these two questions. And our answers to them, philosophically and theologically, will define the path that our lives and our eternities take.

Who am I? The Bible answers this with the truth that I am a sinner, broken and lost, apart from the one who created me (Eph. 2:1-3). This brokenness is felt inside, in the inner vacuum, the loneliness and lack of purpose. Only in Jesus can we find redemption and reconciliation (Eph. 1:7; 2 Cor. 5:18), forgiveness and peace (Col. 1:14; Rom. 5:1), and a love that fills us to overflowing. When we give up in our own self attempts at earning love and forgiveness, we can become a child of God (Jn. 1:12). Who am I? Now I am in God’s family. Now I am one of his own, no longer an enemy now a son (Rom. 5:10).

Why am I here? What is my purpose and mission? Again the Bible gives us answers. God created me to enjoy him, to serve him, to love him (Matt. 22:37). And now that I am alive in Christ, I am commissioned to go out and share his love with others around me (Matt. 28:19). If the loom in *Wanted* was more than a metaphor, the names of its victims would be names I would have to go share Jesus’ love with. My role would be to assassinate their old selves, not with a bullet but with a Bible verse telling of the kingdom. Then instead of falling down dead they would rise to new life, a life with meaning and purpose.

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