When Power Is Misused
Finding The True Strength Of A Man
by Jeff Olson

The 1992 motion picture *A Few Good Men* tells the story of two US Marines put on trial for the murder of a fellow platoon mate. Under orders from their commanding officer, they had carried out a “code red” against a fellow soldier thought to be a dishonorable slacker. Also known as “hazing,” a “code red” is an illegal and extreme form of physical discipline sometimes used to teach a lesson. In this case, the “code red” triggered an undetected medical condition that not only contributed to the fellow Marine’s underperformance but also led to his untimely death.

The two Marines accused of the murder were defended by a trio of military lawyers who were split on how they viewed their clients. Two of the lawyers believed the men were innocent because they were following orders. Although the third lawyer accepted their contention that they were under orders, he believed there was no excuse for what they did and that they should be severely punished.
At a very tense moment in the trial, the lawyer who had little sympathy for the accused Marines was asked by one of his colleagues to explain why he disliked his clients so much. He explained, “They beat up on a weakling! . . . They tortured and tormented a weaker kid. They didn’t like him. And they killed him.” Moments later he shot back the question, “Why do you like them so much?” The sympathetic lawyer replied, “Because they stand on a wall, and they say, ‘Nothing’s gonna hurt you tonight. Not on my watch.’”

In that brief exchange, the film powerfully taps into both the good and the bad side of masculine strength. There is the good side that steps up and comes through for others. From daily providing for their families to courageous acts of heroism. From forging homesteads out of the rugged wilderness to protecting their country against hostile forces. We don’t have to look hard to find stories of men stepping up and exerting themselves, often at great personal risk, for the benefit of others.

This film, however, reminds us that there is a dark side to male strength. The pages of history also chronicle the tragic story of masculine energy gone bad. Over the centuries, husbands, fathers, sons, friends, church leaders, employers, and civic authorities have used forms of masculine strength to bully and hurt others.

Violent crimes, which are for the most part committed by men, are obvious examples of the abuse of male strength. The misuse of masculine strength, however, is not necessarily played out in physical violence. The
problem is much broader. With a sharp look of disapproval, a raised voice, or an intimidating threat, men are able to throw their weight around and walk all over people without breaking a law or laying a hand on someone.

Before we get too far, let’s make it clear that the purpose of this booklet is not to engage in male-bashing. Masculinity has taken enough of a bad rap. Maleness is not villainous. It’s a reflection of God Himself (Gen. 1:27) and declared by Him to be “very good” (v.31).

Men don’t have to apologize for their gender or their strength. Still, all of us men need to be open to see where, how, and why we’ve misused our strength—and hurt others in the process.

If you are a man who has a pattern of dominating others, something has likely happened that caused you to pick up this booklet. A friend may have stood up to you and said, “You’re too hard on people.” Your wife may have filed for separation or divorce. You may even have been arrested or lost your job. It may not seem like it now, but it’s a good thing if it has gotten your attention. You are now at a place to start taking more seriously the way you treat people.

Whether you are troubled by the way you bully people and mishandle your power, or even if you don’t think you cross that line, please read on.

The following pages are one small effort to help men begin putting a finger on what’s gone wrong in the hearts of males whose strength has turned bad. Further, it’s our hope to help men discover and deepen a God-given desire to use their strength to “stand on a wall” for others.
What’s Gone Wrong?

Pick up a newspaper or go to your favorite online news site. It doesn’t take long to see that masculine strength has taken a turn for the worse. It’s gone in directions that God never intended. To understand what’s gone wrong, let’s step back and consider misused strength by men from a larger context.

A Divine Starting Point. The Bible describes God’s character and purposes as a mysterious and wonderful mixture of strength and tenderness, justice and mercy. David, a man who was closely acquainted with the nature of God’s heart, summed Him up this way: “One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving” (Ps. 62:11-12). Jesus had some fairly harsh words for the religious hypocrites of His day who neglected both the “justice and the love of God” (Lk. 11:42).

Both men and women are created as equally valuable image bearers of God (Gen. 1:27). And both genders possess and reflect the strength and tenderness of their Creator. Without getting into a discussion about the similarities and differences between men and women, it’s reasonable to say what common sense has told us all along—that strength is an important starting point for masculinity.

Most adult men develop significant upper body strength. Research also shows that males build muscle easily and are built for physical clashes and the use of force.

The biblical narrative puts its own emphasis on
the strength of a man.
Heman, a very wise
contemporary of Solomon
(1 Ki. 4:31), implied that
something vital is missing
when a man lacks strength.
He said that “a man without
strength” was like one who
was dead and remembered
no more (Ps. 88:4-5).

