

MEN OR BOYS

EZEKIEL 22:30

“So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.”

An article in New Yorker magazine, on the family lives of some of America’s most famous 20th century authors, documents how few healthy homes existed.

The great novelist, Saul Bellow, was the classic example. He split with his wife early in his son’s life.

Greg Bellow was just eight years old when his father broke the news to him. They were sitting on a park bench in New York’s Central Park, when father Saul, told his son, Greg, he and his mom were divorcing.

Now an adult, Greg Bellow, writes in his memoirs about that moment. Obviously, it still pains him...

“I responded by making a snowball and letting fly at a nearby pigeon. What I really wished for was the courage to hit my father with the snowball. Under the childhood anger my father expected and hoped to see was sadness born of losing the parent who understood me best. At eight, I felt like a deep-sea diver cut off from my air supply.” The author of the article describes Greg Bellow’s writing as more like a “speaking wound.”

He characterizes his book as “pain bubbling up every few pages.” The son’s resentment still runs deep. “At sixty-nine, Bellow is still the drowning deep-sea diver.”

As in the Kelly Clarkson song, Jill sang earlier, the influence of a father lasts long, long after he no longer plays a practical or economic role in his child’s life.

Wounds linger... hurts fester... memories nag...

Her lyrics are haunting, “All I saw was your back walking towards the airport leaving us all in your past... Begged you to want me, but you didn’t want to...”

Kelly Clarkson wrote her song about the failures of *her dad* - and *the husband* who’s now showing her and her daughter what a dad truly can and should be.

The song’s chorus breathes hope, “He restored my faith that a man can be kind and a father can stay.”

It’s sad, but today 25 million American children live in a home like Kelly Clarkson grew up in - a home without their biological father - that’s 1 out of every 3 kids.

In 2013, 40% of American babies were born to single mothers - and that’s up from a meager 11% in 1960.

If you have a dad who was a good dad and a caring dad, who worked at it and stayed married to your mom, *even with his mistakes*, he gave you a valuable gift.

Not everyone is as fortunate... Some dads create painful memories. And tragically their unwitting kids grow up to

repeat their dad's mistakes. They become parents, who end up repeating the abuse or neglect.

Thoughtful parents, like Kelly Clarkson, make it their goal not to do to their kids what was done to them.

But one thing is certain, a father - for better or worse, casts an enormous shadow on the destiny of his child.

It's no secret that men in our culture are in trouble...

While women are graduating from colleges at record number - men are dropping out, or just not bothering...

Rather than get a job, find a wife, have kids, raise a family - many young men are postponing commitment.

They lack the will to take the bull by the horns and carve out a life for themselves. *They're men adrift...*

In fact, it's confusing to be a man these days...

Some fellows follow the machismo and swag of the gang life. They want to be tough, but think it's pushing folks around, or using women for sexual gratification...

Other men buy into the feminist notion that society prefers they act like girls... *"get in touch with your emotions, explore your feminine side."* They opt for soft

Still other men just sit there, and refuse to tackle a challenge or take a risk. They think life owes them. They assume the adult world passes out participation trophies too, and their prize should be coming soon...

Where are today's role models? Many young men have never been taught or shown how to be a man. Recently I read

a blog that listed, “The Fifty Manliest Men Ever.” The top three entries sum it up...

In 3rd place was **Babe Ruth**. Here’s the explanation why, “Everyday for Babe was eat, drink, sex, eat, play game, eat, drink. Despite his less-than-athletic training regiment, he held baseball records until just a few years ago. He even had a candy bar named after him.”

In 2nd place was hockey player, **Chris Nilan**. Here’s the justification, “He holds the highest average per game for penalty minutes, 4.42. He once accumulated 42 penalty minutes in one game. He was nicknamed “*Knuckles*.” Even hockey players feared him. He wasn’t very good, but everyone was scared to cut him.”

And the #1 manly man... **Al Bundy**. Yep, we’re told, “Sarcasm, putting a hand in one’s pants, being lazy, cursing, nagging your wife, watching sports, smelling bad, and complaining about everything... if Al didn’t invent it, he made it cool and taught us how to do it too.” This summarizes today’s concepts of manliness.

A manly man is either a guy who achieves greatness and fame without working for it... Or he’s the guy who uses violence to get his way... Or the guy who has a sorry and selfish attitude toward his work, his wife, his family, and life in general. And somehow makes rude look cool... These are today’s models for manhood...

Rather than take life by the throat and do what it takes to make something of themselves, many men today expect fame and fortune without working for it...

They get frustrated that doors don't open for them, so they resort to violence and try to kick in the doors...

