

Grace Based Men's Ministry

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October 27, 2008

Radical Grace
2DM 844 Spirituality Elective
July 7-11, 2008
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Pete had been a Christian nearly all his life. But since his teen years he had been losing the battle with pornography. Desperately he fought his lust, but every new solution was temporary. Praying harder didn't work. Feeling worse afterwards didn't work. Getting married didn't even work. Feeling alone and ashamed, Pete struggled for years; but his bondage only increased.

One weekend, he attended a seminar on sexual purity with his friend. On the way home Pete was even more overwhelmed with feelings of condemnation, and hypocrisy. He knew he had to bring his sin into the light to get help; but the thought of his wife and kids finding out about his secret life was too humiliating to consider. Pete's friend listened compassionately. But it was the last conversation he would have with Pete. The next weekend, Pete committed suicide.¹

Pete was a troubled man. The problems that drove him to end his life included more than lust. Yet, his shame over his pornography addiction seemed, outwardly, to push him over the edge. It is good that men's ministries, which address sexual temptation, are rising up across the country. But this story is a stark reminder that men's ministry must be rooted and grounded in grace.

Five Reasons Men's Ministry Must Be Rooted In Grace

1. Men feel guilty and ashamed over their sin. Christian men often hang their heads in shame, disgusted because they have surrendered again to lust, anger, selfishness, self-indulgence, or just flat disobedience. If the secret thoughts of our minds were flashed up on a screen for everyone to see, we would all bury our heads in shame. How could we ever look our children, our wives, our friends in the eye again? How could any human want anything to do with us, much less a holy God? Our shame over our sin can convince us that we're too dirty for a holy God to love—and that is exactly what Satan wants us to feel. The "Accuser of the Brethren" wants to destroy our relationship with God. He mercilessly loads guilt onto our sagging back until we are either convinced that a holy God wants nothing to do with us, or become obsessed with trying to earn his love by being good. In both cases, we believe God's fundamental attitude towards us is rejection.

¹ This is a true story told to me by a men's ministry leader in California

The problem of men's guilt driving them away from God has reached epidemic proportions because of the easy access of pornography in the twenty-first century. In a 2002 survey of Christian men, 65% said they had looked at sexually explicit material in the past thirty days. 47% said they were not the spiritual leader of their home. The number one reason given for their failure of spiritual leadership was secret sin in their lives.²

Men's shame over their sin is further exacerbated by a feminine dominated church that defines sanctification largely as controlling the appetites. Men are hard-wired with stronger appetites than most women, and are chided for their inability to control those appetites, especially their sex drive. Researcher Archibald Hart reports that 83% of men say that women do not understand their sex drive.³ They are made to feel ashamed of their god-given desire for sexual intimacy.

If the men in the PCA know anything, it is that God is holy. Like Adam, they therefore allow their feelings of shame to drive them away from God. If drawing near to God always makes you hang your head in shame and condemnation, why would you want to keep coming close to him?

2. Men are designed for mission. They are doers, who earn whatever they get. God made men for adventure, achievement, and challenge. We want to build things and do things. Just tell us which mountain needs to be taken, and we will get the job done. We don't want to talk about it; we want to *"just do it."* We were created to do a job, to cultivate the earth.

David Murrow writes, *"Men want to succeed at everything they do. Competence is very important to them. They never stop to ask for directions because doing that would call their*

² Survey conducted in 2002 of 1003 men by Men in Ministry, Inc. <http://www.meninministry.org/>

³ Archibald Hart, *The Sexual Man* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994) 128

competence as a navigator into question. Men are also competitive. They want to win in every situation.”⁴

Men function everyday in a world that rewards their efforts, and punishes their failures. If they don't get their tired bodies out of bed and into work, they will get fired. If they don't put time into developing their relationship with their client they won't get the sale. If they don't get the oil changed it will be their fault when the engine seizes up and throws a rod. Men know there is no such thing as a free lunch. Even their relationship with their wife is about their efforts. They took the initiative to win her in the first place and she is designed so that she tends to respond to the way he treats her. In a world where 99% of the benefits he enjoys come from his efforts, it is nearly impossible for a man to internalize what it means to walk with God daily by grace. In every other relationship of life our failures push others away from us if not turn them against us.

