

THEOLOGY for ordinary life

by Faith

MEN FOR THIS SEASON

FAITHFUL DEPENDENCE AFFIRMS GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

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WE'VE CROSSED THE THRESHOLD AND TAKEN OUR FIRST FEW STEPS INTO THE 21ST CENTURY. IT'S WORTH TAKING STOCK OF WHERE WE ARE AND HOW OUR MEN ARE DOING. AND TO ASK: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A CHRISTIAN MAN IN THIS SEASON?

MEN EMERGING INTO MANHOOD

today have been shaped by the attitudes and culture of the last 50 years. Our fathers and grandfathers, whose own parents were the products of the Great Depression—bracketed by two World Wars—have no stories of epic victories over evil enemies to shape their worldview. Instead, they are a generation of ambiguity, of Korea and Vietnam, of a relatively painless stock market crash that didn't really seem to test anyone's character, of the sexual revolution, Watergate, and the computer revolution.

Which leads to the young men of today, the first generation brought up on Hollywood and cable TV. Our heroes are not men like Audie Murphy or Douglas MacArthur or Jackie Robinson, but man-children like Kobe Bryant and Adam Sandler.

A 30-year-old man today has known only a Bush or Clinton as President since he was 10 years old. He'll get a new job, house, and car every three years or so. It is likely that at some point in his childhood his household did not include his biological father. His own decision to marry will come later in his life than for his father, and he is less likely to marry or have children. If he does marry, he only has a slightly better than even chance of staying married to the same woman until one of them dies.

So what does the church have to say to men like this?

THE PROBLEM: BABYLONIAN ETHICS

GOD AND A PROPHET NAMED HABAKKUK had a conversation in the Old Testament that sounds remarkably modern. In chapter one, Habakkuk was decrying the judgment that was coming through the Babylonians. God responds by describing the Babylonian army as "a ruthless and impetuous people ... they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor ... they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty men, whose own strength is their god" (Habakkuk 1:7, 11).

Doesn't this describe many men today? Men relentlessly pursuing happiness and success, confused about where to look, bending and breaking any rules in order to get ahead, charging from relationship to relationship, and determined to be dependent on no one but themselves. The causes may be modern, but the results are timeless.

THE WRONG SOLUTION: AVIS CHRISTIANITY

SO HOW HAVE CHRISTIAN MEN responded to this cultural milieu? Having been told that performing well is the essence of manhood, many Christian men respond by committing themselves to religious things. In an effort to be a better man, they resort to what we call "Avis Christianity."

Avis is famous for its slogan, "We try harder." And that's what some men do. If they can't find meaning and purpose through the world, then they will find it through religion. They do the right things. They fill their calendars up with church activities, get on every committee they can, and take pride in the number of good deeds they fit in their schedule.

Flash back to Jesus' day and consider the Pharisees. They often get a bum rap today. We denounce their motives in our sermons and Bible studies. But the truth is, they were the religious leaders of their day. They were the go-to guys. They took care of widows, stood against the syncretism of the Romans, studied the Scriptures, and tried to impact their culture for righteousness.

Why was Jesus so upset with these good men? The problem with trying harder is not that you're doing the wrong thing. The problem is that you're doing the right thing in your own strength. The Pharisees believed that their own efforts would bring them into a right relationship with God.

Men are problem solvers, and many times we see our Christian life as another situation to be managed. We make the list and work the list. And so what is our reaction when we read a passage like Colossians 3:5-8? "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming ... But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips."

We see this as our marching orders. And so we figure out how to implement these commands. We start putting to death these different sins in our lives. But we try to do it in our own strength. We focus on the behavior and not our hearts.

Paul had a different approach in mind.

THE RIGHT SOLUTION: RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

AT THE BEGINNING OF COLOSSIANS 3, Paul gives these instructions: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature”

Here, Paul gives us the keys to living as a godly man in the 21st century: starting with heart transformation and not behavior modification. Setting our hearts and minds on things above, preparing ourselves for when Christ returns. When your focus is on Christ, you will want to remove those things from your life that distract you from being the man God wants you to be.