Or they run from responsibility and live behind a fence of sarcasm... It's incredible, research shows 18 to 34 year old men now spend more time playing video games than 12 to 17 year old boys. In today's world, it's really difficult *to tell the men from the boys*. But there's a big difference, and it has little to do with age.

Boys play house, men build homes.

Boys shack up, men get married.

Boys make babies, men raise children.

A boy won't raise his own children, a man will raise someone else's... Boys invent excuses for failure, men make strategies for success... Boys look for somebody to take care of them, men look for someone to take care of... Boys seek popularity, men earn respect..."

Someone once said of a young male, "He's got all the equipment of manhood save the parts that matter."

If you're male don't let that be said of you. *Be a man!*

And if you're a lady know what a real man looks like.

Just because a person speaks in a low voice, has a few muscles on his frame, and hair on his chest doesn't make him a man. There's more to manliness.

What does it really mean to be a man?

Our coaches and drill sergeants and friends and uncles - and maybe even our father - screamed in our ear, "Be a man!" *But do we know what that means?*

This morning I want to answer two questions...

What does it mean to be a real man? And how do you tell the difference between a boy and a man?

This past week I ran across a checklist on the “**Art of Manliness**” website. It lists 100 skills every man should be able to do. I whittled the list down to thirty-three...

See how many of these skills you’ve mastered...

Tie a necktie... Build a campfire... Shine your shoes
Make a toast at a wedding... Know how to dance
Haggle on a price... Paddle a canoe... Parallel park
Fix a leaky faucet... Grill over charcoal... Tell a joke
Unclog a toilet... Throw a spiral... Change a flat tire
Give a hearty handshake... Shoot a gun
Identify poison ivy... Cast a fishing line
Dive headfirst... Split firewood
Drive a stick shift... Do a proper push up
Operate a chainsaw... Whistle with your fingers
Drive in the snow... Break a rack to pool balls
Make a logical argument... Jump start a car
Read a book... Ride a motorcycle... Fillet a fish
Hammer a nail without bending it... Tell a good story

It’s interesting God also identifies what it means to be a real man. But He doesn’t have a list of 100 skills a man should be able to do, or even thirty-three...

God only lists two... In Ezekiel 22:30 He declares, “**So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and**

stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.”

Here God identifies what it means to be a real man by listing the two tasks a man should excel at doing... A man should **make a wall** and **stand in the gap**...

And this is what a good dad does! It's no surprise that what makes *a real man* makes *a great father*.

A manly dad will build walls around his family, and he'll stand in the gap for his wife, and kids, and church.

Realize, in Chapter 22 the Prophet Ezekiel is writing of a terrible time in Israel's history that resulted in God's judgment. Verse 29 reveals the dire conditions...

“The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger...”

It was a day of chaos and cruelty. Personal liberties were being denied... Law-abiding, hard-working citizens were being preyed on - oppressed and robbed.

Rather than extend a helping hand, the people were turning on one another - and especially the most vulnerable of the society... the poor and needy - and the strangers (*the undocumented workers of their day*).

And God's solution to the problem was **a man!**

Not a committee, or a study group, or funding for more education, or a movement, or a revolution, or a new program, or new laws, or a new political party...

God knew the real answer was *a man*, or *men*, who would take responsibility - who would build walls for the people around them, and stand in the gap for others.

God sought for such a man - as He says, *“that I should not destroy...”* Here’s what I believe, if we’re to arrest and stave off God’s coming judgment on our nation, we also need men who will rise up and be men!

Tragically, God sought for *a man* in Israel, but says, *“I found no one.”* I pray He finds a few men here today.

Boys talk. Men do... Boys find reasons they can’t. Men find ways they can... Boys do what’s easy. Men do what’s right... Boys blame. Men take responsibility..

Boys avoid pain. Men endure pain for a higher good... Boys bellyache because the world is unfair. Men work for justice... Boys look for data to prove they’re right. Men seek wisdom in case they’re wrong..

Boys need more time to get ready. Men need more challenges to overcome... Boys hide fears. Men deal with their fears... Boys blame others for where they are in life. Men own where they are in life... Boys nurture insecurities. Men overcome their insecurities... Boys are scared to fail. Men push through their failures...

Notice first, God says men *“make”* or *“build.”*

Building has defined masculinity from the first man, Adam, onward. After God created Adam from the dust of the ground, He placed him in a garden to work that same dirt. God appointed Adam the caretaker of Eden.

God told the man to take dominion over the creation He made. It was Adam's job to oversee and build up.