3. Men's strong sense of responsibility makes them self-reliant. Men have broad shoulders; we were made to carry weight, to carry responsibility. We are assigned the task of leadership in the home and in the church. We are to be warriors and protectors of our families. Every male wants to be the kind of man his wife and kids can lean upon. Strength is one of our greatest virtues.

This strong sense of responsibility can lead to what Steve Brown calls, *the prison of obligation*. He explains, “This prison is characterized by the need to fix and rescue. It is the belief that every problem has a solution and that *you* are responsible for that solution.”⁵ I have a friend who grew up with an alcoholic father and absent mother. He is discovering that he is inwardly compelled to have to be responsible—to always do the right thing to take care of others. He suppresses what he really feels. The problem is that eventually his real feelings come out; he gets tired of it all, has a blow out, and does some stuff he shouldn't be doing.

⁴ David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 2005), 16

⁵ Steve Brown, *Born Free* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 21

With everyone else depending upon us, who do we men depend upon? After all, most men aren't too good at the relationship thing in the first place. So, we come to depend upon ourselves. Several studies have shown that when women face a crisis, they want to work out a solution with other people. But when men face a crisis, they want to be alone, work out the solution, and then come announce it to the team. In America, rugged individualism reigns supreme among most men. At the height of the Promise Keepers movement, PK conducted a survey of 100,000 men. They laid out a picture of what a best friend looked like, then asked the men, "Do you have a best friend?" Ninety-five percent answered, "No." Self-reliance is about as far away from the gospel of grace as you can get!

4. Men grow up needing to prove themselves. Anthropologists have discovered that in nearly every culture there is a code, which defines what it is to be a man. This code helps a man overcome his natural instinct of self-preservation to do what is best for the tribe. He fears the shame of the rest of the males more than he fears harm. Masculinity is conferred on a male by the other males of the tribe. It is something he earns. If a man fails to be brave, stoic, and self-sacrificing, he is branded a sissy and becomes an unmanly outcast of the men of the tribe. If a man succeeds in his manly endeavors he adds coins to his masculinity bank. Men avoid anything that might drain their masculinity banks. That is why womanly behavior is so damaging to a man, and why he has to constantly prove his manhood to the other males. "*Real manhood differs from simple anatomical maleness, that is, it is not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds.*"⁶

Interestingly if a woman engages in male behavior, she is often seen in a positive light, as a tomboy, or deliciously rebellious. Not so with a man who engages in womanly behavior. He will be

⁶ David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 11.

branded a sissy at best, and often much worse. Men are embarrassed to appear feminine in public. (Ask any man how he feels when his wife asks him to hold her purse for a moment.)

What does this have to do with grace? A lot. A boy's masculinity is something he has to earn. More than almost anything, a man wants respect, especially from the men of the tribe. He grows up with the haunting doubts about whether he will succeed at proving his manhood. John Eldredge, in his book, Wild at Heart, says the question that haunts every man is, "Am I really a man? Have I got what it takes...when it counts?"⁷ Eldredge goes on to discuss the wounds to a boy's heart as he makes this journey to manhood, wounds that leave him in what could be called prisons of the soul. Steve Brown has named many of these prisons, which include, the prison of self-abasement, the prison of the past, the prison of fear, the prison of needing approval.⁸ The prisons are erected on a foundation of having to prove himself to others to be sure of his masculinity.

5. Men specialize at meeting outward expectations for their behavior without engaging their hearts. Men are very good at going into a new situation, figuring out what the expectations are, and performing accordingly. It might be the expectations of his wife, the church, or his golfing buddies. He will then tend to live up to those expectations—even though his heart is not engaged. He may go on living that way for years. Then one day we are all shocked to hear that he has run off with his young secretary. What happened? That young secretary captured his heart.