“So be strong, show
yourself a man” (1 Ki. 2:2)
are the words the great
King David began with
as he challenged his
son Solomon in the last
moments of his own life. On
his deathbed, a time when
people cut to the chase
about the things that matter
most, David stressed to his
son the connection between
being a man and and acting
capable and strong.

The apostle Paul also
stressed that strength is
the place for a man to begin.
Notice the following charge
he gave to the men at
Corinth: “Act like men, be
strong” (1 Cor. 16:13 NASB).

Paul wasn’t telling them
to be arrogant or to feel the
need to prove themselves to
others. He was encouraging
them to act legitimately
confident as they contended
with the challenges of life.
Paul’s words were not a
mere suggestion—“By the
way, it might be a good idea
if you guys acted capable
and strong.” Far from it.
His words were directive
as well as instructive about
what is at the heart of
being a man.

Being strong and coming
through for others is an
essential component of
masculinity. While parts of
culture and society promote
twisted and violent versions
of male strength, it’s a basic
trait that men are endowed
with and are meant to offer
to their world. And there is
more to it than just being
physically powerful.
Masculine strength isn’t
just about muscle mass or
how much weight a man
can bench-press. God packages masculine strength in all physical shapes and sizes. A physically smaller male doesn’t have to join a gym and bulk up to be strong. A physically handicapped man is not doomed to a life of weakness. Even men of small physical stature or those with a physical limitation can live strong and courageous lives.

Every man, regardless of his size or weight, is born with an essential strength in his heart that is central to his being and yet unique in its expression. Sometimes strength is expressed in physically heroic measures to protect or rescue someone in harm’s way. Other times it is shown by speaking up or by simply making a difficult choice. There are even moments when quiet strength is expressed through a look or a presence that lets others know he means business.

However it’s expressed, strength is that quality of stepping up and taking action when danger calls. It’s about assertiveness and movement versus passivity and paralysis. Rather than shrinking back in fear, it is having a spine, forging ahead and making tough and unpopular decisions. Instead of being a pushover, it’s standing one’s ground in the face of sharp opposition. It is that part of a man that will rise up and go to bat for others or even be big enough to admit when he’s wrong.

While we should respect and appreciate the right kind of masculine strength, it never implies superiority or greater value. Nor does it mean that men have to cut out their gracious and gentle side. Sometimes a man needs to be gentle like the apostle Paul was to the church in Thessalonica.
when he wrote: “We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children” (1 Th. 2:7). But Paul was not gentle at the expense of his strength. When he needed to be strong, like the time the Jews “opposed” him and “became abusive,” he stood his ground and confronted their abuse (Acts 18:6).

Earlier, when some men in Jerusalem tried to take away the Galatians’ freedom found in Christ to make them slaves again to religious rules, Paul and his men held their ground and “did not give in to them for a moment” (Gal. 2:4-5).

Strength Turned Bad. God created men to be initiators and to come through when the going gets tough. But early in the story of humanity when that strength was put to the test, it failed and eventually turned bad.

The book of Genesis may indicate that Adam was present the day Satan tempted Eve. Genesis 3:6 tells us, “She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” The Hebrew word translated “with her” means “right there, shoulder to shoulder.” Adam may not have been somewhere off in a different part of the Garden of Eden when Satan lied to and deceived Eve. The phrase “with her” implies that Adam could have been standing next to her as Satan misled her. Even if he wasn’t actually present, as some suggest, there still was a moment of truth when Adam needed to step up and do something, to say something, to intervene. But he did nothing.

When history hung in the balance and humanity counted on Adam’s strength, he lost his nerve and froze. There’s no record that he spoke up—only silence.
At crunch time, he choked on his words and passively allowed his wife to lead. When Adam took a bite out of the forbidden fruit, God cursed the ground because Adam “listened” to Eve (Gen. 3:17). This was an indictment of his failure to be strong and to speak up.

Another important twist to the Genesis story is that God had not yet created Eve when He instructed Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:15-17). That means that when Satan was tempting Eve, Adam should not have remained silent. God specifically entrusted Adam with firsthand knowledge of this vital information—to pass it along and to protect its integrity. Consequently, Adam should have spoken up and clarified what God actually said. He could have said, “Eve, the snake has it all wrong. I was there when God said not to eat from this tree, and the snake’s trying to trick you. I’m not sure what’s going on here, but he’s misquoting God. Please don’t listen to him.”

Instead, he sat on vital information and followed his wife into disobedience.

One of the results of Adam’s silence has been more male passivity. All of us men have followed in Adam’s footsteps more often than we care to admit. But it was only a matter of time before Adam’s passivity led to the violence and misuse of strength that has plagued the world.