God is a builder Himself. In just six days, He created the universe, and all its contents. And part of God's image in men is our tendency to build and oversee.

Even at an early age males have this desire to build.

When my kids were young my daughter played with her Barbie... while my three sons played with Lincoln logs and building blocks. If I had a quarter for every time I stepped on a Lego, I would be a rich man.

When we went to the beach my boys built sand castles - at a camp-out they built a fire.... In my old backyard we had a couple of sheds, four tree huts, and an underground tunnel. I brought home every stick of scrap wood I could find, and my boys built stuff.

And hopefully, men don't outgrow this desire to build.

Men like to take dominion - take charge over what they possess and build it up... This is why men tinker on cars and engines - build skyscrapers, bridges, and roads to remote locations, and send probes to Mars...

This is how invention happens, and our quality of life improves. Men in particular, are wired by nature to take dominion over their environment and rule their world.

Why do you think men like land?

My house sits on three acres and if you visit me we can walk my land, and I'll describe for you my plans. I'll point to

where the swimming pool could go - or where I'll cut out the baseball diamond for the grandkids...

In reality, I might not do any of it, but my thoughts are always on building. Men have an innate desire to build.

Above all, men build walls - *community structures*: like *marriages, families, churches, businesses, ministries, teams...* They provide people around them boundaries, and opportunities, and accountability. This allows the people they influence to grow and prosper.

A real man is busy making his world a better place!

As a matter of fact, if a man isn't building into his life, he becomes bored, and idle, and even dangerous. If he's not being *constructive*, he'll become *destructive*.

If a man doesn't love Jesus and people, he will end up cultivating evil interests and sinful, selfish desires. True manliness is about fabricating the right stuff.

When men **marry** they start to cultivate and build up their wives. Hopefully, they love off her rough edges. *Love her until she becomes lovable.* They instill trust.

When a man has a **child** it ramps up his responsibility further. He's called on to teach discipline, wisdom, courage, and respect - while making life fun.

When men build a **business** their goal is to make an honest profit and serve their community... When men form a **team** they provide younger men opportunities to grow... When men participate in **church** they enlist in its mission, and create environments where people can know God and love God. *How important is that!*

But building isn't easy. It never is. It wasn't for Adam.

After he sinned, he immediately ran into obstacles and opposition. Work that was at first, "*no sweat*," became hard labor. Adam now had to deal with thorns and thistles. He labored by the sweat of his brow.

Understand, after Adam sinned, everything under man's dominion started to buck and kick against his will. It was much tougher for him to build and cultivate.

This was also true of Nehemiah - *the Bible's great wall builder*. In the years following Ezekiel, when God got ready to bring His people back from Babel to the land He promised, Nehemiah led the construction.

He had a burden to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

But he too was faced with thorns, obstacles, and opposition. His enemies tried to thwart his building.

Your thorns and thistles may be *a client who won't pay on time... or rising costs... or an angry boss... or friction at home... or a nagging neighbors...* It's making what you want to build more difficult and more painful.

You're trying to cultivate a marriage but there're thorns and thistles. *Misunderstandings, angry words, past mistakes, ex-spouses, financial problems* – it's not easy to build love and harmony in your marriage.

Rebellion in a teenager, or stubbornness in a toddler... can become the thorns and thistles that interfere with the family you're trying to build.

Here's my point, after sin entered the world all building became problematic. It's a fallen world now. Everything in this life has become a fixer-upper.

And here's what separates *the men* from *the boys*.

A man understands there're no free passes. Building isn't easy. Every man's effort will get thwarted at times.

He has to fight through the thorns and thistles. *Get stuck and you can't quit...* Cultivation takes tenacity and perseverance. It's true in a job, and in a business, and in a marriage, and in a family, and in a church.

Boys opt for short-cuts. They want a wife, and job, and house, and kids that aren't a lot of work. You might as well believe in Santa Claus - he doesn't exist either.

Here's what a boy says... I want money, just not a regular job... I want to own a business, but without the long hours it requires... I want sex, but not the commitment of a marriage and a family... I want a cool church, I just don't want to give or serve or show up.

Let me say a word again to the unmarried women...

A gal cheapens herself by *shacking up* or *hooking up* with a guy who doesn't love her enough to take on the responsibility of marriage. I'm sure you've heard the adage, "*He's getting the milk without buying the cow.*"

Ladies, don't be some boy's shortcut.

I don't care what age is on his driver's license - when a woman gives her heart to a boy, not a man - she inevitably gets hurt by his immaturity and selfishness.

And ladies, marrying a boy won't make him a man.

