

Acknowledging Loneliness'

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By Rob Pue

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I guess I'm a bit late addressing this topic. It's been coming across my desk for a while now, but I've relegated it to the "later," pile because it didn't seem that important to me. Maybe I thought it was just another concocted social crisis, undeserving of my time and attention, but I've come to understand this is a real thing that many are living with, and just maybe this particular demographic is finally worthy to be acknowledged.

I'm talking about the issue of "male loneliness." Certainly, all people deal with times of loneliness, but men are disproportionately affected and probably always have been, but like so many other things in a man's life, this emotional struggle has just been ignored.

Loneliness has been linked to a wide range of negative health outcomes, including increased depression, heart disease and even early death. In researching this, I learned that one out of four men in the US feel lonely or isolated *either all of most of the time*, and that same 25% of men reported having *no close friends at all*.

This affects Christian men too. According to a Barna study, 20% of practicing Christians – who are also regular churchgoers – reported feeling lonely *at least daily* and 10%

reported being lonely *all the time*. This number jumps to 50% for *single* Christian men, and participation in church or “men’s groups” doesn’t move the needle at all. While these men may interact with one another in group settings, it’s only on a surface level, with little to no depth in their relationships with one another.

And while men and women both experience times of loneliness, women are able to form social networks and share personal struggles and emotions with one another in ways that men haven’t felt appropriate or acceptable.

Maybe it’s the way we’re raised. Boys grow up with certain expectations required of them. They’re expected to be strong, tough, resilient, and keep their emotions to themselves. And, of course, nobody likes or respects a boy (or a man) who’s “needy” or a crybaby – but these gender expectations form mindsets that stay with them for life, thus making it very difficult for men to show any amount of vulnerability that could be construed as weakness.

Men are meant to be the workers, leaders, protectors and providers for their wives and children. A good man will willingly carry the weight of the world on his back for those he loves, but his efforts often go unacknowledged and taken for granted. A man must work hard to learn a trade that will allow him to earn a good living. Then, he must work hard at his job every day to bring home a paycheck and provide for family needs.

He’s also the one expected to deal with all the “man” stuff: all the yard work, home maintenance, lawn mowing, snow shoveling, car repairs, paying all the bills, fixing all the broken things, paying the taxes, attending to the happiness and contentment of his wife, setting a good example for his children, and in many cases, also sharing the household duties of cleaning, laundry, cooking, dishes, taking out the trash and pet care.

He doesn't expect constant praise for all his hard work. He embraces his role in life, but after a while, being taken for granted can take a serious toll on his emotions – and, of course, it's not socially acceptable for men to even *have* any emotional needs. If, after all this, he wears down and breaks physically – or worse yet, emotionally – he's considered wimpy and weak.

I share all this with you, because as a man myself, I understand that men have real struggles that they deal with alone, in silence. Most will never complain and as I said, most of us are more than willing to carry the weight of the world without praise. We don't expect acknowledgment or even a simple "thank you," though I admit there are times it would be nice. We tend to put ourselves and our own needs last, because that's just how it is. But sadly, all our hard work goes unnoticed by most – until it's no longer there because we can no longer do it.

When young men are courting their future wives, it's expected that they pay for everything. Yes, even in today's world, where modern girls claim to value their independence, and will proudly proclaim, "I don't need a man to take care of me..." (don't ever marry a woman like that, by the way). They still expect the guy to buy the dinner, provide the entertainment, drive an acceptable car, and prove his value as a man by putting in all the effort, lest he be found wanting and therefore rejected by the female for not being good enough. By the way guys, if you've done all this and were not granted the "honor" of a second date, consider yourself blessed, because you've just dodged a bullet.

But back to the main topic here, which is male loneliness. Men deal with a lot more than they're given credit for, and they do it willingly, unemotionally and silently. But it wears on us. Without close friends that we can be open, honest and even vulnerable with, it's easy to end up feeling very alone in life a lot of the time. Thank our Heavenly

Father that He blessed us with Godly wives to ease our burdens. As He said in Genesis 2, *"It is not good that the man should be alone."*

But we also need "guy friends" – others who can understand our unique situations, our callings and the daily demands of life that we bear as just part of who we are and what we do. Unfortunately, most of us walk these roads alone. Personally, I have a lot of people that I consider friends. But I can count on less than one hand the number of male friends that really know me, that I can open up to, share my struggles with and seek advice from. And none of these few close friends are local to my area. In fact, almost none even live in my state, so it's rare that I get to see them and spend time with them in person.