John Eldredge describes this phenomena: "At a recent church retreat I was talking with a guy in his fifties, listening really, about his journey as a man. 'I've pretty much tried for the last twenty years to be a good man as the church defines it.' Intrigued, I asked him to say what he thought that was. He paused for a long moment. 'Dutiful,' he said. 'And separated from my heart.' *A perfect description*, I thought. *Sadly, right on the mark.*" Eldredge goes on to say, that the heart

⁷ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 57

⁸ Steve Brown, *Born Free* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 24

of many men is “driven into the high country, into remote places, like a wounded animal looking for cover. Women know this and lament that they have no access to their man’s heart. Men know it too, but are often unable to explain why their heart is missing. They know their heart is on the run, but they don’t know where to pick up the trail. The church wags its head and wonders why it can’t get more men to sign up for its programs. The answer is simply this: We have not invited a man to know and live from his deep heart.”⁹

Living by grace is living not because of external pressure, obligation, or expectation. It is living from the heart, as we shall see in the second half of this paper.

Men’s Ministry That Is Rooted In Grace

1. Men feel guilty and ashamed over their sin. Our shame over our sin can convince us that we’re too dirty for a holy God to love—and that is exactly what Satan wants us to feel. The “Accuser of the Brethren,” wants to use our shame to destroy our relationship with God. He mercilessly loads guilt onto our sagging back until we are either convinced that a holy God wants nothing to do with us, or become obsessed with trying to earn his love by being good. In both cases, we believe God’s fundamental attitude towards us is rejection.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ is that because of Christ, our shameful sins do not cause God to reject us. Instead, we are more loved than we ever dared to dream even though we are, in fact, dirtier than we can even imagine. When our sin leaves us feeling dirty and ashamed we need to stand under the shower of God’s truth and let grace wash over us. We need to daily preach the gospel to ourselves. “Only those who know that God will love them even if they don’t get better will ever get any better.”¹⁰

Men’s ministry needs to be centered in the truth of justification. *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit*

⁹ Eldredge, Wild at Heart, pa 7-8

¹⁰ Class lecture, DMin Class, RTS

of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:1-4)

Believers are doubly declared to be legally righteous. First, through Christ’s death. He atoned for our sins. We need to say to men, “Which of your sins are so frequent or so vile that Christ’s blood isn’t good enough to atone for?”

Second, through Christ’s life, his perfect record is imputed to us. The Spirit of God has erased Jesus’ name at the top of his straight A moral report card, written our name in with permanent ink, and thrown our old report card away. God, the judge, sees us clothed in Christ’s righteousness and declares us free from guilt. We need to ask men, “Is Christ’s straight A report card so inadequate that you have to earn a few A’s of your own?”

We must teach men to always let their sinfulness drive them TOWARDS Christ, not AWAY from him—to remember that their enemy, Satan, the father of lies, wants to use their guilt and shame to drive them away from Christ and NOT TO LET HIM. We need to reinforce the truth that their right to get an audience with God has NEVER depended on THEIR performance, but always on CHRIST’S perfect performance, which has been imputed to them. They need to hear often that all of God’s judicial wrath against their sin has already been spent on Christ at the cross. There is none left for them.

We also need to teach our men to reject an unbiblical view that exalts sexual sin above other sin. All sin offends a holy God. All sin brings about destruction. But unlike some Christians who exalt sexual sin above other sin, the Bible does not. In the words of C.S. Lewis, “If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual--the pleasure

of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me...: they are the animal self and the diabolical self; and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig, who goes regularly to church, may be nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course it's better to be neither."¹¹ In fact, Proverbs lists many sins that are "an abomination to the LORD." Sexual sin is not one of them.

