

# PLAY THE MAN

*BECOMING  
THE MAN  
GOD CREATED  
YOU TO BE*

Mark Batterson



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# INTRODUCTION

Let us play the men for our people.

—2 Samuel 10:12 KJV

**February 23, AD 155<sup>1</sup>**

**Smyrna, Greece**

Like a scene straight out of *Gladiator*, Polycarp was dragged into the Roman Colosseum. Discipled by the apostle John himself, the aged bishop faithfully and selflessly led the church at Smyrna through the persecution prophesied by his spiritual father. “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer,” writes John in Revelation 2:10. “Be faithful, even to the point of death.”

John had died a half century before, but his voice still echoed in Polycarp’s ears as the Colosseum crowd chanted, “Let loose the lion!” That’s when Polycarp heard a voice from heaven that was audible above the crowd:

“Be strong, Polycarp. Play the man.”

Days before, Roman bounty hunters had tracked him down. Instead of fleeing, Polycarp fed them a meal. Perhaps that's why they granted his last request—an hour of prayer. Two hours later, many of those who heard the way Polycarp prayed actually repented of their sin on the spot. They did not, however, relent of their mission.

Like Jesus entering Jerusalem, Polycarp was led into the city of Smyrna on a donkey. The Roman proconsul implored Polycarp to recant. “Swear by the genius of Caesar!” Polycarp held his tongue, held his ground. The proconsul prodded, “Swear, and I will release thee; revile the Christ!”

“Eighty and six years have I served Him,” said Polycarp. “And He has done me no wrong! How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

The die was cast.

Polycarp was led to the center of the Colosseum where three times the proconsul announced, “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.” The bloodthirsty crowd chanted for death by beast, but the proconsul opted for fire.

As his executioners seized his wrists to nail him to the stake, Polycarp stopped them. “He who gives me strength to endure the fire will enable me to do so without the help of your nails.”

As the pyre was lit on fire, Polycarp prayed one last prayer: “I bless you because you have thought me worthy of this day and this hour to be numbered among your martyrs in the cup of your Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Soon the flames engulfed him, but strangely they did not consume him. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before him, Polycarp was fireproof. Instead of the stench of burning flesh, the scent of frankincense wafted through the Colosseum.<sup>3</sup>

Using a spear, the executioner stabbed Polycarp through the flames. Polycarp bled out, but not before the twelfth martyr of Smyrna had lived out John's exhortation: *be faithful even to the point of death*. Polycarp died fearlessly and faithfully. And the way he died forever changed the way those eyewitnesses lived. He did what the voice from heaven had commanded. Polycarp played the man.

### **Make Men of Them**

In 1744, the College of William and Mary sent a letter to six Native American chiefs, offering a free education to twelve of their young braves.<sup>4</sup> The chiefs politely declined the offer with the following reply:

Several of our young People were formerly brought up at the colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but when they came back to us they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods, unable to bear Cold or Hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a Deer or kill an enemy, spoke our Language imperfectly, and were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, or Counselors; they were totally good for nothing.

The chiefs then made an offer of their own:

If the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons, we will take care of their Education; instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them.<sup>5</sup>

I've taken more classes in more subjects than I can recall. I've been instructed in everything from ancient history to

astrophysics, meteorology to immunology, psychology to pneumatology. But never once have I taken a class on manhood. That class wasn't offered—not even as an elective!

I fear we have forgotten how to make men.

I fear we have forgotten how to play the man.

Before we go any further, let me offer a disclaimer. In many ways, I feel like the least qualified man to write this book. Simply put, I lack man skills. If an assembly project requires more than two steps, it's not going to end well for me. My family affectionately calls me an “unhandy man.” And to be honest, my version of roughing it involves an air-conditioned cabin with a fully stocked refrigerator.

I've had more than my fair share of adventures, such as hiking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. But in the spirit of full disclosure, I packed an inflatable mattress. When we set up camp the first night, a strange mechanical sound echoed throughout the campsite. That was me and my inflatable mattress motor! Did I feel a little less manly than the rest of the guys? Yes, yes I did. But I highly value sleep, and I slept great!

I might also add that I can change a flat tire, but I usually call AAA. And I did deep-fry a turkey once, emphasis on *deep-fry*.

You get the picture. I lack man skills, but that is *not* what playing the man is about.

You don't have to eat the heart of a bear or sleep inside a dead horse like Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Revenant*. That might win you some man points, or even an Oscar, but that isn't what playing the man is all about.