Paul puts things in a specific order here. Belief: “set your hearts on things above.” Knowledge: “set your minds on things above.” And behavior: replace what your earthly nature would have you do with what a Christ-following nature would have you do.

THE RESULT: A LIFE OF FAITHFUL DEPENDENCE

IT CAN BE SAID that all sin is a desire to be independent from God. In the Garden, Adam and Eve rejected dependence on God. He gave them access to the whole garden to fill and subdue, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was one clear reminder that they were not independent beings, but remained dependent on Him.

Since the Fall, all our struggles with sin come down to this desire to be independent from God. In every area of our lives, we can choose to focus on things above, or on our own earthly desires.

Paul ends this section of Colossians with a final admonishment: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” So what might that look like for men today?

We believe God calls men to an attitude of “faithful dependence.” Faithfulness implies obedience and action. Dependence acknowledges our need for God.

Men often deviate from this biblical standard. Sometimes our desire to be independent from God shows itself in passivity, a refusal to do and be what God calls us to. Other times, our independent spirit may reveal itself in aggressive action, seeking to control our lives and find meaning on our own. But every time we determine to follow our own ways and not God’s, we are telling God we don’t really need Him.

**MOSES:
FROM ONE EXTREME TO THE OTHER**
MOSES’ STORY GIVES US A GREAT EXAMPLE of independence from God on both the passive and aggressive sides of this continuum. Moses’ early life cultivated an attitude of self-reliance. Raised as a son of the Pharaoh, he likely enjoyed the rights and privileges of royalty. When he decided to bring his vision for the liberation of his people into reality, he did it in his own strength. “Glancing this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Exodus 2:12).

But someone was watching. Confronted with his actions the next day, Moses ran into the wilderness of Midian and spent “a long period” recovering from this outburst of anger and lack of self-control. As author Pat Morley says, when Moses thought he was adequate, God found him inadequate. There was too much Moses in Moses.

We see the pendulum of Moses’ character swinging to the passive side when he argues with God, who spoke to him from a burning bush. God renews His mission. “I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” Moses is all excuses. “What if they won’t listen to me? Who do I tell them sent me? I can’t speak very well.” Finally, Moses just says it, “O Lord, please send someone else to do it” (Exodus 4:13).

Confronted by God Himself, Moses does everything possible to wimp out! But God will have none of this passivity. “Take your

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So Moses chose to act in faithful dependence on God’s power, and God used him to rescue His people.

Faithful dependence affirms both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. My actions do matter. I am responsible for my behavior and my impact on the world and others. But my actions work for righteousness and the kingdom when they are done in dependence and faith. God is bigger than I am, and I was made as a man to live in relationship with Him.

So what does it look like to be a biblical man in the 21st century? Consider the significant areas.

FAITHFUL DEPENDENCE AT WORK

MOST MEN will spend their most productive adult hours at work. It’s pretty important to figure out how to do it right. So what does passive independence from God look like in the area of work? We might call it sloth. A man who is passively independent from God in the area of work would not be taking advantage of the opportunities that God has given.

days a week, every week, or who consistently brings work home, will find it difficult to be engaged at home with his wife. We must be willing to “right-size” our commitments so that our wife gets our best. We have to save some of our emotional and creative energy for our families.

Do you know your wife’s thoughts and dreams? Do you pray with her regularly? What would others say your opinion of your wife is? Does she look forward to your return at the end of a work day? When was the last time you put her needs in front of your own? What would happen to her if you died? Would she be financially secure?

Are you investing in your children spiritually? Are you praying for them on a regular basis? Do they see and feel your love for them in practical ways?

EMOTIONS AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

MANY MEN STRUGGLE in the area of emotions. In an effort to protect themselves, they become emotionally “flat.” Other men struggle to contain their emotions, flying off the handle with little provocation.

Emotions often reveal where a man finds meaning. When his heart and mind are focused on things above, he will be engaged emotionally, accepting that people will disappoint him, and that circumstances will be painful, but that God is in control and will ultimately protect his heart.