Men's ministry leaders must create an atmosphere at men's events that says, "The church is actually a place for people who are needy, afraid, confused, and quite sinful. But even more important than that, the church is a place for people who have been loved...and have no idea why. Each congregation is, as it were, a local chapter of 'Sinners Anonymous.'" ¹² We need to realize that sharing our successes tends to build walls, but that sharing our failures builds bridges. We must model the truth Jesus taught in Luke 7, where he said that he who is forgiven much loves much. The bigger our sin is, the bigger our savior, the bigger the price he paid to redeem us, and the bigger his love for us is shown to be. That leads us to a bigger love for God. Men's ministry leaders must be the chief repenters of the men's ministry. We must kindle a deeper love for Christ, by remembering how much we have been forgiven.

2. Men are designed for mission. They are doers, who earn whatever they get. Grace centered men's ministry leaders preach the gospel to themselves every day. They recognize that in the world of men, nearly every one of the benefits we enjoy comes from our hard work. It is difficult to internalize the truth that there is nothing I can do to cause God to love me more...and nothing I can do to make God love me less. His love is unconditional. Its source is his own immutable decision to set his love upon me! We must hammer this truth home because it is so foreign to men's every day existence.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

¹² Steve Brown, *What Was I Thinking* (New York: Howard Books, 2006), 108

Men's ministry must have the right definition of a Christian. "Christians are folks who came to the astounding truth that we're not very good people, but God is fond of us anyway."¹³ One way to reinforce a man's understanding of God's unconditional fondness for him is to help a man understand the doctrine of adoption. The Apostle, John, wrote, "*Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called 'children of God,'—and that is not just what we are called, but what we ARE.*"¹⁴ For those men who have children, the best way to help them understand God's unconditional love for them is to point to their unconditional love for their sons and daughters. The event in my own life that has helped me most understand God's relentless love and fondness for me is the birth of my first child. I just flat love my kids because...I love them.

A grace-centered ministry to men must be careful not to allow the teaching of grace to be interpreted as a call to passivity. After all, hasn't God done everything for us? What is left to do? We need to think clearly about this. Grace means we don't HAVE to work for our SALVATION. But that does not mean that we don't GET to work for our SAVIOR. Men are created for mission, adventure, achievement, with a deep capacity for allegiance to a commanding officer they respect, who will lead them in this conquest.

Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, posted this advertisement in 1913: "*Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.*" More than five thousand men applied for twenty-six slots. One only needs to consult movies designed for guys to see what men's dreams are. We dream of accomplishing a great feat, against overwhelming odds, defeating a powerful foe, winning a beautiful woman in the process, and then riding in the front chariot of the victory parade.

¹³ Steve Brown, *A Scandalous Freedom* (New York: Howard Books, 2004), 188

¹⁴ 1 John 3:1, J.B. Phillips

The true Christ challenges us to boldness, daring, commitment, and costly sacrifice, if we choose to join his band of followers. “The challenging Christ presents no rocking-chair religion, no peace of mind pap, no come-in-and-be-saved-and-take-it easy-from-now-on ideology. No escape from life. He invites us to enter his kingdom. He challenges us to allow God sovereignty over our lives. He challenges us to take God seriously. He challenges us to enter the spiritual realm where God is Lord, indeed. What a great challenge to accept! A new way of life. A new power for our bungling efforts.”¹⁵ Men dream of greatness. Grace-centered men’s ministry doesn’t stifle this desire by calling it a “works orientation.” To the contrary, it reaches into the masculine hardwired heart, appealing to a man’s love for the savior who died for him, and challenges him to unwavering allegiance to his king as he follows the king’s mission for him.

Jesus commanded, *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”* (Matthew 7:13-14.) The challenge of Jesus is to enter his kingdom. He began his preaching with the words, “Repent. Believe. The kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mk 1:15) An earthly kingdom is a territory. The land and people who belong to a king form his kingdom. The kingdom of God, however, is a spiritual realm, where there is submission to Christ.

