

Redefining Manhood

Empty Hands, Filled with Grace

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A man with empty hands – surely that’s a contradiction in terms. We admire those who are strong, self-sufficient, respected – real men. But if Christ came not for the healthy but for the sick it’s surely preferable to be small, weak. That’s grace for men: when we are weak, empty; we are strong, full.

He listened, as the serpent spoke deceit to his wife about the fruit of that tree – silent, with his hands in his pockets (well, maybe not...). No voice, no leadership. She offered him the fruit, and he took, and ate. No courage to say “No!”

I get it. I was in a conversation circle the other day and someone used the name of my God in vain. I was silent, had no voice, hands in my pockets. I recall a visit to an outback community, heard a male voice shouting aggressively, then witnessed him slap a woman across the face. I turned and drove away – and felt like a failure.

Our current context wants it that way. You’re white, male, straight? The vibe has come at us thick and loud to shut up and sit down; you’ve had your turn and blown it, now give others a chance. In your marriage, defer to your wife; she’s probably more right than you. At work, defer to the genderless; they’re perspective deserves to be heard. In the train, defer to people-of-color, let them rage, let them steal, you’ve wronged them too often. Yesterday’s oppressors need to learn to shut up; show no courage, utter no voice. So we’ve learned to retreat into our shell, cowed into timidity, our valor vaporized.

HOLLOW MAN

God did not intend for Adam to be a hollow man. God put the man he’d created in the Garden with the mandate to “*work it and keep it*” (Genesis 2:15). The term “keep” captures the notion of guarding, it reflects God’s awareness that there’s an enemy out there who’s threatening God’s creation. So God had equipped the man to whom he entrusted his creation with the courage and the stomach to resist and withstand this enemy; man had been created to “*have dominion*” over all God’s world, with all things under his feet (Genesis 1:26). And God saw all that he had made and behold, it was very good – this too. But when push came to shove under the devil’s provocation, we were hollow men, empty.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

GENESIS 1:26

The devil tried it on the Second Adam too. Jesus had not eaten in 40 days (Matthew 4:1-4); there was nothing in the desert into which the Holy Spirit had driven him. Six weeks earlier, the Holy Spirit had come upon him and God from heaven above had plainly said, “*You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased*” (Matthew 3:17). But in the desert those words sounded empty; no father would leave his beloved son so hungered! The deceiver’s words formed a challenge: “*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread*” (Matthew 4:3). The subtext: didn’t the Lord God give you “dominion” over all creatures – so that even stones are subject to your bidding? Jesus, be a man! We imagine Jesus looking through sunken eyes at the enemy, silent, with his hands in his pockets. Hungry. Contemplating. Listening to the pangs in his gut, his gaze turning to the stones – should I? But no, No! Resolutely, courageously, he addressed the enemy: “*It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word of God’*” (Matthew 4:4). God, you are my strength; lead me in your way! And when the devil tried again with further temptations, Jesus responded again with courage, decisiveness, leadership – precisely in step with the mandate of the beginning. And the devil left him for a more opportune time.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

MATTHEW 4:1-4

So when all hell broke loose on the cross of Calvary, Christ Jesus retained full dominion over his emotions, his faculties, his strength, his life, his death – so that on the third day he could arise from the dead. Behold the Man; he “guarded”, he “kept” the Garden of this world so that the apostle could declare the blessed consequence *“he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them”* (Colossians 2:15). and another apostle proclaim that he “destroyed” the devil (Hebrews 2:14). Now there’s a man!

I’m not like that. I’d love to be a Daniel – or even a Daniel Perry, that ex-marine travelling the subway of New York last year and opted to enter danger’s way to protect women and girls from a fellow traveller accosting them. But I’m not. My kitchen table back home has a long crack in its beautiful maple timber because I dropped my fist on it hard, because I lost it in front of the kids. If the walls of the manse could speak, they could testify to my shame at how often I lashed out at those I was meant to protect, to love, to serve. And losing it makes me feel so rotten, so hollow.

SURRENDER

Meet David, a man like us. He was under enormous pressure from his task of running a country, fighting a war, and on the side raising a family. He took a break from the strain of it all, and one afternoon saw from his roof a woman bathing. He saw. And looked. And I imagine him looking again. And had a servant fetch her. As he put his shirt back on, he stuffed his resulting guilt deep inside, where no one could see it. Some weeks later she sent him a note: I’m pregnant. Now what? An abortion? No, he couldn’t do that; Urijah would surely find out. Easier to be rid of her husband. There was room for more guilt where he’d stuffed the earlier lot.

But he couldn’t focus on his work. He lost appetite, lost weight, lost health, lost drive; the burden too much (Psalm 32). He self-diagnosed, on the basis of God’s earlier revelation, what was happening: his guilty conscience was God’s hand pressing on him, squeezing him to put words to his sin, to go to God in confession (Psalm 32:5): Lord, help me! You created me to have dominion, to be strong and courageous, but I’m so weak, I failed, I feel so dirty, a dud; I hate me. Lord, I give up; I can’t. Have mercy, mercy, on me a sinner!

