

Manly Courage and Doing (and Saying) the Hard Things

I came across this story the other day told by Salvatore Cordileone, Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Francisco. The chaplain for San Quentin State Prison, Father George Williams, wanted to help the inmates on death row there reconnect with their family. So, for Mother's Day, Father Williams offered to post a card for any who wanted. He would buy the card, pay for postage, and handle the mailing. All the inmates had to do was sign the card with whatever message they chose. Of the 721 men on death row, *over 500* took Father Williams up on his offer. This was deemed a modest success. He decided to extend the same offer for Father's Day. Again, he would buy the card, collect them, and make sure they got in the mail. Any who wanted to reconnect with their father was offered a chance.

Precisely *zero* inmates took him up on his offer.

Why? Well...we have a crisis of fatherlessness in our country. It would seem that those men on death row, either have a severed relationship with their father, or do not know who their father is. Or their father was an abuser. Whatever the reasons, not one of these men thought enough of their father, or knew enough, to want to even make contact with him. Remember—over 500 did so for their mother. We have a crisis of fatherlessness in our country.

Another story. You might know this one. It's about the place kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs, Harrison Butker. Harrison recently gave a commencement address to the 2024 graduating class of Benedictine College, a small Catholic liberal arts school in Atchison, Kansas. In that twenty minute speech, Mr. Butker (addressing specifically Roman Catholics) touched on many universal issues. I will not cover them all here (I would absolutely encourage everyone to watch it), but I want to focus on something he says at the end of the speech:

To the gentlemen here today, *part of what plagues our society is this lie that has been told to you that men are not necessary in the home or in our communities.* As men, we set the tone of the culture, and when that is absent, **disorder, dysfunction, and chaos set in.** This absence of men in the home is what plays a large role in the violence we see all around the nation. Other countries do not have nearly the same absentee father rates as we find here in the U.S., and a correlation could be made in their drastically lower violence rates as well. Be unapologetic in your masculinity, fighting against the cultural emasculation of men. **Do hard things.** Never settle for what is easy.

What do these two things—absentee fathers and the messaging to men— have in common? We have an absence of fathers in homes, and where that void is, disorder, dysfunction, and chaos set in. Men are on death row for doing vile things, despicable things...*things they are responsible for*...yet it makes me wonder, “What if they had fathers? What if the fathers they had didn't abuse them?” Killers aren't born, they are trained. As Butker points out, the absence of men in the home plays a large role in the violence we see all around us every day. But the flip-side is

that men, boys, are told again and again that they are *not necessary*. Not wanted. Not valued. The messaging everywhere is: everything a man can do, a woman can do twice as well. Our “enlightened” age. You may dispute this and point to personal examples. Pay attention to narratives seen in movies, in media, in politics. Because I do. And that message is that men are toxic, and their masculinity is not wanted. Women are smarter, stronger, faster, more capable in every single way. So, men are left with the idea that they are not wanted or even needed.

We have two issues I seek to address—**men failing at their callings** and **the messaging to men failing them**. Both are true. As a result (due to sin, Satan, and the fall), our society has descended into disorder, dysfunction, and chaos. Positively, I frame this by a single question, leading to a challenge—where are the men?

A Mini-Bible Study—1 Corinthians 16:13-14

At the close of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says this: *Stay alert, stand firm in the faith, act courageous like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.* (my translation) These are five present imperatives (which convey enduring ongoing activity) strung together over two verses. It may seem random, but often at the ends of his letters, Paul will include “exhortative” material such as this. But this material is not to be ignored.

Let’s walk through these imperatives. First, **stay alert**. Be watchful. Keep your eyes open. For what? There are several similar commands in Scripture to “watch” for the day of judgment (1 Thess 5:6, 10; Mark 14:34-38; Matt 24:42-43; 25:13). Given that Paul is not talking about the “end times” here, and given that the next imperative is “stand firm in the faith,” it’s likely that Paul is talking about threats to the Gospel, and threats to the Church. We are to be vigilant for these threats. But what is the opposite of vigilance? It is to fall asleep and ignore the threats all around you. Which means that not only are you asleep, but you are inactive. Passive. Indifferent. Disengaged.

Stand firm in the faith seems clear enough. What faith, though? *The* faith. The objective, underlying reality of the good news of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of the Gospel...and all that goes with it. Stand firm. As opposed to what? Being weak-kneed. Being “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” (**Eph 4:14b**) There are threats to the faith; we are to stand firm against them.

Now comes the controversial part. **Act like courageous men**. It is noted above that I am using my translation from the Greek. Just so you’re sure I’m not taking liberties, here are a few others:
ESV (what we use in worship)—act like men
KJV—quit ye like men
NIV—be courageous
NASB—act like men

The verb used here (only time in the NT) is more than “being courageous.” It is semantically related to the word for “man/male.” Because gender/biological sex debates abound in our day and age, and because the messaging to men has been so corrupted, people see an exhortation to “be/act like a man” as problematic. “What about the women, Pastor Heaton?” Given that Paul mentions several men in the near context, I think it’s okay to let Paul’s “male” flag fly.