To “*seek first the kingdom of God*” is to seek to bring about the rule of Christ in every sphere of life. It is seeking to bring about Christ’s righteous standards in the culture through our influence as salt and light, seeking to bring others to surrender to the rule of Christ in their lives by sharing the gospel with them. It means seeking to understand and implement Christ’s agenda in your marriage, family, work place, church, neighborhood, etc. We are called to follow King Jesus in the conquest of this entire world, spreading his kingdom geographically to the ends of the earth, and spiritually to the very gates of hell itself.

¹⁵ H. S. Vigeveno, *Jesus the Revolutionary*, Regal Books

Ephesians 2:8-10 gives us the proper relationship between grace and works. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* We are not saved BY good works, we are saved FOR good works. Grace is not antithetical to men's passion to achieve. This truth is also apparent in Romans 12 where spiritual gifts are closely related to grace. Verse 6 says, "*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.*" The Greek word for spiritual gifts (*charisma*) and the grace (*charis*) come from the same root.¹⁶ True grace does not lead to a passivity because God has done it all; it shows itself in motivating true believers to serve Christ with passion.

Grace and a man's call to mission must not be divorced for another reason. Grace is the church's great distinctive in the world. Philip Yancey has written an entire book to make this point.¹⁷ Grace is the one thing the world can't duplicate, and the one thing it craves above all else—for only grace can bring hope and transformation to a jaded world. As one who has experienced grace and mercy, the Christian must be one who looks for ways to grant mercy to others. Men whose hearts are transformed by grace do things like leading fathering classes for teen dads at an inner city pregnancy center. One entire men's ministry, called New Commandment Men's Ministries,¹⁸ connects teams of four men each month with a widow or single mom in the community to help them with practical repairs of their house and car.

3. Men's strong sense of responsibility makes them self-reliant. Although healthy self-confidence is a virtue, *self-reliance* can be a deadly form of pride. *Self reliance* is what convinces men that they can earn their way into heaven. It is the form of human pride that sends people to hell—a refusal to acknowledge our inadequacy, our unfitness for an audience with a holy God, our need of a savior. In contrast, the core value of kingdom people who understand grace is

¹⁶ Colon Brown, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol 2*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 115

¹⁷ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1997)

¹⁸ Go to <http://www.newcommandment.org/>

dependence. The first brush strokes of Jesus' portrait of his kingdom people given in Matt. 5-7 read, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*" The Greek word, "poor" refers to those who are "spit upon," i.e. those on the lowest possible rung of society with no resources whatsoever. Jesus is teaching us that the highest virtue of his kingdom people is an attitude that daily recognizes our own utter spiritual poverty. When we come to the table to meet God, we bring ourselves plus nothing. Peter and James reinforce Jesus' emphasis on such poverty of spirit by reminding us, "*God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" The foundational attitude for the Christian life is a humility that repudiates *self-reliance* and admits our fundamental *dependence* upon God and the others he brings into our lives. This is grace in action.

Christian men need to realize that lurking in the dark places of the masculine heart is a proud resistance to admitting that we have to depend upon anyone else. If we don't identify and confront that resistance, it will subtly steer us away from the connection with a band of brothers that we need. It will cause us to lose sight of the covenantal nature of the Christian faith and the truth that we are not only called as individuals to be followers of Christ, but we are called *into a community* of Christ-followers.

The twin brother of *self-reliance* is *independence*. There is a virtuous independence that arises from our dignity as the image bearers of God, who are called to rule *for God* over His creation. The problem is that we are born with Adam's sinful nature. Adam wanted to rule, *for himself*. Deep in our masculine soul is an overpowering desire to be independent, to rule autonomously, to be like God. We resist authority. We resist accountability. We resist restraint. The Ford, "No Boundaries" commercials make something leap in our hearts. Unless we teach men to confront it head on, our sinful desire for autonomy will prevent us from connecting at a deep level with brothers in Christ. When the sharing level in a friendship or study starts to get personal we will find an excuse to stop meeting. Dwelling in our sinful hearts is a strong aversion to letting others get close enough to confront us, challenge us, or nag us about aspects of our lives that aren't

right. We resist the tough accountability that would put an end to our self-indulgence, settling instead for mediocrity in our walk with Christ. Left unchallenged, our masculine resistance to accountability will rob us of the spiritual strength and personal fulfillment that come from connection to a band of brothers who love us and are helping us fight our spiritual battles.

