

SHEW THYSELF A MAN

INHERITANCE AND MANLINESS IN THE BIBLE

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It is difficult, even with the Bible in hand, to sketch an image of that special excellence we call manliness. In fact, it is generally easier to describe false images of manliness. We might think first of machismo, a frequent target of Pope Francis, which is an image drawn from the maleness of beasts and makes men into the same. Further, we have harshness, absenteeism, inertia, coddling, coldness, and the list goes on. Certainly we can imagine examples of men with these vices, and even examples of those who think that one of these belongs to true masculinity.

What we should notice is that all of these images of false manliness are so obviously false because they are so obviously destructive to the relationships most important to a man: relations with his wife and with his children. These are marks of a bad man because they are marks of a bad husband and a bad father. This should not surprise us, for manliness is a relational image. It can only be understood as part of a whole, the dual image of God:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.” (Gen 1:27–28)

True manliness finds its home in this fruitful, relational image, set in the frame alongside woman and children. “In the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman” (1 Cor 11:11). Man along with woman inherits human life from the hand of the Father.

If we want to find the image of manliness in its relational context, there are a few things that we need to exclude from the program. First, we are concerned with the particular virtue of manliness, and not with human and Christian virtue in general:

“In Christ . . . there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28). Second, we must leave aside any modern concerns and critiques. We approach the Scriptures to find saving truth, so we should proceed in an earnest, intimate, and peaceful dialogue.

So we begin our study of manliness in the Bible. Starting from St. Paul, we will first make a backwards march to Solomon and David, discovering the manliness of their kingly vocation. This vocation will be described more explicitly in the second section. The third concerns the particularly Christian manliness of imitating Christ’s manful love of his Church. The fourth concludes by zooming out, situating manliness within the inheritance of life that God has given to the whole race of man.

MAN, KING, HUSBAND, MAN

Let us begin with one of St. Paul’s commands to the brethren of the Church in Corinth. “Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong” (1 Cor 16:13). But where most of the modern English translations give “be courageous,” St. Paul’s letter reads *andrize the*, which is a verbal form of the word for “man.” Very close to the Vulgate, the King James Version translates “quit you like men,” and we could suggest “bring yourselves to manhood,” “act manfully,” or maybe even “man up.”

There are plenty of Old Testament parallels to this usage of “man up,” generally paired with a verb meaning “to be strong.” For instance, in Joshua 1:6–7, God gives this command in two successive verses, demanding of Joshua the manliness necessary to lead Israel into the promised land and the manliness necessary to follow the law of God. But we are most interested in a close parallel to St. Paul’s instruction found in David’s last words to his son and heir, Solomon:

When David’s time to die drew near, he charged Solomon his son, saying, “I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and be a man, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his

commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.” (1 Kgs 2:1–3)

This passage reads “be a man” in both Hebrew and Greek, and the KJV gives the nuance nicely: “shew thyself a man.” Joshua’s manliness had won the land, always following the Lord’s law. As Solomon inherits the throne over all of Israel, he is also commanded to have the strength and manliness to walk in the way of the Lord.

But let us take another step, from the end of David’s story to its very heart, and we will see this manliness in a still richer light. The reign of David did not begin peacefully, but was won through long patience and much contest. In fact, his reign began in stages, starting in his native Judah, and the remaining tribes did not acknowledge his anointing until he proved his character, especially by weeping for the death of his enemies. Hear the words of the tribes of Israel, who have come to accept David as king:

Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you that led out and brought in Israel; and the Lord said to you, “You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.” (2 Sam 4:1–2)

We can recognize the first line as an inverse allusion to Adam’s words upon seeing Eve, that first love poem:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man. (Gen 2:23)

The people of Israel, in declaring “we are your bone and your flesh,” are saying to David something very definite, and almost too sensitive to elaborate: “we are yours, we accept you and trust you, this people is your woman—be our man.”

Would not David have especially remembered this in his last words to his son, who was now inheriting the people of Israel?

“Be a man,” he tells his son. “Be the man of Israel, the people whom God gave to me.”