In the pages that follow, I'll unveil seven virtues of manhood—tough love, childlike wonder, will power, raw passion, true grit, clear vision, and moral courage. Just in

case any women get their hands on this book, these virtues aren't exclusive to men, but I find men lack them more often than women, and in some respects, they are more important for men. The seven virtues are not an exhaustive list either, but they give us a starting block.

After exploring how to play the man, I'll switch gears and talk about how to make a man. I love youth pastors. I thank God for youth pastors. But it's not their job to disciple my children. That's my job! If you weren't disciplined by your father, it can be tough to disciple your son because you don't know where to begin. I realize I'm only a data point of one, but I'll share the Discipleship Covenant I created for my sons and the Rite of Passage I took them through at the end of what we called the "Year of Discipleship." These things are not bulletproof or foolproof, but they are a starting point in the journey toward manhood. My goal is to give you a template you can adopt and adapt.

Now, let me paint a picture—the big picture.

## **Untamed**

A decade ago I spent an unforgettable week in the Galapagos Islands. This archipelago of islands off the coast of Ecuador hasn't changed much since Charles Darwin sailed there on the HMS *Beagle* in December 1831 and studied fifteen species of finches. The Galapagos may be the closest thing to the Garden of Eden left on Earth!

My son and I saw a two-hundred-year-old turtle weighing in at nearly a thousand pounds. We came face-to-face with giant iguanas that weren't the least bit intimidated by humankind. We watched pelicans that looked like prehistoric



pterodactyls dive into the ocean and come back up with breakfast in their oversized beaks. And we went swimming with sea lions, which we later learned isn't altogether safe!

A few weeks after returning home, our family went to the National Zoo in Washington, DC. The National Zoo is a great zoo, but zoos are ruined for me. Looking at caged animals isn't nearly as exhilarating as witnessing a wild animal in its natural habitat—it's too safe, it's too tame, and it's too predictable.

As we walked through the ape house, the four-hundred-pound gorillas looked so bored, so emasculated, behind protective plexiglass. That's when a thought fired across my synapses: *I wonder if churches do to people what zoos do to animals.*

I don't think it's intentional. In fact, it's well-intentioned. But I wonder if our attempts to *help* people sometimes *hurt* them. We try to remove the danger, remove the risk. We attempt to tame people in the name of Christ, forgetting that Jesus didn't die to keep us safe. Jesus died to make us dangerous.

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.<sup>6</sup>

That doesn't sound safe, does it? That's because it's *not*. The will of God isn't an insurance plan. The will of God is a dangerous plan. It takes tons of testosterone, and it produces high levels of holy adrenaline.

Now, let me add a frame to the picture that Jesus painted.

## Rewilding

In 1995, the gray wolf was reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park after a seventy-year hiatus. Scientists expected an

ecological ripple effect, but the size and scope of the trophic cascade took them by surprise.<sup>7</sup>

Wolves are predators that kill certain species of animals, but they indirectly give life to others. When the wolves reentered the ecological equation, it radically changed the behavioral patterns of other wildlife. As the wolves began killing coyotes, the rabbit and mouse populations increased, thereby attracting more hawks, weasels, foxes, and badgers.

In the absence of predators, deer had overpopulated the park and overgrazed parts of Yellowstone. Their new traffic patterns, however, allowed the flora and fauna to regenerate. The berries on those regenerated shrubs caused a spike in the bear population.

In six years' time, the trees in overgrazed parts of the park had quintupled in height. Bare valleys were reforested with aspen, willow, and cottonwood trees. And as soon as that happened, songbirds started nesting in the trees. Then beavers started chewing them down. Beavers are ecosystem engineers, building dams that create natural habitats for otters, muskrats, and ducks, as well as fish, reptiles, and amphibians.

One last ripple effect.

The wolves even changed the behavior of rivers—they meandered less because of less soil erosion. The channels narrowed and pools formed as the regenerated forests stabilized the riverbanks.

My point? We need wolves!

When you take the wolf out of the equation, there are unintended consequences. In the absence of danger, a sheep remains a sheep. And the same is true of men. The way we play the man is by overcoming overwhelming obstacles, by

meeting daunting challenges. We may fear the wolf, but we also crave it. It's what we want. It's what we need.

Picture a cage fight between a sheep and a wolf. The sheep doesn't stand a chance, right? Unless there is a Shepherd. And I wonder if that's why we play it safe instead of playing the man—we don't trust the Shepherd.