Within one generation of Adam’s failure to be strong, masculine strength turned into murder when Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4). Only a few generations later, Lamech followed suit and killed a man for “wounding” him and threatened to kill anyone who dared to cross him again (Gen. 4:23-24).
From there, violence spread like a cancer. Apparently, things got so out of hand that one reason God flooded the earth was because of the violence of men (Gen. 6).

Even before Cain turned on his brother and murdered him, God had predicted (not condoned) that men would mishandle their power. Before banishing Adam and Eve from Eden, God said that one of the tragic results of humanity’s fall into sin would be that men would use their strength to dominate women. “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). The Hebrew word translated “rule” means “to dominate.”

There is something to the notion that it is a man’s world. Throughout history, men have used their strength to maintain the upper hand against women. For instance, many male-dominated cultures have wrongly viewed women as nothing more than property or sexual objects. They were not allowed to voice their opinions and were not given opportunities for education. Although parts of the world have recently granted women privileges that for centuries belonged only to men, women have historically been relegated to little more than cooking, cleaning, and bearing children. Sadly, many in the church today have twisted New Testament statements about male headship to justify male domination in the home.

From the start of the human story, something went terribly wrong. Eve’s temptation by Satan put Adam’s strength to the test—and he failed. Masculine strength eventually turned bad. Like Diotrephes (the villain in the New Testament book
of 3 John) who maliciously imposed his will on others (1:9-10), men have had a tendency to misuse their strength ever since. For some men, it happens occasionally. For others, it develops into a destructive way of life.

Part of the reason many men turn out to be so harsh and pushy is that their family and society have trained them and given them permission to be self-centered and heavy-handed. Taking away that permission by showing men they don’t have the right to dominate anyone would go a long way in turning things around for the good. To more fully understand the misuse of masculine strength, however, we must also look into the heart of men who walk over others. We’ll find a wounded strength that is a part of every man’s story.

What’s Behind The Misuse Of Strength?

Near the end of the classic film *The Wizard Of Oz*, Dorothy and her three companions meet up again with the mysterious wizard. No one had ever seen the “great and powerful” Oz, but his booming voice portrayed him as a mighty force to be reckoned with—that is, until Dorothy’s little dog Toto pulls away the curtain to Oz’s control room, showing him to be a small, insecure man with a weak and unassuming voice.

It’s not always immediately seen, but there’s a common reason men misuse their strength. Like Oz, there’s more going on behind a man’s show of force that further explains (yet never excuses) his pattern of using power to control people. It’s the
contention of this booklet that there’s a wounded strength deep down inside most men who routinely misuse their strength. They may hide it well behind an abrasive front or false bravado, but it’s there. Let’s pull back the curtain of a man’s show of force and consider strength that has been shamed or badly ignored.

**Shamed Strength.**

To be affirmed as strong and capable is essential to males. God the Father’s relationship with Jesus could serve as an example of the importance of a father affirming a son when He said to Jesus: “You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased” (Lk. 3:22).

The unfortunate reality is that we live in a less-than-perfect world where every man questions himself. To some degree, we all wonder if we have the strength to come through when we’re called on. It’s a doubt that cuts to the core of our character. Though most do not easily admit it, such doubts and feelings of inadequacy run deep in the hearts of men who have a habit of pushing others around. Their doubts often come as a result of being shamed and belittled in their formative years.

One man remembers that when he was growing up, his father often called him a sissy or a little girl. He chided his son about his failures and rarely noticed his accomplishments. Some, like the man just mentioned, had their sense of adequacy ridiculed by a hostile parent. Others had peers, teachers, coaches, and a number of authority figures reinforce the idea that they were weak and lacking. Even life’s circumstances, such as childhood abuse, losing a job, growing up in poverty, or a long-term illness, can
leave some big questions that undermine self-confidence.

**Ignored Strength.** Not only can strength be shamed and undermined, it can also be ignored altogether. In some cases, the adults who were meant to build up and encourage a young boy’s sense of adequacy simply weren’t present. For a number of reasons—a divorce, a job that required long hours or a lot of traveling, or some other extenuating circumstances—their fathers were absent or just plain uninvolved. When it came to speaking to their sons about their competency, they were silent. Sadly, many fathers couldn’t pass along and validate in their sons a sense of adequacy because it was never affirmed in them.

**The Message Of Wounded Strength.** Whether a sense of strength is shamed or ignored, it sends an unsettling message that will eat away at a male’s sense of competency. It whispers and sometimes shouts to their hearts, “You are weak! You don’t have what it takes! What little strength you may have is not enough.”