CONQUEST, PRESERVATION, AND FAITH

In the last section, we drew a comparison between St. Paul’s command to “man up” and King David’s paternal instruction to “be a man.” This connection gives us, you might say, teeth to grip manliness in the Scriptures. Consider two of the commands discussed above, God’s command to Joshua and that of King David to his son. Each of them closely joins manliness with (a) inheritance and (b) walking in the way of the Lord.

First, manliness is what brings about the full and lasting reception of the inheritance, achieving and preserving it. In the Book of Joshua, manliness *achieves* the inheritance. The Lord commands Joshua to be a man and so “cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them” (Josh 1:6). In a similar way, David commands Solomon to be a man “that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn” (1 Kgs 2:3). As the history of the kings goes forward, it becomes clear that “prospering in all that you do” is success in *preserving* the inheritance that is the land: its peace and security, and most importantly, its right relationship to God. Manliness both achieves and preserves the inheritance.

But second, manliness only fulfills this mission by walking in the way of the Lord. Over and over again, both in Joshua’s conquest of the land and in the long history of the kings, the possession and the preservation of the inheritance is possible only by walking in the way of the Lord and observing his commandments. The conquest proceeded swimmingly until Achan disobeyed the Lord (see Josh 7). Similarly, Israel was beaten and broken through the failure of its king to hear, obey, and trust in the Lord. This teaching runs through the whole history of Israel, and is repeatedly emphasized by the prophets.

Manliness, we could then say, is at the service of the inheritance, and its first act is to be faithful to the Lord. Manliness cannot achieve its goal of preserving the inheritance if it fails in its act of faithfulness. You might even say that it is not manliness at all if it is not faithful. When David's trust wavers, moving him to take a census of his people, the nation suffers greatly (though the weight is lessened by David's repentant intercession). King Solomon's excesses—sexual, military, and pecuniary—culminate in idolatry and the subsequent division of the kingdom. Solomon's failure in manliness undid what his father had achieved in becoming Israel's man.

St. Paul preserves this image of manliness: its first business is faithfulness and its goal is the preservation of the inheritance that God gives to men. He precedes his command of strength and manliness with the instruction to "be watchful, stand in the faith." And he considers it a failure of faith not to preserve one's own bone and flesh, as he reaffirms in writing to Timothy: "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8).

But the goal of being a man is not only to preserve his family in the basic needs of life, but also to keep the family faithful. Thus it is the father's role to instruct and correct, and so we read, "What son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Heb 12:7). Nevertheless, St. Paul frequently enjoins mildness upon the fathers in his flock: "Fathers, do not provoke your children" (Col 3:21 and Eph 6:4). Being over-demanding and harsh is not true manliness, and it was a part of Solomon's error, as is confirmed by his son and heir Rehoboam: "Whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (1 Kgs 12:11). Rehoboam inherited this vice from his father, it seems. But it was not a vice of King David, who repeatedly manifests his patience, constancy, and forbearance. These qualities gained the trust of the people and manifested his full manliness.

CHRISTIAN MANLINESS

So far, we have seen that manliness “stands in the faith” and is directed toward the preservation of the inheritance, both in natural and in supernatural life. But the fullness of Christian manhood is revealed only in the manliness of the Word made flesh.

St. Paul understood this, and gives beautiful instruction to Christian men and women: “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:22, 25). In short, Paul is drawing a rich analogy, and more than an analogy—a mystery, between the union of Christ and his Church and the union of man and wife.

The role given to man, we notice, is that of an authority like Christ’s own. So let us look more closely at Christ’s own words about Christian authority. In chapter 20 of St. Matthew’s Gospel, he makes a clear distinction between the rulers of the “nations” and Christian kingship.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. (Mt 20:25–27)

These lines provide good guidance for reading St. Paul’s instruction to the Christian man. In receiving his wife’s submission, his love is to imitate that of Christ, serving rather than being served, washing the feet of his beloved.