A true understanding of the centrality of grace in the Christian life goes way beyond an understanding of justification through faith alone. When grace grips our lives, we realize how desperate we are for the spiritual power and moral strength that come from God. In fact, as Paul begins his great treatise on salvation by grace, the book of Romans, he distills the essence of the gospel. It is that salvation is FROM God.¹⁹ Such salvation refers to far more than a ticket to heaven; it refers to our transformation into the image of Christ--our redemption from the power of sin in our lives. God is the source of that power, and one of the primary means of grace he has appointed for us is other members of the body of Christ.

Grace comes to us through connection with the body of Christ. God's plan for spiritual growth is connection to the body of Christ: *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* (Eph.4:16) If men's ministry leaders are going to build a grace-centered, disciple-making ministry for men, they must understand the necessity of relationship for growth. Christian psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend, after years of helping Christians grow in Christ, have come to this conclusion: "At the emotional level, connection is the sustaining factor for the psyche, the heart, and the spirit. Virtually every emotional and psychological problem, from addictions to depression, has alienation or emotional isolation at its core or close to it. Recovery from these problems always involves helping people to get more connected to each other at deeper and healthier levels than they are."²⁰

¹⁹ Romans 1:17

²⁰ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 122

The kind of friend Christian men today need is the kind described in the second part of Proverbs 18:24, “*A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother*” Most Christian men today have many companions, but no friend who sticks closer than a brother. They have numerous *acquaintances*, but no *brothers in arms*.

With a friend who is merely an acquaintance conversation centers around the ball game, work, the kids, vacations, and the news—superficial subjects kept safely away from issues of the heart.

“*Acquaintance*,” and, “*superficial connection*” are the concepts behind the Hebrew word used in the first half of Proverbs 18:24 which is translated, “companion.” In sharp contrast is having a true “*friend*,” (NIV), also translated, “*beloved friend*” who sticks closer than a brother. This is the kind of brother Paul had in Epaphroditus. Paul introduced him to the Philippians as “*my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier*.” (Phil. 2:25) Here are two souls knit together by common family bonds, by a common task to be accomplished, and by a common enemy to be faced. Epaphroditus was a true brother in arms to Paul, the kind every man needs.

Today, the stakes are too high, the battle too fierce, the enemy too wily, the attacks too frequent, the cost of defeat too severe for any Christian man to fight his spiritual battles alone. The more a man understands grace, the more repugnant his self-reliance will become and the more committed he will be to finding some brothers to encourage him, love him, and stand with him in his spiritual battles.²¹

4. Men grow up needing to prove themselves. Dave Murrow begins his book, Why Men Hate Going to Church, with these words: “Cliff is a man’s man. On the job he’s known as a go-getter and a very hard worker. He’s a good provider who loves his wife and kids. He’s well respected by his neighbors. Cliff drives a humongous four-wheel-drive pickup. He loves the outdoors and takes every opportunity for a little hunting and fishing. He enjoys a cold beer and a

²¹ The author has written a 60 page booklet called, “Forging Bonds of Brotherhood,” to help men get men connected for encouragement and strength, which is available at www.pcanet.org

dirty joke. He does not go to church. Ask him why not and he'll offer up words like, *boring*, *irrelevant*, and *hypocrite*. But the real reason Cliff doesn't go to church is that he's already practicing another religion. That religion is *masculinity*.²²