The message of such wounds is so powerful that it can slowly begin to rule a male. Taking their cue from earlier messages, some men will gravitate toward a life of fearful passivity and avoidance. Others will handle it by going to the other extreme and will angrily mishandle their power. These males learn to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy by bullying others or lashing out at those who make them feel small. Some constantly live with a big chip on their shoulder, out to prove themselves. They come to believe the lie that making
others feel weak or overly dependent on them makes them bigger and better than everyone else.

Saul, Israel’s first king, is a prime example of a man who exhibited both extremes. Even though he was a physically “impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others” (1 Sam. 9:2), he had come to believe a completely different message about himself.

When the prophet Samuel told Saul about God’s plans to make him king and deliver Israel from their archenemies, the Philistines, he balked. He said to Samuel, “Why do you say such a thing to me?” (1 Sam. 9:21). His response betrayed his true view of himself—a man who was “small in [his] own eyes” (1 Sam. 15:17). In fact, he felt so inadequate and unsure of himself that when it came time for Samuel to present Saul to the people as their king, he tried to hide among some baggage so that no one could find him (1 Sam. 10:22).

The biblical narrative doesn’t tell us the details of what chipped away at Saul’s view of himself. We don’t know if his father or someone else demoralized him or ignored his strength. What we do know is that after Saul was anointed king, some “troublemakers” mocked his strength. “How can this fellow save us?” they jeered. “They despised him and brought him no gifts.” Not surprisingly, he “kept silent” as they carried on (1 Sam. 10:27). Saul just took it like someone who was accustomed to hearing such things about himself.

Despite what Saul had come to believe, God had put His stamp of validation on him. He was
the man for the job. And for a time, Saul apparently believed it. Under the power of God’s Spirit, he stepped up and powerfully answered God’s call on his life. (First Samuel 11 records the courageous military campaign he led to rescue the city of Jabesh.) But it didn’t last long. The old message of inadequacy returned as he grew to be more controlled by what others thought about him than by God’s approval. Instead of being a strong leader and following God’s commands, he started to compromise and make concessions out of fear. When Samuel confronted him, he finally admitted, “I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them” (1 Sam. 15:24). And it cost him his throne.

As God began to tear the kingdom away from Saul, he became increasingly hardened and violent. It only got worse for Saul when his future replacement’s military successes caused his popularity to swell among the people (1 Sam. 18:5-9). It galled him as the crowd cheered, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” The last half of the book of 1 Samuel records the tragic story of an increasingly insecure and jealous man who resisted God and repeatedly tried (but failed) to kill David. In the end, he took his own life as he was being overrun by the very enemy from whom he was called to rescue his people (1 Sam. 31:1-6).

False Strength. Out of the message of wounded strength men manufacture a contrived strength. When a man lashes out physically or tramples others with his words, he may appear to be strong. It may feel strong to him, at least for the moment, but bullying others is not a genuine strength.
It’s often a distorted counterfeit that tries to compensate for feelings of weakness and inferiority. Wounded strength may not account for every time men dominate and push others around, but it is behind the problem far more than we realize. More often than not, males misuse their power because somewhere deep down they believe they are small and powerless. Few see the wounded strength underneath, least of all the bully himself. Still, beneath much of it is a deep uncertainty that he doesn’t have what it takes.

Men who are mean and domineering are often uncertain about their real God-given strength. And we don’t help them, or the ones they continue to hurt, by just scolding them and punishing their behavior. The failure of prison systems to “reform” criminal offenders is an expensive reminder that treating the symptom doesn’t work. The issue is always the heart.

Nothing justifies a man walking over people and treating others in an authoritarian way. While we need to boldly confront the misuse of strength by men and lovingly hold them accountable for the sake of those they hurt, there’s a greater goal than just modified behavior. We want to help these men see that there is a wounded strength inside of them that doesn’t have to rule them anymore. We want to help them realize there’s a way for their wounded hearts to mend and that they can find and use an indispensable strength that brings life and protection. We want them to know the freedom, life, and strength that can be found only in Christ (Jn. 10:10; Gal. 5:1).
Strength Restored

There is a strength, a good strength, somewhere inside men who misuse it. But it can’t be found and restored for good if we try to strip men of their masculinity. In his book *Raising A Modern-Day Knight*, Robert Lewis notes that men in our culture are “being stripped of their maleness. . . . Over the last few decades, this culture has steadily and relentlessly undermined healthy notions of what it means to be a man. Once-noble images of masculinity have now been replaced by images of men behaving badly. . . . Manhood is no longer a unique calling: it’s now seen more as a problem to overcome” (pp.2-3).

Certainly, one important way to turn things around is by teaching men who behave like tyrants to be less self-centered and more sensitive to the needs of others. But the solution is not to do away with a man’s strength—to throw it out like a faulty or useless part. That’s a tragic mistake that emasculates men. Our world equally suffers from a lack of men with backbone.