Moreover, this distinction between Christian and pagan lordship responds to an important feature of the punishment given to Eve after the sin of Eden. Christ says here that the rulers of the Gentiles “lord it over” or “exercise domination” over their subjects. In Genesis 3:16, we read the curse, “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Though difficult to understand, this curse clearly signifies a rupture in the relationship

which has something to do with a broken masculinity, a heavy exercise of authority. But a closer look at the text will show how Christ brings correction and healing. The word for “lord it over” in the passage from Matthew is almost the same as the Greek of “rule over” in Genesis 3:16. The word in Matthew only differs by the addition of a prefix which here might mean “completely” or “against.”

To this complete or hostile “lording over,” Christ says, “it shall not be so among you.” Paul explains the way that it will be. “Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. . . . No man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church” (Eph 5:28–29). If St. Paul sets up man in a position of lordship, it is one of service, not of being served. It is one of preserving life and not consuming it. If it is a lordship, it is not one of “lording it over,” and if it receives submission, it is not a submission that is complete or oppositional. This Christian relationship heals the rupture between man and woman by loving and sacrificial service. If the man is given to wear a crown, it is a crown of thorns.

This lordship—or we might say kingship—of the husband and father is something important in the Christian dispensation. It is a manliness that comes from faith and preserves faith. As an image of Christ’s lordship, it is so closely connected to the way of Christ that the re-establishment of man’s headship can draw him back to the faith, as we hear from St. Peter: “Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives” (1 Pet 3:1). With this manliness of sacrificial lordship held firm, the body is united and made sound, the inheritance is preserved in life and peace.

THE INHERITANCE

It is time to lay down more fully what is included in this “inheritance” that man receives and preserves. And in doing so we turn again to St. Peter:

Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Pet 3:7)

It is the phrase in the middle that I want to emphasize, “joint heirs of the grace of life.” This inheritance of life can be taken in two ways. First, we can understand a reference to the grace of eternal life, the dignity of the children of God redeemed in Christ. In this sense, “there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28), and the honor due here is that due to Christian dignity, identically inherited by men and women. But the second reading takes Peter to refer to the gift of life in the sense of bearing and bringing up children, of family life as a whole. And this inheritance of life is received jointly by men and women, and yet in different and proper ways, just as they receive, jointly and diversely, the punishment for the sin of Eden. With this both joint and diverse inheritance in mind, Paul writes, “in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman” (1 Cor 11:11). Let us take the opportunity to understand how this one inheritance of familial life is received by man and woman, each in their proper manner.

Woman is here called the “weaker sex,” but Peter knew that God’s “delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man” (Ps 147:10). Woman is not given the same gift of strength because her inheritance of the gift of life has its own proper dignity. And the importance of this gift is so great that St. Paul writes, “woman will be saved through bearing children” (1 Tim 2:15). This does not restrict her vocation, but tells the importance of motherhood for those called to it, the value of her way of partaking in the inheritance. If we think it too little for

woman, it is because we do not respect the wonderful gift that is her generative power, her calling to bring forth, to nurse, nurture, and rear. Without it, human life can neither remain nor rejoice; it goes astray and is lost.

And if woman is a co-heir of life by nurturing and bearing, what is man? His relation to this inheritance of familial life is just what we have laid out through our study. First, like Joshua, man is called to receive fully this inheritance, to marry and to be fruitful and multiply together with his wife. But the greater task is then, like the kings, to bring this generation to perfection, to preserve the inheritance of life. This includes prudently disciplining, teaching, providing, and guarding. It demands a love ready to sacrifice, love unto service, not being served. It demands gentleness in firmness, forbearance in lordship. And the first act of this manliness, as we have said above, is to stand in the faith.

We have passed over him thus far, but we cannot close without turning to the manful image of that just man, the earthly father and patron of Christ and of his whole body—St. Joseph, Son of David. Unassuming and unwavering in faith, he was granted the manly inheritance of the grace of life in every sense. He was given to keep and preserve the child who was and is life itself, and ever shall be. So let every Christian man sing with Joseph,

The lot marked out for me is my delight:

Welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me! (Ps 16:6)

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