The pull on the male heart to prove his masculinity is so compelling that Murrow calls it a religion. Unlike girls, boys must break their emotional bond with their mother, their primary nurturer in the early years. They must then bond with their father and the world of men, where they quickly learn that masculinity is not a free gift; it is bestowed by the men of the tribe, based upon their performance. Eldredge writes, "A boy learns who he is and what he's got from a man, or the company of men. He cannot learn it any other place. He cannot learn it from other boys, and he cannot learn it from the world of women. The plan from the beginning of time was that his father would lay the foundation for a young boy's heart, and pass on to him that essential knowledge and confidence in his strength. Dad would be the first man in his life and forever the most important man."²³

The process by which a young boy must unplug his emotional bond from his mother and connect it to his father is so fraught with danger and turmoil that it usually results in emotional scars called father wounds. While leading a Great Dads seminar several years ago, we played a tape of Christian artist David Meese articulating his struggles with the pain inside because of his relationship with his father. At the end of the tape, I heard, in the back of the auditorium, a man begin to weep uncontrollably. He kept weeping until I went out, quietly put my hand on his shoulder and led the group in prayer for Christ to help him deal with the pain in his heart. My experience in men's ministry, at many levels, has taught me that most men have deep father wounds.

²² Dave Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, 3

²³ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 62.

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story, their relationship became strained and the son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of his rebellious son. Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: “*Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon...all is forgiven...I love you, Your Father.*” The next day at noon in front of the newspaper office, eight hundred “Pacos” showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness, love, and restoration from their fathers.²⁴

Thirty-four percent of the children in America have grown up with no father in their home, and another fifteen percent have grown up with virtually no emotional connection to their father.²⁵ It is into this world that we must bring the message of God’s grace. Grace must not be thought of primarily as the doctrine of justification. It involves far more, especially the truth of our adoption as sons by God, himself. “*For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*” (Rom. 8:15-16)

J. I. Packer comments, “Justification is a *forensic* idea, conceived in terms of *law*, and viewing God as *judge*... But contrast this, now, with adoption. Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship, and establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection, and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the *judge* is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the *father* is a greater.”²⁶

God’s grace is demonstrated not only by the fact that God has destroyed the barrier of guilt that separated us from himself by sending Christ to atone for our sin. That grace continues as God draws us to himself through the cords of love and adopts us into his very family. In the strongest

²⁴ Ernest Hemingway short story, "The Capital of the World."

²⁵ Great Dads Seminar www.greatdads.org

²⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*

possible way, God is saying that he has done what is needed for us to be close to him, as his beloved sons. We partake of the very intimacy that exists between God, the Son, and God, the Father.

A grace-centered men's ministry will teach men to often sit in the lap of their heavenly father, where their deepest needs of affirmation from their father can ultimately be met. In Scripture, two of the three times the Father's voice is audibly heard, the Father tells his Son what every son longs to hear from his father: "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" (Mark 1:11) We need to say to men, "If you did not often hear 'I'm proud of you,' from your dad, the chances are good that you're carrying some wounds. Our fathers did the best they could—but that doesn't change what God designed the hearts of children to need. If you experienced a deficit, the truth of your adoption into God's family as his son can bring great healing to those wounds."

5. Men specialize at meeting outward expectations for their behavior without engaging their hearts. In the Garden of Eden, after Adam sinned, the LORD called to Adam, "Where are you?" Scripture says, "*He answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.'*" Men have been hiding ever since. Eldredge writes, "You don't need a course in psychology to understand men. Understand that verse, let its implications sink in, and men around you will suddenly come into focus. We are hiding, every last one of us. Well aware that we, too, are not what we were meant to be, desperately afraid of exposure, terrified of being seen for what we are and *are not*, we have run off into the bushes. We hide at the office, in the gym, behind the newspaper, and mostly *behind our personality*. Most of what you encounter when you meet a man is a façade, an elaborate fig leaf, a brilliant disguise."²⁷

Men hide and are afraid because they do not understand grace. Christian counselor David Seamands summarizes his ministry by saying, "Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the

²⁷ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 52.

failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that is not the way we live. The good news of the gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.”²⁸

Jonathan Edwards pointed out that every decision we make is based upon what we most want to do at that moment in time, given our options. If a thief puts a gun in your back and says, “*Your money or your life,*” he has reduced your options. You can refuse to give up your wallet and die, in which case he will get your money anyway, or you can give him your wallet and live. You will still choose whichever of those options you most want, given those limited choices. The battle for loyal obedience to Christ is fought at the level of our wants, our desires, our heart.