Playing the man starts there!

Ecologists recently coined a wonderful new word. Invented in 2011, *rewilding* has a multiplicity of meanings. It's resisting the urge to control nature. It's the restoration of wilderness. It's the reintroduction of animals back into their natural habitat. It's an ecological term, but rewilding has spiritual implications.

As I look at the Gospels, rewilding seems to be a subplot. The Pharisees were so civilized—too civilized. Their religion was nothing more than a stage play. They were wolves in sheep's clothing.<sup>8</sup> But Jesus taught a very different brand of spirituality.

“Foxes have dens and birds have nests,” said Jesus, “but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”<sup>9</sup> So Jesus spent the better part of three years camping, fishing, and hiking with His disciples. It seems to me Jesus was rewilding them.

Jesus didn't just teach them how to be fishers of men.

Jesus taught them how to play the man!

That was my goal with the Year of Discipleship, which I'll outline in chapter 9. To celebrate the completion of the covenant, I took each of my sons on a Rite of Passage trip. Parker's trip was hiking the Grand Canyon from rim to rim. That 23.2-mile hike still ranks as one of the hardest things I've ever done, in part because of the July temperatures that

hit 110 degrees—and that was in the shade! But I gained some life lessons that couldn't be learned any other way.

A man discovers who he is in the wild.

He also discovers who God is.

Even Jesus went off the grid for forty days. You have to put yourself in situations where everything is stripped away, where nothing is scripted. You have to put yourself at the mercy of the elements and test your limits. That's how you discover what you're capable of and, more important, what God is capable of. That's how boys become men and men become men of God.

This book is for the man who wants to play the man but isn't entirely sure how. It's for the man who wants to be a father his children can honor and a husband his wife can respect, but he needs a little help. And the simple fact that you've picked up this book tells me that's *you*.

## The Enigma

There is an old axiom: “Men are from Mars and women are from Venus.”<sup>10</sup> But since we both live on Earth, we better figure this thing out. What does it mean to play the man? The white noise of cultural confusion coupled with the deafening silence of the church has left us insecure and unsure of our manhood. So we settle for something far less than what God originally intended.

Male and female he created them.<sup>11</sup>

Gender was God's idea. So it's not just a good idea; it's a God idea. And that goes for sex too, by the way. Manhood isn't a subject to be avoided. It's an objective to be sought after and celebrated. But where do we start?

The answer is God's original intent, God's original design. We must examine the first Adam, Adam—he's the prototype. And we must cross-examine the second Adam, Jesus—He's the archetype.

When the compass needle of masculinity is spinning, Jesus is true north. First Adam helps us understand what went wrong. Second Adam helps us make it right.

In many respects, Jesus is a study in contrasts. He is the Lamb of God and the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He is gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But meek isn't weak, and Jesus definitely had a wild side! He was tough as nails, seven-inch nails that pierced His hands and feet. But He was also man enough to cry.

Jesus is an enigma, the Enigma, and that is because He was fully God, fully man. Yes, He is the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent Son of God. But for thirty-three years, Jesus played the man. He subjected Himself to the laws of nature He created, taking on flesh and blood. It almost sounds sacrilegious, but Jesus went through puberty just like we do. Like us, He had to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. And He had to discover His destiny, His identity, and His masculinity. Of course, after discovering it, He defined it.

## Manhood Virtues

In his brilliant book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks makes a distinction between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. Résumé virtues are the skills you need to *make a living*, and those are often the most celebrated virtues in our culture. But when it comes to *making a life*, eulogy virtues win the day. These are the virtues that get talked about at your funeral.<sup>12</sup>

One danger of writing a book on manhood is that it's very difficult to decode the difference between biblical prototypes and cultural constructs. Much of what it means to be a man is determined by tradition. The expectations placed on men in first-century Israel and twenty-first-century America are very different. But I'll do my best to decipher the difference between the hardwiring—the image of God in us—and the software—cultural expectations.

It's increasingly difficult to differentiate culturally between what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. And for that very reason, it is more and more important to do so!

Every man needs a résumé, but that isn't the focus of this book. Man skills may win you man points, but manhood *virtues* win the heart of God. Virtue is much harder to develop than skill, and it takes much longer. But the payoff is far greater!