It’s important to keep in mind that the legitimate strength of a man accounts for much of the good and heroism in the world. Remember, it was a band of men on Flight 93 who rushed the cockpit and prevented the hijackers from flying another airplane into a crowded building on September 11, 2001.

In East Greenbush, New York, it was two male teachers who tackled and disarmed a 16-year-old who had opened fire on his classmates on February 9, 2005. May we never forget that nearly 2,000 years
earlier it was a Man who spent every ounce of strength in His being as He willingly suffered excruciating torture and gave “His life as a ransom” for the world (Mk. 10:45).

If you are a man who has a habit of throwing your weight around, literally or figuratively, you don’t have to sacrifice being strong. Yes, you have some rough edges that need smoothing, but there still remains an essential strength within you. God is the One who put it inside you, and He wants it restored. He wants you to learn how to use it for noble and great purposes that you’ve yet to discover.

Finding what that means for you is a deeply personal process that requires time. Along the way, there will be some difficult things to acknowledge and work through. There are no easy formulas to follow, but as with most major breakthroughs in a person’s life, it starts with admitting that you have a serious problem.

Admit That You Have A Problem.

Whether you do it with words or brute strength, at home or out in the community, it’s essential to admit that you bully others. There is no way of getting around this. Those who admit they have a problem can change. Those who don’t, will not.

You might try to minimize your problem by claiming that others are at fault. You may justify what you do because you feel pushed around. You might be tempted to believe the lies that if people would just stop being so sensitive or just be more attentive to your needs, things would get better. The truth is that your misuse of strength will only get worse if you continue to point the finger...
at others and operate from the selfish idea that the world revolves around you.

Admitting your problem may be especially difficult if you are the type who acts nice and charming to some people. Many may be fooled by your charm. You may have even fooled yourself and don’t really know what you’re doing. None of it, however, changes the fact that there are those in your life—a spouse, your children, a friend, a co-worker, an employee—who consider you abrasive and controlling.

If you get stuck on this point and can’t admit this about yourself, remain open. Be willing to be wrong. People can’t make you admit to something that is painfully obvious only to them. But be open to the fact that others may see a side of you that you don’t currently see.

Even Paul had trouble seeing that he had a problem. Until he was confronted on the Damascus road, he was convinced in his own mind that hunting Christians down and persecuting them was God’s will (Acts 9:1-18). God opened Paul’s eyes to see the truth about himself. God can open your eyes too. So ask Him to help you search your heart for as long as it takes till you start to see your problem for what it is. Pray with the psalmist: “Search me, O God, and know my heart . . . . See if there is any offensive way in me” (Ps. 139:23-24).

You are well on your way to restoration when you admit your problem. And once you surrender to God, you will be able to make more progress than you ever thought possible.

**Surrender To God.**

Jesus taught, “Whoever wants to save his life will
lose it” (Lk. 9:24). He didn’t mean that we must physically die. Nor was He calling for an end to all personal confidence. What must “die,” according to Jesus, is our commitment to self-sufficiency. We must give up the self-absorbed illusion that we can manage life without Him. In other words, we will not find the life God wants us to have until we humbly get out of the way and allow Him to be the Lord of our life.

If surrendering to God feels like putting your life into the hands of a complete stranger, a major turning point will occur when you see your need for God’s forgiveness and accept His offer of a restored relationship through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Mt. 20:28; Jn. 3:16). Putting your faith in Jesus doesn’t make the struggles of life disappear, but it is your spiritual starting point to a new-found life. Paul wrote, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead . . . , we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6:4).

Whether you entered into a relationship with God recently or years ago, you can surrender and start to get deeply connected with the One who cares about you and believes in you like no one you’ve ever known. God is a person, not a set of rules. And relationship with Him is not primarily about going to church and behaving yourself. The Scriptures teach that rules will enslave us and drain us of life if we make them the focus (2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 4:9).

At its core, relationship with God is an intimate friendship. From Moses to Paul, the Bible tells the story of a God who wants to be our constant companion and converse regularly with us. As Jesus put it, “I no longer call you servants,
because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends” (Jn. 15:15).

Surrendering to God is not a one-time event. Surrender is a place you return to in your heart again and again. It’s where you center yourself in God’s authority and friendship on a daily basis. Some days you may surrender willingly. Other days you might have to wrestle with God before you go there. Still, from a surrendered heart, you can begin to truly confess the difficult things you’ve begun to see about yourself.

**Confess Your Misuse Of Strength.** Regardless of where you misuse your strength, it’s essential to admit to yourself that you have a pattern of controlling others. As you have the opportunity, it’s equally important to personally acknowledge what you’ve done to hurt others.