Therefore, the most important task of grace-centered men’s ministry is to get the hearts of men connected to the heart of God. It is not enough simply to stress the fact that we are forgiven in Christ and declared righteous by the judge of the universe. We must help our men fill their emotional tank through abiding in Christ’s love. Jesus said, “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.*” (John 15:9) The greatest task of a men’s ministry that is seeking to grow disciples is to help men build and maintain this heart connection. Proverbs 4:23 tells us that a man’s heart is the wellspring of his life. Bryan Chapel points out, “Spiritual change is more a consequence of what our hearts love than of what our hands do.”²⁹ Paul tells the Corinthian church, “You were made for God, and he is the answer to your deepest longings.”

In the long term, men’s behavior will be transformed not so much by focusing on that behavior but because their heart grows to love and desire Christ more. We must love Christ more than we love sin. John Piper challenges men: “One reason lust reigns in so many is that Christ has so little appeal. You were created to treasure Christ with all your heart—more than you treasure sex

²⁸ Cited without footnote by Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, 15.

²⁹ Bryan Chapel, *Holiness by Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001) 154.

or sugar. If you have little taste for Jesus, competing pleasures will triumph. Plead with God for the satisfaction you don't have. Quote Psalm 90:14, 'Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we might rejoice and be glad all our days.' Then, look, look, LOOK at the most magnificent person in the universe until you see him the way he is.³⁰

I have been teaching seminars on the battle for sexual integrity for four or five years. Although there are many valuable Biblical principles for helping men win this battle, I became convinced that I needed a tool to help their desire for God and their intimacy with him deepen. That is why I wrote a 30 day devotional, entitled, Allegiance: Building a Foundation of Loyalty to God.

Conclusion

Grace must be the foundation of any effective men's ministry. We must constantly remind men that because of Christ, God remembers their sins no more, even their shameful sexual ones. But in teaching grace we must not stifle a man's passion for accomplishment and mission or infer that his masculine heart can be satisfied with a passive understanding that God has provided for his salvation. Nor can we be satisfied with men's leaders who can articulate the doctrine of justification by faith alone who are not connected at the level of their soul with another brother for encouragement, love, and strength. Actions speak louder than words and such a brother is still enslaved in his works mentality of self-reliance, no matter how much he talks about grace.

Grace-centered men's ministry must recognize the brokenness that many men have experienced in their transition to manhood. The deep longing of their masculine soul for respect and the approval of their father can only be ultimately met as they live out the truth of being adopted into the very family circle of God.

Finally, grace-centered men's ministry must go way beyond understanding that God is not mad at us anymore. Grace means "favor" and we must help every man feel as if he is a favorite of

³⁰ John Piper, *Desiring God*

God. A grace-based relationship with God means not only that God is not angry with us, and that he loves us. It means *he wants us*. Isaiah tells us, “*As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*” Scotty Smith tells the story of a wedding he conducted. After the last Maid of Honor arrived up front, the mother stood, and with all the stops pulled out, the first notes of the great hymn, “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” cued the ushers to open the massive oak doors. There stood the bride, radiant in all her beauty. As she took her first step down the aisle, the groom could contain himself no more. He ran up the aisle to greet his sweetheart.³¹ Every man in our ministry needs to know God feels that way about him. Dirty and foul though he be, the God who is holy still wants... him.

³¹ Scotty Smith, *Objects of His Affection*.