Don't beat yourself up if you fall short on any of these seven virtues. Remember, Jesus already paid the penalty for your sin. Don't try to double pay with feelings of guilt. Philippians 2:12 provides a good guideline for this:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

The irony of this statement is that salvation cannot be earned by good works; it can only be received as a free gift. But once you receive the gift of salvation, you have to take it to the gym and work it out.

You exercise virtue the same way you exercise muscles. You have to push them to their limits until they literally tremble. That's how you know the muscle fiber is breaking down, and that's how it gets built back up even stronger!

This might be a good opportunity for me to recommend that you read this book with someone else. Why? Because iron sharpens iron! You need someone to push you, someone to spot you. I know men have a reputation for being as relational as inanimate objects, but you can't reach your full potential without a band of brothers.

One final challenge.

The twentieth president of the United States, James B. Garfield, served two hundred days in office before being gunned down. Garfield is the only president who was also an ordained minister. And Garfield is the only president who didn't run for president! The 1880 Republican National Convention was in a deadlock after the thirty-fifth ballot. Garfield wasn't even on the ballot at the beginning of the convention, but he somehow managed to win the nomination on the thirty-sixth ballot.

How did a man who didn't seek the presidency end up in the White House? I'm not a political scientist, but I have a theory. I think it traces back to a defining decision James Garfield made as a young man.

"I mean to make myself a man," said Garfield, "and if I succeed in that, I shall succeed in everything else."<sup>13</sup>

Garfield made himself a man.

Then America made him president.

I'm not giving you a formula for becoming the next president of the United States. I am, however, giving you a formula for greatness, no matter who you are or what you do.

Like me, you wear many different hats. And you have many different dreams, no doubt. But if you focus on playing the man, everything else will fall into place. If you succeed at that, you will succeed at everything else.

Play the man!

PART 1

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**PLAY  
THE  
MAN**

*THE SEVEN VIRTUES*

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# 1

## Tough as Nails

### *The First Virtue of Manhood: Tough Love*

Behold, their brave men cry in the streets.

—Isaiah 33:7 NASB

**May 20, 1927**

**Roosevelt Field, Long Island**

At 7:52 a.m., a twenty-five-year-old pilot named Charles Lindbergh fired up his single-seat, single-engine airplane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Lindbergh almost ran out of runway before takeoff, but no brakes meant no turning back! Thirty-three hours, thirty minutes, and thirty seconds later, Lindbergh touched down in an airfield outside Paris, becoming the first person to make a solo nonstop transatlantic flight.

Half a dozen pilots before him had failed, buried at sea. And Lindbergh's flying résumé paled in comparison to theirs.

He was a mail pilot with a handful of barnstorming events under his belt. But what he lacked in experience, he more than made up for with mental toughness.

Lindbergh had no radio and no fuel gauge. He also got next to no sleep the night before! Because of weight limitations, Lindbergh hardly packed anything, not even a toothbrush. He only took one quart of water and five ham and chicken sandwiches. He ate only one of them.

Through the darkness of a moonless night, Lindbergh aimed at Europe. He flew as high as ten thousand feet and as low as ten feet, fighting thousands of miles of fog over the Atlantic Ocean. Lindbergh got the first hint that land was nearby when he saw a fishing boat as morning dawned on the second day. He closed the throttle and circled the boat, yelling, “Which way is Ireland?” The poor fisherman either didn’t speak English or was too spooked to answer.<sup>1</sup>

As the sun set for the second time in his epic journey, the lights of Le Bourget paved the way to Paris. He circled the Eiffel Tower, then flew toward what he thought would be an empty airfield. He found the airfield all right, but it wasn’t empty. Instead, a huge crowd crying, “*Vive!*” gave Lindbergh a hero’s welcome. Lindbergh won not only the \$25,000 Orteig Prize for the first nonstop flight from New York to Paris, but he also won the hearts of people around the world.

The day after his flight, newspapers ran 250,000 stories totaling thirty-six million words. One publication called it “the greatest event since the resurrection.” Lindbergh received so much fan mail—3.5 million letters—that thirty-eight Western Union employees were assigned to manage his mail.

So how did Lindbergh do it? How did he succeed in doing something so many others had failed to do? How did he endure the fog, the fear, the fatigue?

Here's my theory.

During the darkest hours of the night, I bet Charles Lindbergh thought of his grandfather, August Lindbergh.

