

Contending for Manhood

Becoming the Men God Intended Us to Be

I had a good father and what most people would consider a normal upbringing. Even so, by the time I left for college, I still did not really understand what it meant to be a man.

When I was eleven years old, my father was sent by the Air Force to serve in Vietnam for a year. Before he left, he took me aside and said, "Jerry, you're the man in the home now." That was about all he said.

I had no idea what those words meant. I can still remember watching as the men came to pick him up, knowing he would be gone for a year and not knowing whether I would ever see him again. I felt terribly alone. Somehow I was now the man in our home, but I had no idea what a man was supposed to do or how I was meant to carry that responsibility.

I do not tell that story to criticize my father. I am sure he intended those words to express his trust in me and give me courage. He was also leaving his family and going to war. But I was still an eleven-year-old boy. I had been given responsibility without the understanding to go with it.

The culture around me helped fill the empty space. It celebrated rugged individualism. The man on the screen seemed able to stand alone and handle trouble without anyone's help. Captain Kirk offered another model: confident, decisive, and firmly in command. Those qualities had value, but the picture was incomplete. I could see what authority looked like; I was far less certain what it was for.

The confusion has not disappeared. Men are now sorted into categories such as "alpha" and "beta." One stereotype glorifies dominance, while another can mistake passivity for kindness. Neither

comes close to Jesus. A gentle man is not necessarily weak, and a forceful man is not necessarily strong.

When I came to Christ, I began to look to Scripture. There I found more than a list of masculine traits. I found the life of Jesus Christ, the clearest picture of a man fully alive and surrendered to God. My understanding did not arrive all at once. It continued to form over decades.

I remember being in my early fifties with a group of men who laid hands on me and prayed. By then I had been a husband and father for many years and had carried substantial responsibility in my work. From the outside, I probably looked well established. Yet those men were contending for something in me that had never been fully settled. At the time, I described it simply as warring for identity. Looking back, I realize that they were helping me settle something about my masculine identity—the assurance that I was a beloved son of God and could stand as a man without having to prove it.

Growing older happens by itself. Becoming a mature man does not. We learn by watching others and by making choices when something meaningful is at stake. We are also helped when men we respect recognize what God is forming in us and call it forward.

What follows is an encouragement rather than an attempt to say everything Scripture says about manhood. It grows out of my own unfinished journey as I have tried to understand Scripture and pass what I have learned on to our children and others.

The Essence of a Man

Scripture begins by telling us that both male and female are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Nothing I say about manhood should be understood as a claim that men have greater worth or a right to diminish women. We begin on equal ground before God.

Although I am writing as a man to men, many of these principles apply to women as well. Denise and I tried to be intentional with both of our children. We called Jonathan into courageous manhood, and we called Elise into virtuous womanhood. We were not assigning

courage to men and virtue to women; both children needed both. We wanted each of them to hear our blessing and understand the life God was inviting them to live. Elise's story deserves its own paper, but the need to be seen and called into maturity is not limited to sons.

Manhood takes shape in many different personalities and circumstances. A man does not become more masculine because he is physically imposing, highly paid, married, or placed in charge. A quiet man is no less a man than an outgoing one. A man who is single or has no children is not living a lesser form of manhood. Such circumstances affect how manhood is expressed, but they do not define it.

The clearest place to begin is sonship. Before Jesus began His public ministry, He heard these words from His Father: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Jesus did not have to manufacture an identity or win the Father's approval. He lived and served from a love that was already secure.

Men who do not know who they are will usually try to prove themselves somewhere. Some do it through achievement, control, or the image they present to others. Some retreat from responsibility because they are afraid to fail. Both are trying to answer the same question: Am I enough?

A mature man learns to receive the Father's answer rather than spend his life trying to establish his own. He is a son before he carries any other role. Success may come and go, and physical strength will eventually fade. Sonship gives him a place to stand through all of it.

From that secure place, I believe the essence of mature manhood can be stated simply: a man offers his God-given strength under God's authority for the good of others.

That strength may be physical, but often it is moral or spiritual. It may mean stepping forward when others hesitate or remaining quiet long enough to listen. At times strength requires us to confront what is wrong. At other times, it allows us to say, "I was wrong," and begin the hard work of repair.