As men, we have a calling and duty to be strong and courageous, to work hard and be providers, protectors and servants. We're to be warriors – not weak, not lazy and certainly not cowardly. And even though we're trained from childhood on to not let our emotions or feelings show, we still have them. While most men are used to being "loners," we need to admit that we need male friends who can empathize with us in compassionate understanding. God's Word says so.

Ecclesiastes 4, *"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up."* Proverbs 27, *"Iron sharpeneth iron; so, a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend."* Galatians 6, *"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."*

In John 15, Jesus called His disciples His "friends," rather than servants, because He was able to share with them all His Father had shown Him.

David and Jonathan are examples of two men that were best

friends and we should learn from their example. Even in the midst of the worst adversity, we read of this bond of deep friendship, *"...the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."* I'm blessed in that I also have a friend like that, though he lives far away and we're rarely able to get together in person.

As men, we often have a hard time trusting other men, because we've learned things aren't always as they seem. I was once part of a men's prayer group, and we shared many personal, private struggles with one another, fully believing our time together in that small group was safe. We prayed for one another, counseled one another and bore one another's burdens. We told each other the truth, even when it was hard for them to hear. Proverbs 27, *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend..."*

Unfortunately, as it turned out, there were two deceivers among us, who betrayed our trust. And once that trust was broken, it was impossible to rebuild. *"The kisses of an enemy are deceitful."* Indeed.

As Christian men, we should also be aware that the root of our loneliness is often sin. It began in the Garden. When sin entered the world, brokenness entered relationships. Adam, once able to walk with God in the Garden in the cool of the day, suddenly found himself *hiding* from God. When caught in sin, Adam blamed Eve, and I would conclude that this not only isolated him from God and his wife, but the shame and guilt also isolated him internally.

Pride is another sin that causes us loneliness. As men, we think we need to hold everything together and conquer life on our own. We don't want to be seen as weak or vulnerable, so we have a hard time letting our guard down, dropping our pride and bonding with our Christian brothers. But James tells us we are to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another.

Once again, God's way is the opposite of the world's way. The enemy would prefer we remain isolated, emotionally distressed, lonely and even hopeless. There are many examples in Scripture of men who felt exactly these ways. Think of Job, Elijah, David and Paul. But God's Word tells us to connect, to be genuine, vulnerable, open, honest, loving and caring toward one another. And we're also reminded that we, and Christ-followers, also have a Friend who sticks closer than a brother.

I know it's hard to trust. My trust in others has been betrayed more times than I can count. But the truth is, it's impossible to form these vitally-important close friendships if there's no trust; if you're not willing to let your defenses fall and allow people to see that you're not perfect, that your life can be hard sometimes and that sometimes, though your faith is strong, your will is weak.

It's ok. God does some of His best work in the midst of our weakness. We all need love and connection, and the comfort of Godly friendship in this world we've been battling for so long on our own. Where do you find such a friend? First and foremost, in Jesus, because as you know, "What a Friend we have in Jesus!" But then take another look at your long list of "acquaintances" and consider which one you would like to be a friend to. Then, invest some time in getting to know that brother better.

Instead of the surface "friendship" you may have now, talking only about the weather, the kids, your job or sports, allow yourself to be open with them and deepen that connection. Your soul will rejoice when you have a true friend like this. But to have such a friend, you need to be a friend. One who would never betray their trust. One who would drop everything to help in their time of need. One who doesn't just say, "I'll be praying for you," but instead, stops everything and prays with them right in that moment.

Bottom line, if we want to break out of the trap of “male loneliness,” we need to understand that we *need* connection. Even as men, we must admit we have emotional needs that can only be understood and met by other men, who understand our unique struggles and challenges, and then, allow ourselves to trust. Openly, honestly and deeply – with no other agendas, except to offer empathy, understanding and compassion as brothers in Christ.

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