In 1859, August Lindbergh immigrated to America from Sweden and found work at a sawmill in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. Two years later, Lindbergh fell into a whirring saw blade that tore through his upper torso. It left such a gaping hole that one eyewitness said they could see his beating heart.<sup>2</sup>

A half-conscious Lindbergh was carried home, where he waited *three days* for a doctor! When the doctor finally reached Lindbergh, he amputated what was left of his arm and sewed up the hole. Now, here's the amazing thing: August Lindbergh didn't scream or cry. Not even an "ouch!" He toughed it out, suffering in silence.<sup>3</sup>

With a grandfather like that, is it any wonder Charles crossed the Atlantic? Compared to all the pain and agony that his grandfather endured, a solo flight across the Atlantic was a cakewalk.

## **Toughen Up**

Next time someone complains a little too much about their aches and pains, tell them about August Lindbergh. I actually tried this with my youngest son, Josiah, when he was twelve years old. He might have been a tad too young for that gory story, but it worked like a charm. He quit complaining!

Reality check: most of our problems are first-world problems.

My wife, Lora, recently spent several days in a Syrian refugee camp on the border of Greece and Macedonia. The horrors that many of those refugees have endured is unconscionable—homes destroyed by bombs, families torn apart by civil war, children drowned at sea trying to escape. We have Syrian refugee friends who recently immigrated to the United States who actually buried their sixteen-year-old son alive for nine hours to protect him from being forcibly recruited to join ISIS. That will put your problems into perspective in a hurry.

The refugees can't go back home to Syria because their houses are destroyed, and they can't go forward because of a barbed-wire fence at the border. It's not unlike the situation the Israelite refugees found themselves in after the exodus—trapped between an uncrossable Red Sea and a stampeding Egyptian army.

That's a *tough spot*.

We, however, get frustrated when we miss a connecting flight or can't hook up to the internet. Really? We get upset over a thirty-minute delay before boarding a 450-ton Boeing 747 that will soar to thirty thousand feet in the air and get us wherever we want to go at half the speed of sound. We need to keep checking our perspective.

Sometimes we need to lighten up.

Sometimes we need to toughen up.

I'm not advocating wholesale stoicism. I am advocating a single virtue—toughness. It comes in lots of shapes and sizes, from physical toughness to mental toughness. But in this chapter I want to focus on the rarest form of toughness—tough love. That's the first virtue of manhood.

Tough love is far more difficult to attain than physical toughness, and far more important. It sets the men apart

from the boys! A tough guy isn't someone who can blacken an eye or bloody a nose; it's someone who is willing to be nailed to a cross for someone they love.

Playing the man is tough love!

## Take Up Your Cross

When you hear the phrase “tough guy,” who do you think of? Some people think of baseball iron man Cal Ripken or NFL icon Brett Favre. Or perhaps you recall your favorite film hero. Certainly William Wallace or Maximus Decimus Meridius come to mind for many! And they qualify as tough guys, no doubt.

But none of them carried a cross to Golgotha and then allowed themselves to be hammered to it with seven-inch nails.<sup>4</sup> And if we had been eyewitnesses to the crucifixion, we wouldn't read Luke 9:23 the same way:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

Take up your cross.

We say it so effortlessly, so flippantly. But that's because we read it figuratively. It's estimated that a Roman cross weighed three hundred pounds, and even if Jesus carried only the crossbar, it was still placed on raw flesh that had just been flogged! And He carried it no less than 650 yards down the *Via Dolorosa*.<sup>5</sup>

When I say “tough as nails,” this is what I mean. It's the epitome of toughness. Being a *tough guy* doesn't mean sticking up for yourself when you get offended. A true *tough guy* sacrifices himself for the sake of others.

Jesus didn't just carry a three-hundred-pound cross; He carried the weight of the world. Every offense ever committed was placed on His shoulders, and He carried it all the way to Calvary.

## Love Who?

In 1992, a grand dragon in the Ku Klux Klan made front-page news. For years, Larry Trapp terrorized a Jewish leader in his community named Michael Weisser, making death threats against him and his synagogue. Then one day Larry tore his Nazi flags, destroyed his hate literature, and renounced the KKK. Why? Because when Larry Trapp was dying of a diabetes-related kidney disease and unable to care for himself, Michael Weisser took him into his home and cared for him. "He showed me so much love," said Larry Trapp, "that I could not help but love [him] back."

That's tough love!

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>6</sup>

Tough love is loving others when they least expect it and least deserve it.