Be sincere and specific. It’s not enough to simply say the words, “Okay, I admit it. I sometimes push you around.” Confess the details. As best as you can, genuinely acknowledge how you dominate others and when you tend to do it.

For example, one harsh and uncompromising boss finally admitted that he rarely lets anyone tell him anything. He acknowledged that he does whatever he pleases, regardless of the effect on others.

Along with confessing to others, it’s vital that you humbly confess your misuse of strength to God. God doesn’t want to condemn you. Like the father of the prodigal son, He wants to embrace and forgive you (Lk. 15:11-24). God welcomes your humility. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6). More than anything, however,
He wants to celebrate your change of heart.

God’s gracious response may not be what you’ve come to expect, especially if you were mocked or made to pay dearly for your mistakes as you were growing up. Let today, however, be the day you are surprised by His kindness. Let His grace and mercy leave you stunned and speechless. Let Him love you, especially at your worst. Soak in His forgiveness like the warm sun on a winter’s day. Let it fill your heart with grateful celebration (Ps. 65:3).

Do you feel that God won’t use you now because of what you’ve done to others? Well, there may be some consequences for misusing your strength, but God hasn’t written you off. In fact, He’s just getting started. Forgiveness, as huge and surprising as that is, is just the beginning. You can continue to become a different man who offers his strength for the good of God and others. An important sign that this is beginning to take shape in your life is a willingness to take responsibility for the pain you’ve caused others.

**Take Responsibility For The Harm You’ve Caused Others.** A man who has bullied people and misused his strength has victims. And he shouldn’t take lightly the effect he’s had on others. There is much more to it than simply saying, “I’m sorry.” Although you may have moments when you feel and express deep regret and sorrow over the harm you’ve caused, it takes months and sometimes years for a man to truly understand and take responsibility for the way he has hurt others with his strength.
Those who truly own the hurt they’ve caused others are willing to accept the consequences of their actions. They are willing to bear the burden that they haven’t been a safe person to be around. They take responsibility for the fear and mistrust they’ve caused others. They give the people they’ve hurt as much time as they need to work through the pain they’ve created. They are willing to do whatever it takes to rebuild the trust they have broken.

It’s important to be aware that the people you have hurt will likely hurt you in some of their own responses. Make it your goal to be gracious to them, and confess it to God when you’re not. Why? Because you want to take responsibility for putting others in such a difficult situation in the first place.

Stepping up and taking responsibility for the harm you’ve caused is one of the early stages of discovering and showing true strength. It shows the people you’ve hurt that you are not just going through the motions because you’ve been told to. It shows that you seriously want to be a different man.

In some cases, you need to accept that things may never be reconciled between you and someone you’ve hurt. Depending on the seriousness of your offense and the degree of the harm that’s been done, complete restoration of some relationships may not be possible.

Although it may not be possible for some relationships to be restored, you can be restored! You can set out to know and believe the real truth about yourself and go on to live as the man God created you to be. This process of restoration,
however, can keep going forward only as you turn away from your false strength.

**Turn Away From False Strength.** When you stop pushing others around, you’ll be putting off “your old self” so you can “put on the new self, created to be like God” (Eph. 4:22-24). This is more than just straightening out wrong behavior. It comes from a surrendered heart and mind that willingly seeks to give up what you’ve trusted in to deal with your wounded strength.

Giving up your false strength is not about shaping up because you are afraid of losing a marriage, a friendship, or your reputation. Fear of what you might lose can help get your attention, but alone it is not a strong enough reason to make you walk away for good. You need to stop hurting others with your strength for one reason: It is wrong and unworthy of who God created you to be. You need to stop talking down to others and running over people just because you can and you want to. You need to walk away from your false strength so that you can be healed and restored.

God wants to bring real healing and restoration into the lives of men who misuse their strength, but that can’t happen as long as they continue living out of a false strength. Healing comes only when we humble ourselves and turn from our self-destructive and harmful ways (2 Chr. 7:14; Acts 28:27). It’s only then that any of us can find God’s grace and healing.

Letting go of your false strength doesn’t mean you have to turn into a pushover. It means you stop misusing your strength to deal with your feelings of inadequacy. No matter how
If you feel belittled or weak, it means you give up the right to deal with your pain by using your fists or throwing your weight around. It means that you stop putting others down so you can feel better about yourself.

You can turn away from it willing, out of a broken and surrendered heart. If you don’t, God may have to graciously force the matter. To save you from what will eventually destroy you, He may let it blow up in your face. For example, one man was brought to this point after he was arrested and put on probation for slugging his teenage stepson during a late-night altercation. For him, the choice was clear: Either stop hitting his son or go to prison.