Paul brought strength and love together when he wrote, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.” Strength separated from love becomes harshness or control. Love separated from courage can become retreat. In Jesus, the two remain together.

The Man We See in Jesus

Jesus never seemed anxious to prove that He was a man. He touched people others avoided and wept at the grave of a friend. He could also confront hypocrisy and remain faithful when obedience led to the cross. His tenderness never made Him passive, and His authority never made Him cruel.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus knew who He was and knew that the Father had placed all things under His authority. What did He do with that knowledge? He took a towel, knelt, and washed His disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). He did not use authority to elevate Himself above the people He led. He used it to serve them.

That scene has shaped much of what I believe about both leadership and manhood. Servanthood reveals what strength is for. Whatever has been placed in a man’s hands is meant to be used for the good of others.

Jesus carried that service all the way to the cross, where He gave Himself for the sake of others. I have come to believe that biblical manhood is measured less by how many people a man can command than by what happens in the lives of those around him. Its influence can often be seen in something quiet: people are living more fully because he was there.

The Tender Warrior

When Jonathan was a boy, I wrote him a series of letters about the qualities I saw God developing in him. In one of them, I told him that God was forming him to be both a warrior and a worshiper. I reminded him that walking on the outside of the sidewalk beside his mother or sister was a small act of protection. So was his willingness to stand between someone vulnerable and a person who might hurt them.

But I also wanted him to understand that the greatest battles would not always be visible. A man wars when he refuses a lie, brings an angry response under control, or chooses what is right when he feels like doing something else. He shows strength when he repents after using his power badly. Jesus did not break a bruised reed (Matthew 12:20). He used His strength to heal and restore.

That is why I have come to appreciate the phrase tender warrior. The two words belong together. A warrior without tenderness may use strength to dominate. Tenderness without courage may feel deeply but never step into the difficulty. A mature man is willing to enter the struggle while remaining attentive to the hearts of the people involved.

The language of warfare must be used carefully because people are not our enemies (Ephesians 6:12). A man can imagine he is “fighting for truth” while wounding those closest to him or refusing correction. In that moment, the battle he most needs to fight may be against his own pride or need for control.

To contend for manhood is not to contend against women or to return to some imagined time when men held all the power. It is to resist both passivity and the misuse of strength. The aim is not to become louder. It is to become more faithful.

The Husbandman

Another letter I wrote to Jonathan concerned an older word: husbandman—one who cultivates the ground so it can bear fruit. I reminded him of the garden we planted each year in Los Alamos. We worked the soil, planted seeds, watered, pulled weeds, and protected the plants. One year it produced so much that we gave vegetables away. The harvest was generous, but it did not happen by accident.

That garden gave me another picture of manhood. A good man does more than defend what is threatened; he cultivates what has been entrusted to him. He notices where care is needed and patiently tends what God has placed within his reach. He wants the people and places around him to flourish.

For a husband, that means cherishing his wife rather than taking her for granted. For a father, it means far more than paying the bills. Children need a father who sees them and listens, who invites them into his world and is willing to enter theirs. They need words that confirm identity, not merely correct behavior.

When our children were growing up, Denise and I looked for ways to serve together as a family. Sometimes we sorted food or served meals to people who were homeless. My work periodically took me to Washington, D.C., and I brought each of our children on a special trip so they could meet national leaders. I wanted them to be as comfortable in the halls of Congress as they were sitting with a homeless man. We were making memories, but we were also helping them become more compassionate and more aware of their responsibility toward others.

Not every man will marry or have children, but every man can live in a way that gives life. He can invest in a younger man, bring health to a workplace or church, or build something that will bless people he may never meet. The husbandman leaves more life behind him than he found when he arrived.

Called Into Manhood

My father's words carried weight, but at eleven years old they could not, by themselves, show me how to live as a man. A young man needs more than a title or the passage of time. Many communities have understood this and found ways to mark the passage from boyhood into manhood. That was largely absent from the culture in which I grew up. We celebrated birthdays, graduations, and eventually leaving home, but a boy could pass through every milestone without anyone speaking clearly about the man he was becoming.

Denise and I wanted something different for Jonathan. We gathered family members and men who had helped shape his life. His mother and sister blessed him. Trusted men spoke about being a tender warrior, living and leading like Jesus, and making himself available to God.