The message of the gospel can be captured in two words: *love conquers*. But that love is not the puppy love our culture celebrates à la *The Bachelorette*. It's a long-suffering love. It's a love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.<sup>7</sup> It's a love that even loves its enemies.

Tough love is sacrificial love—a love that is willing to be nailed to a cross for someone else’s sin. Tough love is unconditional love—a love that is not dictated by someone else’s performance. Tough love is covenantal love—for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health.

It’s easy loving your wife when everything is going great, right? When it’s not going great, it’s not so easy. Why? Because our love tends to be *reactive*. Tough love is *proactive*. It’s not a need-seeking love; it’s a need-meeting love. It doesn’t seek validation, because it doesn’t need any! It adds value to the beloved!

One of the great mistakes we make is thinking that God feels about us the same way we feel about ourselves. So we project our imperfections onto God. The reality is this: *there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any less than He already does*. God loves you perfectly, eternally.

I know you know that, but do you believe it?

Simply put: you mean the cross to Christ.

When we are at our worst, God is at His best. Think of it as the sacrifice of love, and like the sacrifice of praise, it may be the most meaningful form of love because it means loving someone when you least feel like it.

## **Unbar the Doors**

I recently spoke to a conference of pastors in Great Britain, and my speaking slot happened to be right after Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury. Not an easy act to follow! I pastor a church that is twenty years old, and I can hardly believe it’s been twenty years. Archbishop Welby pastors

a church that dates all the way back to AD 509. He's the 105th archbishop in a lineage that traces to Augustine of Canterbury.

During his talk, Archbishop Welby shared a story about Thomas Becket, one of his predecessors, who was murdered in 1171. Archbishop Becket and King Henry II didn't get along so well. In fact, the king said something to the effect of, "Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?"<sup>8</sup> Four knights interpreted that question as a royal command and set out to confront the archbishop. Arriving on December 29, 1170, they hid their weapons under a tree outside Canterbury Cathedral and their armor under their cloaks. When Becket refused to go with them peaceably, the knights retrieved their swords. The archbishop's clerics told him to bar the doors of the cathedral, but Becket did the opposite. "Unbar the doors!" he shouted. "Unbar the doors!"<sup>9</sup>

This is rather gruesome, but the crown of Becket's head was cut off, his brains spilling out. Becket's blood dyed the floor of the cathedral a crimson red.

It's on the very spot where Becket's blood was spilled that his assassination is rehearsed every year with the presiding archbishop playing the role of Becket. It's a solemn ritual, a profound reminder that, in the words of Archbishop Welby: "What we believe is worth dying for."<sup>10</sup>

So let me ask you this: Is your version of Christianity worth dying for?

It was for Thomas Becket. It was for eleven of the twelve apostles who were mercilessly martyred for their faith. And it was for an eighty-six-year-old bishop named Polycarp who played the man.

How about you?



## Anger Issues

In *Rocky III*, Rocky's rematch with Clubber Lang is a classic fight scene. Rocky takes it on the chin over and over and over, but he does it intentionally, mockingly. "You ain't so bad," he says, taunting Lang. "C'mon. You ain't so bad. You ain't so bad." His confused manager, Apollo Creed, calls it crazy: "He's getting killed!" Rocky's brother-in-law, Paulie, calls it strategy. "He's not getting killed, he's getting mad."<sup>11</sup>

We think of anger as being sinful, but sometimes not getting angry is sinful. The key is getting angry about the right thing, at the right time, in the right way. In the words of Aristotle, "Anybody can become angry, that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power, that is not easy."<sup>12</sup>

Anger is *not* sin. In fact, Scripture uses the strongest type of anger, *hate*, to describe how we should feel about sin.<sup>13</sup> And if we hated sin more, we might do it less! Now, if that gets translated the wrong way, it's extremely dangerous. It's *sin*, not *sinner*.

Jesus got mad.

He got mad at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He got mad at death when it robbed Him of His friend Lazarus. He got mad at the disciples when they tried to deter Him from the cross. He got mad at the money changers who turned the temple into a den of thieves, and then He threw a temple tantrum!

That's tough love!

Now, here's a little tip. If you try to play God instead of playing the man, it won't work out so well. When you try

to do God's job for Him, it backfires. It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict; it's your job to love.