You don't want to wake up - *a day, or a month, or even a few years* - after the wedding and realize you married a *pretend man* - a male who's still a boy.

Hey, honeymoons are fun - *and boys love honeymoons* - but it takes a man to stick with it when the honeymoon is over and the marriage is hard work.

Real men build walls - *i.e. structures and standards* that protect the people under their care. They provide the people they love with boundaries, opportunities, and accountability. *This is what a dad does for his kids.*

I've heard it said, "Kids are like stomachs. They don't need everything we can afford to give them."

Children don't need to be over indulged. They need to learn self-discipline - *how to defer a desire, and turn from temptation, and put principle above convenience.*

And one thing is for certain, a child won't develop the strength of character to say "*no to sin*" himself - if his parent has lacked the courage to say "*no to him.*"

Men are into building walls - that keep out danger, and elevate the perspective of those around them. Men like lifting folks to the top of a wall... But men are also willing get into the trenches and **stand** in the gap...

Boys seek permission. Men give permission... Boys repress. Men express... Boys are intimidated by other people's success. Men are inspired by the successes of others... Boys seek validation. Men give validation...

Boys look for who's responsible for the problem. Men look for how they can be responsible for the solution...

Boys put other people down. Men lift other people up...
Boys are controlled by emotions. Men are driven by goals...
Boys spend time finding a girl to sleep with. Men spend time finding a girl worth waking up to...

And a real man stands in the gap... he's not aloof and distant. He's engaged with his wife and children.

A man lives a connected life. He's plugged into people and plugged into God. A man is willing to *sacrifice for - fight for - pray for* those under his care.

Man was made in God's image and represents God to others. Like a Jewish priest, he serves as the go-between in His family's relationship with God. **He stands for God with His family, and for His family with God.** A man stands in the gap in lots of varied ways.

Every day a father's job is to undertake another person's cause... He feels for the trials and struggles his kids face... He seeks to bring his wife hope, and help, and healing... A father stands up for his family!

He offers them *moral support* and *practical help... protection and direction... provision and supervision...*

And he labors for them in a million - *often unseen ways*. Most importantly, a good and godly dad stands up for his family, *even while he's on his knees*.

I'll never forget an incident that happened at the ballpark when my youngest son, Mack, was a toddler.

I was coaching my older son's baseball team, while little Mack was innocently throwing rocks. He accidentally hit a lady who was strolling in the park.

She wasn't hurt - *and at the time Mack couldn't throw with enough velocity to break a window pane* - but this lady was angry, and wouldn't let bygones be bygones.

Her husband was a foreigner - somewhere from the Middle East. *Apparently he was from a part of the world where conflicts were settled with sword fights, and kids were beaten in the town square...* This guy demanded I subject my son to public chastisement.

I apologized to him for Mack, and told the man I'd correct my son - *but that wasn't good enough for this guy!* He wanted to take matters into his own hands...

That's when I had to bristle up and physically step between my toddler and Osama. I thought for a moment there'd be an altercation. He might've had a sword, but I had a baseball bat... I stood my ground...

Finally, he backed off. But the incident gave me a new appreciation for the phrase, "*standing in the gap.*"

And this is what every good father is willing to do!

He'll stand in the gap for his kids, even if it threatens his own safety. Every day a dad stands between his kids and a hostile world. He resists the evil moral and spiritual influences that are attacking his children - *threats far more dangerous than broken bats...*

And when his kids fail, dad deals with the mistakes they've made... He bears their burden to the degree that he can - he

teaches them from the fallout... And *instead of condemning them - and being embarrassed by them - and hanging his pride on their performance* - a dad just wants to see his kids forgiven and restored.

Don't misunderstand, a good dad sets the bar high for his kids, and follows through on his expectations, but in the end he loves his kids no matter what they do

And a real man also stands in the gap for His wife.

Rather than put her down, or condemn her, or drudge up her past mistakes - he's always pointing her to Jesus by his patience, forgiveness, and compassion.

Men, I hope you're not *one of **the boys*** who always complains about his wife, and says he doesn't love her any more. *Give me a break!* How many years has she lived with you - *5 years, 10 years?* Surely, long enough for you to invest in her life and make her more lovable.

What have you been doing to help your wife?

Understand what it meant for Jesus to stand in the gap for us. On the cross, He took our sins on His shoulders. He bore our burden - dealt with it Himself.

He took responsibility for stuff that was not His fault.

And this is what Jesus expects men to do for their families. A real man covers his wife and kids. He deals with *their issues* - *in their stead* - *for their sake*.