“Lord, I give up; I can’t.” Have you ever spoken those words? They’re so hard to utter, aren’t they. But I can tell you: they’re so liberating! Taste David’s excited response to God’s grace: *“you forgave the iniquity of my sin!”* Yes, blessed is the man whose trespass is forgiven! My failure – washed away! My anguish of soul – replaced by joy, relief, peace! And it’s not because I tried so hard or because God saw I hated myself enough! Ah, the gospel of Jesus Christ, his grace: he cursed in my place; he the anguish I deserve!! *“Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found”* (Psalm 32:6).

I don’t feel like I’m a David. He opened up about the fact of his sins, even wrote and published a psalm for all Israel to read, to sing. I don’t think I could do that. You? I so admire his courage-to-be-open. I know, we all know it: sins-stuffed-in-a-closet are fatally corrosive; sins-confessed are communally life-giving! David’s song went viral through all Israel: when the floods of self-loathing crush your spirit, when the failure tells you you’re useless, know that God has balm for the wound, that God gives healing to the broken-hearted, gives life to the crushed in spirit; he won’t snuff out the dimly burning wick – for he sent his Son into this world not for the healthy but for the sick, not for the righteous but to call sinners to repentance. And that is so encouraging to me in my weaknesses and failures. Christ Jesus: he’s my Man! That’s why surrender-to-him is the mark of a real man. Surrender: that’s courage!

TASTE

Actually, surrendering lets you taste the delight of the gospel. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is not a pretty piece of

doctrine that dazzles by itself from the shelf. The good news sparkles when we embrace it in the thick of our personal mess – for the good news is that Christ Jesus has gone to the cross to wash away my sins of anger, of drunkenness, of adultery, of abuse, of neglect, of porn addiction, or whatever my sins might be that cause me to hate myself! Confessing sin, embracing Christ – that combination is so liberating; it's relief, it's joy! I'm clean, righteous! There's no sugar that tastes like that!

ENTHRONED

And then to think that the Christ who died for sinners arose from the dead, ascended into heaven and received from God a seat at his right hand to be King of kings and Lord of lords (Philippians 2:8-11). And here's the stunning thing: he gave you a seat beside him!! Listen to how Paul puts it: "*God ... raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 2:4-6). You, me: thrones with Christ in heaven! That's the restoration of the dominion of Paradise! Losers made lords, duds made dudes, kids made kings! Can you get your heads in that space? That's me, that's you, that's all who are united to Christ by faith!

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

PHILIPPIANS 2:8-11

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

EPHESIANS 2:4-6

The devil would convince us that we're wimps, that we need to sit down and shut up. The devil is defeated, his whispers a lie. Christ is triumphant and tells us that we're enthroned!

PENTECOST

You would say that's too good to be true? You would point to your ongoing failures to insist that this gospel is empty? Visit with me, then, the events of Pentecost Sunday. "*When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance*" (Acts 2:1-4). Upon whom was the Holy Spirit poured out? Upon men of backbone, of courage and wisdom? Upon upstanding and successful godly businessmen who faithfully took their families to the synagogue, were dressed in nice suits, had their children walking neatly in a row, wife in submission, theology straight – ticked all the boxes? Listen: the Lord poured out his Spirit on a bunch of losers – like Peter. Peter, who followed Jesus into the high priest's house, saw him being slapped around, and did nothing to defend the oppressed. In fact, in the face of The Question, he denied he even knew the Lord – three times. O yes, I relate.

Yet this man, Peter, received Christ's Holy Spirit! For he'd repented in bitter tears, he'd confessed his transgressions, he'd surrendered; so he was washed in Jesus' blood – and so could also receive Jesus' Spirit. Now he's a changed man; listen to his courage: "*Men of Israel, hear these words: ... this Jesus ... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.... Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:23, 38). Wham! Raw courage!

And thousands responded in confession and repentance, men from the very same crowd who seven weeks earlier had cowed to mob pressure and cried out to Crucify, Crucify him! Those kinds of men sold their extra possessions, gave to the poor, broke bread together in each other's homes; they were new men, transformed through the mighty work of

the Holy Spirit. They began to act in step with God's intent in the beginning, true men who ruled over God's world for the benefit of the neighbor. Blessed were their wives, their children, their neighbors!

That, dear brothers in Jesus Christ, is not beyond your reach. Under the guidance of this same Spirit John could say: *"I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one"* (1 John 2:12). And again: *"I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one"* (1 John 2:14). That's the blessed, glorious power of the gospel!

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

1 JOHN 2:12-14

IN SUM

So, dear men, to the degree you're united to Christ by faith -and you are, are you not?- do not get stuck on self-loathing on account of your failures. But pull your hands from your pockets and stretch them empty before God as you surrender your failures to him. Then consciously embrace, again, the glorious gospel of Christ being crucified for the weak, for his enemies, for the ungodly, for me! – that I might be forever sin-free in his sight! Hallelujah!

Then I'll stand tall – even in a culture that wants me small. I'll stand tall in the strength of the Lord and be the MAN God made me to be!