We all have anger issues. It's important that we ask ourselves, *What am I getting angry at?* Some of us beat ourselves up because of the mistakes we've made, but those self-inflicted wounds undermine what God is trying to do in us and through us. Sometimes we get mad at God, thinking He is responsible for something that has happened in our lives. If we're going to get mad, we should get mad at the one who kills, steals, and destroys.

Here's some homework: take an anger inventory.

When do you get angry? Why? And what is the outcome? Do an anger autopsy. That's how you identify your triggers. Nine times out of ten, the trigger is not getting what you want when you want it. Which brings us right back to selfishness. You have to identify your sin triggers so you can lock the trigger instead of pulling it.

## **Thou Shalt Offend Pharisees**

“Who am I going to offend?”

That is one of the most important questions a man has to ask himself—and answer. This I promise you: you're going to offend someone! So who will it be? If you're afraid of offending people, you'll offend God. If you're afraid of offending God, you'll offend people. It's one or the other!

My advice? *Offend Pharisees!* That's what Jesus did, and He did it with great intentionality and consistency.

I'm naturally a peacemaker, and that can be Christlike. But sometimes keeping the peace is just conflict avoidance.

Yes, Jesus calmed the storm. But He also rocked the boat! Jesus didn't avoid conflict; He often caused it. Why? Because Jesus knew that conflict, not comfort, is the catalyst for growth.

Orson Welles gives a famous speech in *The Third Man*:

In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed—but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.<sup>14</sup>

My apologies to Swiss readers, but I rest my case!

One of the biggest mistakes I made as a young leader was trying to make everyone comfortable, but in the long run that doesn't do anybody any favors. I've since redefined my job description as a pastor. My job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and the latter is not less loving than the former. It's more so!

Comforting the afflicted is love.

Afflicting the comfortable is tough love.

It is so much easier to just avoid conflict, isn't it? So we delay discipline, but in the long run that hurts more than it helps. Or we postpone tough conversations because we lack the emotional energy or courage.

Tough love demands tough decisions, tough conversations.

Jesus could have healed any day of the week, but He often chose the Sabbath. Why? Because He knew it'd be twice as fun! Why not kill two birds with one stone? Heal sick bodies while getting under the thin skin of the self-righteous Pharisees. Jesus knew it would get their goat, and that's why He

did it. He was goading them. And that's what you do when you love someone. It's called *tough love*.

The words of the wise are like goads.<sup>15</sup>

A goad was a spiked stick used for driving cattle. Sometimes we have to say something *hurtful* in order to be *helpful*. If we fail to confront someone in their sin, we settle for the status quo. And that's not loving! If we really love them, if we really believe in them—then we goad them like a cattle driver. Now, let me nuance this a little bit, because it's *not* a license to hurt people.

You have to use the right words, at the right time, in the right spirit. If you have an agenda, keep your hurtful words to yourself. If you're simply venting your frustration or saying something that will make you feel better about yourself, then don't bother, because it will backfire.

You must genuinely have the other person's best interest at heart. And bookend your goading with lots of affirmation. That's how you speak the truth in love.<sup>16</sup>

As I look back on my life, you know who I respect the most? It's not those who "took it easy on me." It's those who pushed me to my potential, then pushed me past it. I didn't always like it at the time, but their goading led to growth.

Who do you need to goad?

And who have you licensed to goad you?

Playing the man doesn't allow pussyfooting. Postponing tough conversations only makes them more difficult. It also robs us of the opportunity for growth.

Iron doesn't sharpen iron without friction.

## Toughskins

When I was a kid, I wore a brand of blue jeans called *Toughskins*. The reinforced knees were a blend of Dacron Type 59 polyester and DuPont 420 nylon.<sup>17</sup> Those jeans came with a money-back guarantee that kids would outgrow them before they outwore them.

One of my frequently repeated prayers for my children is that they would have a *soft heart* toward God and toward their mom and dad. But that soft heart is best protected by *tough skin*. Thin skin doesn't cut it—it's too often injured, too easily offended.

One of my annual rituals is choosing a verse of the year. The verse I chose a few years ago was Proverbs 19:11: "It is to one's glory to overlook an offense." It was the same year I released a book, *The Circle Maker*, which has sold more copies than any of my other books but has also garnered its fair share of criticism.<sup>18</sup> It's no fun being falsely accused of false teaching or false motives. And I could have swallowed that pill and let it poison my spirit, but I made a decision to overlook the offense. My goal that year was to be *unoffendable*.