However it comes about, leaving your false strength behind opens you up to a process of restoration that requires faith. It is not only giving up what you’ve trusted in to deal with the wounds in your heart, it is also trusting that God has something better for you and for others, even though you can’t always see what that is. “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

No matter how hurt and angry you may feel, you have good reason to refrain from your old ways: God has something better.

Be aware, however, that the journey to restoration tends to get worse before it gets better. Why? Not only is there a lot to own up to (in terms of the damage you’ve caused), but there is also a lot of unresolved pain to face in your own heart.

Once you’ve quit covering your insecurities through the abuse of your strength, the painful wounds in your heart will start to intensify. And it won’t be a stroll through the park as the
hurt and feelings of self-doubt push back to the surface. This is one reason you shouldn’t try to walk this journey alone. You will have a difficult time sorting through this part of your life by yourself. As you start to turn your attention to the places in your heart where your strength has suffered its greatest blows, reach out to a man who has dealt with this issue in his own life or a group of men you trust and admire.

**Identify And Face Your Wounds.** A man will not understand the force that drives his misuse of strength until he is honest about his own woundedness. Most men find this difficult. Not only are the wounds extremely painful, some see facing their wounds as a sign of further weakness. Many men have been taught to “gut it out” and play through the pain. One lie many men have bought into is, “Big boys don’t cry.” As a result, too many men downplay how much they’ve been hurt.

In his helpful book for men titled *Wild At Heart*, John Eldredge writes, “Most men deny their wound—deny that it happened, deny that it hurt, certainly deny that it’s shaping the way they live today.” He goes on to add, “But a wound that goes unacknowledged and unwept is a wound that cannot heal” (p.106).

Facing your wounds is not a sign of weakness. Big boys do indeed cry. Just look at the example of King David. He was a battle-tested warrior who was candid about the heartaches of his life: “I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me” (Ps. 109:22).

“Playing through the pain” may be appropriate in an athletic event, but it has
no place when it comes to the deep hurts of your life. It’s time to stop playing the independent tough guy who doesn’t need anything from anyone (including God) and start admitting that you’ve been significantly hurt.

To get started, take some time to think about your own story. Before you became a bully, some painful things may have happened or were said to you that made you feel small and caused you to doubt your own sense of strength. If so, what were they? Who said them? And how did it make you feel about yourself? What did you long to hear about yourself from the people who meant the most to you—your parents, siblings, teachers, friends? Whether it was intended or just your own perception, what was the message you heard from them about your strength?

Reflecting on these types of questions can help you break through your denial and open your heart. It won’t always be evident, but begin to watch for moments when you feel the pain of an earlier wound. Look for that old message to surface when someone says something that makes you feel angry and small. Watch for your wound to surface as you’re watching a movie, reading a book, or listening to a song. God can use nearly anything to bring your wound to your awareness.

Whatever surfaces, write it down and talk about it with a friend or a group. Put words to what happened and how it affected you. Writing it down and talking to others helps you reconnect with the events in your life that have shaped you.

Don’t make the mistake of rushing through your unresolved wounds. Give yourself time to let the truth
of what happened and how it affected you sink in. It’s not just another task to check off your to-do list. View it as part of the ongoing rescue mission of your heart.

Admitting your wounds is not a mere intellectual exercise you finish in one session. Nor is it something you can do just in your head. Not only is it important to understand how you’ve been hurt, but also to feel the emotional weight and hurt of the negative words you’ve heard about yourself all your life. You didn’t ask to be put down or ignored when you were growing up. Don’t run from the pain by blaming yourself. It wasn’t your fault, but it was a big deal. It was a significant hurt, and it still is. Let yourself be angry and cry. It’s essential to grieve.

Jesus said that God comforts those who mourn (Mt. 5:4). In fact, unless you can be real and feel the pain of your wounds, your heart won’t be in any condition to hear the deeper Voice that can counter the negative messages you’ve heard about yourself all your life. As you are open to grieve and grow in your ability to recognize those times when you are feeling shamed or small, you can begin to do the most important thing you could ever do with your wounds—take them to God.

**Take Your Wounds To God.** Men who misuse their strength are often so caught up in protecting their image or proving themselves to be “strong” that they fail to see the connection between their misuse of strength and their woundedness. But once a man starts to turn away from his false strength and is honest about the deep pain in his own story, he can turn to the One whose
opinion counts the most.

You don’t just get past your wounds and what others said to you about yourself. You have to intentionally *go through* them by taking them to God. Cry out to Him and ask Him to speak truth into your heart and bring restoration.