I have since spoken at celebrations for other young men. I wanted each of them to understand that leadership is not first a position. One way I expressed it was, Servant is who you are; leader is what you do. Whatever authority we receive is given so that we can serve.

At Jonathan's celebration, we also spoke about our family name. Forte means strong, and the forte is the strongest part of a sword. In our coat of arms, that strength was connected to a life of honor and wholehearted devotion to God.

We prayed over Jonathan and named what we had already seen forming in him. Then we invited him to accept the responsibilities of manhood. The ceremony did not magically make him a man. It gave language to a passage that otherwise might have remained vague. It told him that he did not have to invent manhood by himself.

Years later, on his twenty-first birthday, I reflected on the distance we had traveled together. I remembered carrying him in a pack when he was small, wrestling on the floor, and watching the day come when I could no longer beat him in chess, ping-pong, or tennis. Most of all, I remembered our movement from a dad and his boy, to a father and his son, and finally to two men who loved one another deeply. By then

I could name the courage and devotion to God that I had watched become his own.

There is great power in that kind of blessing. A father's words carry particular weight, but his absence or failure need not have the final word. Other faithful men can also help call a young man forward. Those who never received such a blessing may need to ask trusted brothers to stand with them, as I did in my early fifties.

Calling a man forward does not mean forcing him into a mold. We do not need to manufacture identical men. We can recognize the way God has made a particular man and speak honestly about both the good we see and the places where growth is still needed. A ceremony may mark the passage, but brotherhood must sustain the journey.

Becoming a Wholehearted Man

Mature manhood is not a performance. It is the slow work of bringing the whole of a man's life under the loving rule of God. Over time, his public strength and private character begin to agree. He does not need to cover fear with anger or turn insecurity into control. He can admit that he needs other people.

This kind of man accepts responsibility without assuming he must control everything. He asks, "What is mine to do here?" and then does it. When he fails, he tells the truth and tries to make things right. Repentance does not diminish his manhood; it rescues him from pride.

He also refuses isolation. Rugged individualism may look strong on a screen, but it is a poor way to live. Men need brothers who know them well enough to offer encouragement and correction, and who will stand with them in prayer when shame or disappointment clouds their vision.

A wholehearted man is still capable of fear and weariness. Courage is not their absence. It is the willingness to remain present and faithful in the midst of them. Sometimes courage moves forward. At other times, it asks for help or remains beside someone in pain when there is nothing to fix.

The work is never completely finished. I am still learning to offer my strength without controlling and to remain tender without retreating. I continue to discover how deeply I need to receive my identity from God rather than from achievement or approval. Manhood is not a status we defend. It is a life we continue to grow into.

The Work Before Us

The great need of our day is not for men who talk more loudly about manhood. It is for men whose lives make its goodness visible. They know they are sons and use what has been placed in their hands to serve. We see it in the way they keep their word, honor women, and respond when someone vulnerable needs protection.

If you are a younger man, do not wait for the culture to give you a worthy identity. Look to Jesus. Seek out men whose lives you respect and give them permission to know you well. Take responsibility for something that matters, and let God build courage through the ordinary decisions that prepare you for larger tests.

If you are an older man, consider who may be waiting for words you have never spoken. Name the good you see. Invite a younger man into your life, not merely into a lesson. Challenge him when needed, but stay long enough for your words to become a relationship.

If failure has sidelined you, begin again. It is never too late to turn toward the people you love or the responsibilities you have avoided. You may not repair everything at once, and others need not respond on your timetable. But you can tell the truth, repent where needed, and take the next faithful step.

This is what I mean by contending for manhood. I am not interested in preserving a caricature of masculinity. I want to see men who increasingly resemble Jesus—men whose strength can be trusted because it is governed by love. Their courage does not crowd out tenderness, and people around them are more likely to flourish. They know how to stand firm, but they also know they were never meant to stand alone.

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.
Do everything in love.”
—1 Corinthians 16:13–14 NIV

Questions for Reflection

- What voices or experiences most shaped my early understanding of manhood?
- Where have I confused strength with control, or tenderness with passivity?
- What people, relationships, or responsibilities has God entrusted to me to protect and cultivate?
- Is there an area of failure or passivity where I need to tell the truth and take a faithful next step?
- Whose blessing or brotherhood do I need at this season of my life?
- Is there a younger man whom I could encourage, bless, challenge, or invite into my life?

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