Instead, let’s actually take Paul seriously. He says, “Act like men!” Is this a bad thing? Is a man acting courageously harmful to women? Is this exclusionary? I would argue the opposite. For a man to act like a man, that is, to be courageous, valiant, mature, brave *is exactly what Paul means and exactly what is needed, especially in the Church*. Let the adjectives I use sit with you for a moment. What if the men in your life—your husband, sons, brothers, neighbors, co-workers, grandfathers—what if they actually showed courage? What if they did the valiant and brave thing in the face of danger? What if they used their strength to defend, protect...even lay down their life for the women in their orbit? What would that mean for the Church? What would that mean for the world? What would that mean for your family? What if men did hard things?

To support this reading—be courageous like a man—is the next imperative: **be strong**. Don’t fold up. Don’t blow away. Don’t run. Stay awake. Stand firm in the faith. Show courage. And in so doing, stay strong. If men took this seriously, what would happen? An explosion of toxicity and rampant misogyny? Men holding sit-ins on college campuses, destroying property and committing mayhem? Or worse? This is what we see men across our country doing now. No...that is not what Paul means, and any interpretation and application employed to defend disorder, dysfunction, and chaos is to be rejected. But in the nearer context, we come to Paul’s fifth imperative in the string—**let all that you do be done in love**.

This evokes an earlier discussion Paul has...one you’re likely familiar with. **1 Cor:13:4-13**:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. *It does not insist on its own way*; it is not irritable or resentful; *it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth*. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. **When I became a man, I gave up childish ways**. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. Infant ways. *Acting like a man, is acting in love, predicated on leaving behind what is under-developed, immature, and juvenile*. Acting like a man is being strong, and showing courage, and having the willingness to use that strength for others. Which is love. To be “self-focused” is the way of a child, an infant. We have lots of

“little boys” running around. Men, strong men who act in love, are focused on those around them God has given them to serve. This is what Paul has in mind. Being a man is not about belching, being rude, pre-occupied with lust, or bugging out every free moment to have some “me time.” And it certainly is not about being an absent father, husband, or neighbor. It is *not* to use your strength to dominate others. It is to do all that you do in the name of love—service of another by being obedient to your calling. What Harrison Butker calls, “staying in your lane.” In other words, *vocation*. Vocation is the holy calling God gives, through His creation and design, redeemed by Christ, renewed by the Spirit, to live out and serve others around you...in love.

Living a Life of Renewal Leading to Revival

So, what do Paul’s words mean for us specifically? I’ve unpacked the meaning of 1 Cor 16:13-14, but how does it apply?

First of all, *real men go to church*. Every Sunday. In a world full of chaos, dysfunction, and disorder, men (all people) need the Divine Service. *Because of what God gives to them*. God delivers His gifts in a local, unique way (from a man no less) to sinners that need to hear and receive the mercy of Christ. Lives of service and strength are fed, not through bumper stickers or t-shirts, but through Word and Sacrament. Real men go to worship, because that’s where God calls us. The Third Commandment is still a thing! *Thou shalt sanctify the holy day by not despising the preaching of God’s Word, but holding it sacred and gladly hearing and learning it*. The order of the Liturgy is the antidote to the disorder of daily life. The forgiveness of Jesus is the very thing we all need to receive again and again. Worship is where we receive it most directly.

Speaking of hearing and learning God’s Word, courageous men *study the Scripture*. They read God’s Word. They mine it’s depths. They draw upon it for strength. They memorize it, ingest it, chew on it, and make it part of them. They discuss it with other men in Bible study. Courageous men then lead their family in the instruction of the faith. Husbands and fathers are the pastors of the home. They lead devotions. They pray with their wife and children. But they are first fed daily by the Word of God.

Being grounded in the forgiveness of Jesus, being fed by God’s Word, *courageous men pray*. “I’m not a pray-er, Pastor. My wife prays for us.” Let me ask you something—did Jesus pray? Was Jesus a man? “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.” (**Mark 1:35**) In fact, Jesus was the perfect man, the most courageous man Who ever lived. We see Him praying throughout the Gospels. He is also God. Might we imitate our Lord? “Therefore *be imitators of God*, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (**Eph 5:1-2**) So, imitating our Lord, we pray. Boldly. Consistently. With our families.

But these things are all hard to do consistently. I have struggled with them at different times of my life. I continue to repent of my failures, and live by the mercies of God, which are new every morning. It is hard to be a man who stands “firm in the faith.” Many times we’d rather hide, or be gone, or have fun. But this is the hardest thing of all—to show courage like a man. For this means we DON’T put ourselves first. It means we DON’T think of our every felt need getting met. It means we love those whom God has given us to love. It means—flowing from a life of worship, the Word, and prayer—*doing hard things*.