What touches your heart? A great song? A beautiful sunrise? A story of sacrifice? Excluding a sporting event, when was the last time you were out-of-control happy, or felt deep, desperate sadness? Excluding the death or illness of a loved one, when was the last time you acknowledged a powerful emotion?

SELF-IMAGE AND IDENTITY

THE BIBLE TELLS US that we are both sinners (Romans 3:23) and saints (Romans 1:7). A man living a life of faithful dependence is not mired in self-doubt and defeat (passive independence), nor is he arrogant and self-righteous about his own goodness (aggressive independence). Instead, he is known for his humility and willingness to serve. He knows he is a sinner, but also that he has been saved through faith. He knows that the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is available to transform him from the inside out. As God told Habakkuk long ago, “My righteous ones shall live by faith . . .” (Habakkuk 2:4).

Men who rely on themselves for their self-image are only as good as their last achievement or as bad as their last failure. They are either paralyzed by fear and doubt, or over-confident in their abilities to handle what life brings. Men in this state have no choice but to take matters into their own hands and just hope that no one else gets hurt.

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What about active independence in work? We might call it workaholicism. These are men who are investing too much of themselves in their work and are expecting too much in return. If you’ve been consistently spending too much time at work, you may be in this category.

In contrast, a man who is faithfully dependent on God at work lives out Ephesians 6:6: “Obey them [your masters] not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.” He shows initiative to take advantage of the opportunities God has provided, and does his best, not just when he’s being watched or evaluated, but all the time, for the sake of Christ’s kingdom.

What is your attitude toward your work? Do you find satisfaction in your job? Do you always give your best no matter who is looking? Is it the primary source of your identity? Are you working too much to the neglect of other important areas of your life? Are you taking a Sabbath—one day every week set aside for worship and rest?

FAITHFUL DEPENDENCE AT HOME
HUSBANDS ARE CALLED to “love your wives as Christ loves the Church and [give yourselves] up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). A man can sacrifice his own best interests for those of his wife and family because he is faithfully dependent on God to take care of him. A husband who doesn’t actively invest in his family (passive) or is domineering and controlling (aggressive) is ignoring God’s way for him.

For many men, this area is intertwined with—or at least complicated by—their attitude toward work. A man who travels five

Knowing and believing that God has saved us and claimed us for His own renders our circumstances secondary. Our identity comes not from our achievements, but from our lineage—we are a son of the King.

Where does your identity come from? Have you missed an opportunity because of self-doubt? Do you often find yourself thinking that if it's going to get done right, you'll just have to do it yourself? Have you thanked Jesus today for the sacrifice He made for you? Do you actively pray during your work and conversations for Christ's power to work through you? Have you asked God for a spirit of humility and grace toward others?

PLEASURE AND FULFILLMENT

THE SCRIPTURES CLEARLY INDICATE that men should enjoy the world that God has made. But most men have a difficult time staying on track in the area of pleasure.

What does passive independence look like in regard to pleasure? Some men decide that if they never have any fun they can protect themselves from sinning. Or because someone in the world is poorer than they are that it must be a sin to take a nice vacation or drive a new car. They become ascetics.

Other men seek pleasure believing that it can make them happy. They move from material possessions to experience to hobbies to sex to food believing that they will find something that will be ultimately fulfilling. Of course they never do, and they often find themselves in situations where their pleasures have

become their masters.

What is your attitude toward pleasure? Are you able to enjoy the good gifts God brings? Are there things that you do for fun or distraction that are out of control in your life? What about college football, the NFL, the Internet, golf, or a favorite hobby? Are you looking for more meaning and purpose in these pleasures than they were ever meant to give?

As men, we need to preach the gospel to ourselves every day so that we can live in an attitude of faithful dependence. We need to stand together, a band of brothers, pointing one another to the cross. And we need churches and pastors who will consistently call us toward the high calling of Christ Jesus.

Like Moses, as we are affected by our life circumstances, we will naturally swing along a continuum in the different areas of our lives. But as God's Spirit brings us to Christlikeness, each swing can be shorter and we can know more and more what it looks like to reflect His image in the world. Oh, that God would raise up an army of biblical men for the 21st century. ❏

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