As I mentioned earlier, a man is like a priest. The Latin word "**priest**" meant "**bridge-builder**." This is why a man stands in the gap. He becomes a bridge to others.

A husband and father is a bridge from *what is* to *what can be* - a bridge from the *past* to the *future* - a bridge from *pain* to *prosperity* - a bridge from *hurt* to *healing* - a bridge from *embarrassment* to *honor* - a bridge from *a former life* to *a new life in Christ...*

Whatever it is that has the potential of drowning his family, a real man is willing to step in and be a bridge.

Men, your wife bears scars and hurts from past relationships. They're not your fault, but they're now your responsibility. You're God's healing agent to her.

You can love her, and cherish her, and forgive her, and remind her of who she is in Christ. You're the bridge that can bring her from guilt into acceptance.

Your adult kids have made mistakes on their own, and sometimes you have to let them suffer the consequences... but a dad remains the bridge that can help a truly repentant child to cross back over.

When I cast blame I leave people buried, but when I look for solutions and try to help, I become a bridge.

And this defines a man - *he bridges that gap.*

Rather than wash his hands of the situation, a real man gets down and dirty with other people's problems. A lot happens in life that a man can blame on the wife, or child, or dog. But a true man doesn't bellyache or cast blame. A manly man takes responsibility - *to pay her debt* - *to forgive their sin* - *to fix that break...*

If a man runs a business, he'll have employees that will make mistakes... On the job, his co-workers will let him down... Problems arise that man didn't cause...

On a team, in the hood, at the church, a real man doesn't look to cast blame, he solves the problem.

He takes responsibility for stuff that is not his fault.

Perhaps most importantly, a real man knows he's an example, and he treats that reality seriously. The Jewish priest was the people's closest link to God.

Their knowledge of God's wisdom, love, mercy, and truth were derived from their contact with the priest.

The priest had tremendous influence for better or worse. Because of him the nation ended up *loving God* or *avoiding God*. And this priestly power is the same sort of sway a father has over the lives of his kids.

A dad informs a child's impressions of God.

If you're ever in San Antonio, TX a must stop is the Alamo. I remember my first visit. I had always wanted to see where John Wayne held off Santa Ana's army.

Near the entrance to the Alamo, there's a portrait of one of its brave heroes - under which is an inscription.

It reads, "James Butler Bonham - no portrait of him exists. This is a portrait of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom."

And understand, no portrait of our hero exists either.

Jesus died for our freedom - yet God has ordained for our kids to know Jesus by looking at their dad.

It reminds me of the Sunday School class where the teacher ask the kids to draw a picture of God...

One child portrayed God as a brightly colored rainbow... Another child drew Him as an old man coming out from the clouds... Still another little boy drew God with a strong resemblance to Superman...

But the best sketch came from the little girl who said, "I don't know what God looks like, so I just drew a picture of my daddy." This is why I say, a father's role are big shoes to fill! For better or worse, a child learns about God by looking at the character of their dad.

What does it mean to be a man?

There's so many erroneous ideas today - including a lot of the macho versions of manhood and manliness.

If you don't hunt, or practice mixed martial arts, or enjoy sports it doesn't make you're less of a man.

If you want to know what it means to be a real man, God hits the nail on the head. **It's building walls and standing in the gap...** And these two activities are not for the faint of heart. They require a manly effort...

I'd think we'd all agree - it's a lot easier to *sit on the sidelines* than it is to *build a wall or stand in the gap*.

Often on the wall and in the gap you feel as if you're being shot at from both sides. The world is attacking from without - while your kids are resisting from within.

But a father belongs *on the wall* and *in the gap*. He wants to be involved where his kids rub up against the world - that's where they're shaped for better or worse.

Real men don't vacate, they take dominion.

They do whatever it takes to make their world a better place by *building walls* and *building bridges*.

A real man dares to make a difference. He's willing to shake up the status quo, even among the people he loves. He's not content to be a spectator, he's a player.

He mixes it up in the lives of his family and friends...

A real man loves and follows Jesus, so his kids will too... *When his daughter starts to date, he doesn't just watch it unfold, he gets involved in the process...* He feels his wife's hurts, and commits to helping her... *His friends are headed to hell, so he shares with them the Gospel...* He doesn't just taker at Church, He makes a contribution... *He's not just seeking success for Himself, but hopes to share its fruits with others...*

A real man will *take a risk* or *stay the course*. He'll do whatever it takes to elevate the quality of life for the people around him. *This is what it means to be a man!*

Boys tear down walls. Men build up walls.

Boys run for the hills. Men stand in the gap.

Don't be a boy, be a man!