It might mean running for the local school board. It might mean sacrificing your time for a project your wife needs done. It might mean standing up to lies and wickedness that you see right outside your front door. It might mean confronting a bad actor who means harm. It might mean having a hard conversation with a friend who has lost their way. It *does mean* putting your family first, your wife first, your children first. And if you don’t have those things yet, it means preparing for the day and time when God gives them to you. It means working hard to be ready for it. For there is no greater thing a man can be than a husband and a father.

The Necessity of “NO”—Saying the Hard Things

One final thing. Doing hard things are essential because we live in an age where it’s never been easier to be “outraged” without ever having to get off the phone or couch. We’re all caught up in a cycle of manipulation, driven by algorithms seeking to devour us, making us passive through active engagement with our technology. So, to do something takes a great amount of energy to break out of the inertia of the present age. The call to action is needed now more than ever. But men are also *to say hard things*. And what is the hardest thing of all? It is the thing said so infrequently. **No**. A little word. No. A *loving* word. A necessary word. No. Nope. Nah. Uh-uh. No. This word has been lost, especially from the lips of men.

“No...you may not go out dressed like that. No...you may not live in sin with my daughter. No...you may not sit around all day and play video games. No...it’s not okay to talk to your mother that way.” No. N-O. It is a complete sentence. It is a word that limits, protects, emboldens, and reorients toward the good. But if men are absent—from homes, marriages, churches, society in general—who is saying the final “no”? Don’t misunderstand—women say no too! Wives, mothers, sisters, friends also speak the negative. But if men don’t say the hard thing, then the wicked thing abounds. It was the hard word needed in the garden when Eve took up the sinister suggestion from the serpent. It was the word the kings of Israel failed time and again to speak against abomination after abomination. *No is the word that needs to be reclaimed by men seeking to do the hard thing*.

And it starts with the self. Men have to tell *themselves* no. It’s called self-control, and it is a fruit of the Spirit. Men have to control their urges, their sinful desires, their inclination toward passivity. Ask any man with a family. It’s always easier to stay silent or retreat to the garage. It’s always easier to avoid getting involved. But men need to be involved. “Be courageous like

men!” Paul says. Some of you may be familiar with Riley Gaines, a world-class college swimmer from the University of Kentucky. Riley (with many others) was forced to swim against a fully-intact biological male in competitions...a 6’4”, 185 lb. man under the guise of “transgenderism,” who goes by the name of Lea Thomas. Worse than this, she and the other female competitors were forced to get undressed a few feet away from this pervert. And who, according to Ms. Gaines, was permitting these things to happen? *Men*. Not one man said, “No.” You shall NOT compete with women. You shall NOT be in women’s spaces. You shall NOT intimidate my daughter. Where are the fathers, husbands, brothers? Where are the courageous men doing and saying a hard thing? No...this is not a call for violence. It is a call to do the loving thing. Protect our wives, daughters, sisters. We say no, and follow up when necessary.

The Role of Women in Encouraging Courageous Men

So, what about the women? Have I completely forgotten about you? Actually, you are the reason I write this! For there is nothing that frustrates a woman more *than a man whom they cannot count on to do what he’s supposed to be doing*. There is no quicker way to disappoint a woman than a man in their life not showing courage when courage is needed. Women know this, whether they say it out loud or not. If you look at the preponderance of people who are out there fighting wickedness and perversity, it’s women. They are largely the ones on the front lines. Women will ask, “Where are the men? We need you!” But a woman *will not let things go that need done*. They will step up. So, in light of this, the greatest gift a woman can give the men in her life is **encouragement to live courageously**. To instill courage in their breast by asking them to do the hard thing. This can be gentle or it can be firm. This isn’t done by nagging, but through quiet insistence. This isn’t to say women aren’t strong. Women can be quite strong, in some ways stronger than men, though it’s a different kind of strength. A woman’s strength also comes from living according to their God-given vocations and in accordance to how God beautifully designed them. A mama bear is fierce! But women are empowered by men doing hard things, saying hard things, and living according to his calling and design. And those beautiful, distinct differences that God has made between men and women...when those things are lived out to the full, men doing what they are called to do and women doing what they are called to do...then our families will be better, our congregations will be better, our communities will be better, our world will be better. Women have their roles to play. Part of that is not trying to usurp a man’s duties, but encourage the men in their lives to do and say what God has given them.

So, a courageous woman can join their voices with St. Paul and say, “Stay alert. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous like a man. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” And if men do and say the hard things, we will see a revival of our country, our congregations, and our future until Jesus returns and puts all things back to right. Our faith is in Christ, not ourselves. But we are all called to show manly courage, by doing and saying the hard thing...modeling and teaching this to the next generation.