Don't let an arrow of criticism pierce your heart unless it first passes through the filter of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> No one is above rebuke, and we're all imperfect. So if the criticism is valid, repent. But if it's not, don't swallow the pill, because it will poison your spirit. Overlook the offense! You'll be more of a man because of it. Playing the man requires tough skin, and it's absolutely necessary if you want to play business, play politics, play sports, or even play marriage.

When I was in junior high school, I was called a few names that aren't fit for print. I'm sure you experienced this too. No

one *graduates* from junior high—they survive! But as I look back on it, I think it prepared me for real life by teaching me how to prove the naysayers wrong. Now, please don't use that as an excuse for name-calling. Bullying is a legitimate issue. When I was a kid, physical bullying was a real problem. Add social media to the mix, and it has gotten even uglier. Either way, there is no place for it. Nothing is more cowardly than bullying.

That said, I wonder if our culture of political correctness has left us too thin-skinned. Again, I'm not advocating for careless, thoughtless, heartless insults. But when political correctness becomes the Golden Rule, speaking truth becomes bigotry. Truth is crucified in the name of tolerance, undermining civil debate, conscientious objection, and religious conviction.

We live in a culture where it's wrong to say something is wrong. And I think that's wrong! Remaining silent on a subject that God has spoken about isn't loving—it's cowardly. And when we fail to use our voice, we lose our voice. We as the church should be more known for what we're *for* than what we're *against*. But playing the man requires standing up for what you believe in, even if you're standing alone.

A few diagnostic questions: When was the last time you were criticized? If it's been awhile, it should make you nervous. Why? Because it probably means you're maintaining the status quo rather than challenging it. You can't make a difference without making waves, and some people in the boat won't like it. So be it. Rock the boat anyway. Also, how easily offended are you? If the answer is *easily*, then you need to man up. When you take offense, you become defensive. And the second you become defensive, the kingdom of God stops advancing through you. Playing the man means playing

offense with your life. In marriage, playing offense is called romance. With your kids, it's the difference between reactive and proactive parenting. In the workplace, it's bringing your A-game attitude Monday through Friday, nine to five.

Jesus was constantly badgered by the religious paparazzi; He was apprehended by a self-righteous mob that chanted, "Crucify him."<sup>20</sup> Then He was flogged, mocked, and nailed to a cross by Roman soldiers.

Question: What didn't Jesus do?

Answer: Defend Himself.

Jesus was still playing offense on the cross. He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."<sup>21</sup> If you are defensive, then figure out who you need to forgive. Start playing offense by praying for them!

## **Blood, Sweat, and Tears**

Real men cry.

Ending a chapter titled "Tough as Nails" on that note feels a little funny, but I think it's an appropriate ending. If nothing is tougher for men than baring their souls and revealing their true feelings, then a true tough guy is someone who does just that.

In twenty years of leading National Community Church, I've tried to be strong and courageous. And that often means putting on a brave face and soldiering on. But if you surveyed our staff, I bet many of them would point to moments when I broke down and cried as the most meaningful, the most powerful.

I remember being emotionally wrecked once by a question during a session at the Catalyst Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. I took our staff to Catalyst for thirteen years straight, but this one moment ranks above the rest. Craig Groeschel

asked the question: “Does your heart break for the things that break the heart of God?” My honest answer was no. My heart had become calloused, not just my skin. So we delayed our reservation at P. F. Chang’s to have a come-to-Jesus meeting with our staff. We confessed. We cried. And not unlike the way a broken bone heals, my spirit became even stronger in the place where it had been broken.

I’m not saying you have to wear your emotions on your sleeve. But we’re men, not automatons. And sometimes crying is leading.

“Jesus wept.”<sup>22</sup>

It’s every kid’s favorite memory verse—two words! But those two words speak volumes about Jesus. The original language indicates intensity. This wasn’t a single teardrop rolling down His cheek—this was a meltdown! Jesus lost it, and I love this dimension of who He is.

Jesus got sad. Jesus got mad. Then Jesus got even, raising Lazarus from the dead.

Good leadership takes blood, sweat, and tears. You have to make sacrifices—blood. You have to work hard—sweat. But you also have to lead with empathy—tears. And you can’t fake this dimension of leadership!

When was the last time your wife saw you cry?

How about your kids?

What about your friends?

If it’s been awhile, you’re probably repressing something. And repression usually leads to obsession or depression. Your lack of vulnerability isn’t courageous, it’s cowardly!

Toughen up.

Tear up.

Play the man!