As Jesus launched His earthly ministry, He let people know that one of the primary reasons He showed up on the stage of humanity was to bring healing and freedom to the brokenhearted (Isa. 61:1-3; Lk. 4:17-22). Later on, He said, “Come to Me. Get away with Me and you’ll recover your life” (Mt. 11:28 *The Message*). For a man who has had a habit of abusing his strength because of his own insecurities, it’s time to take Jesus at His word and to bring Him the pieces of your heart that are broken. It’s time to ask the Lord to help you reinterpret the painful messages you’ve heard about yourself. It’s time to invite Him into the wounded places of your heart where you feel inadequate.

More than you know, God wants to show love by speaking words of healing and validation that counter the negative messages of your life.

You may have already heard Him speaking some difficult things to you about the way you’ve mistreated others. And He likely has some more difficult things to say to you. But He doesn’t say any of it in a spirit of condemnation. His words of conviction are laced with the truth and hope that we are much more than the sum of our sins and failures. We are a new creation because of the redeeming work of Christ in our heart (2 Cor. 5:17).

Hearing from God is
more than just a mental exercise in which you recite a Bible verse or remind yourself about God’s love for you. It’s asking God what He really thinks of you—and then listening for His response.

One of the saddest statements in the Bible is, “The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention” (2 Chr. 33:10). God wants to speak to us, but we’re often not paying attention for a number of reasons—we’re too busy talking, too distracted with life, or we simply don’t believe He will say anything to us.

Jesus said, “He who belongs to God hears what God says” (Jn. 8:47). Sometimes hearing from God requires getting away from all the distractions of life and spending time alone with Him. If we would actually quiet our hearts and take the time to listen, we would be amazed at what He has to say. This is when we can hear His “gentle whisper” say what is true about us.

Getting to a place of solitude is often what gives your heart the necessary breathing room it needs to hear and absorb what God wants to say. Obviously, He speaks through the Bible—our foundation of truth. But you must also be open to God speaking to you in other ways. He can also deliver words of affirmation through nature, books, friends, music, films, or any other way He chooses (for more, see When Disappointment Deceives CB041). But remember, whatever we think God is saying to us must agree with what He has already said in the Scriptures.
Imitating Jesus

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Man is God in ruins.” It’s true. Much has gone wrong in the hearts of men. At the same time, there are significant remnants of dignity. There still remains a good strength that is part of man’s original glory that God intends to restore.

We see this original glory most clearly in the life of Jesus. He was the perfect model of kindness and strength. Those who were down and out, oppressed, and treated like outcasts had no better friend than our Lord (Mt. 9:36; Jn. 8:1-11). Those who were in the service of the kingdom of darkness and oppressing the disadvantaged, however, encountered a very different side of Jesus. Just ask the money lenders whose tables He knocked over and chased out of the temple just days before His execution (Mk. 11:15-17; Lk. 19:45-46).

Jesus was the most gracious man ever to set foot on this planet, but He also possessed an intense, loving strength. As a human being, His strength was based on knowing who He was. He listened and believed what His heavenly Father said about Him: “You are My son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased” (Lk. 3:22).

His strength also came from knowing His purpose. He knew why He was here. He knew His role in God’s story and what He had come to do (Mt. 20:28).

Finally, He knew who His real enemy was and what he would attack. He knew the real enemy wasn’t people. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12). He knew it was Satan, the same adversary who deceived and lured
Adam and Eve into rebelling against God. And Jesus also knew that the enemy would attack His identity. Twice in the wilderness temptations, Satan called into question the very identity God the Father had given to Jesus when he sneered, “If You are the Son of God” (Lk. 4:1-13).

As a follower of Jesus, you too can hear God speak to you. You can know with more and more certainty that you are His son and that you are capable and strong. You also can start to find your purpose and mission in life (2 Th. 1:11). This is the place in God’s ongoing story of rescue and redemption where your strength is needed the most. Finally, you should expect the same kind of attacks from the enemy. He poses the greatest threat to the life God has for us. Like it or not, all of us were born into a world at war. It’s the war behind every war—the spiritual clash between good and evil that has been taking place ever since Satan tried to overthrow God (Isa. 14:12-14). In fact, your wounded strength is a casualty of the life-and-death battle between good and evil.

Jesus said that Satan is a “thief” who is out “to steal and kill and destroy” (Jn. 10:10). He will continually try to steal away anything you hear from God about your true identity and strength. He will do whatever he can to make you doubt God, yourself, and your ability to carry out God’s calling in your life. He will stop at nothing to lure you back into a false strength.

This battle can become quite fierce. But you don’t have to sit there and take it. Like Jesus, you can stand your ground and resist the enemy’s lies and attacks as you continue to live a life of surrender (Jas. 4:7).
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Healing The Masculine Soul by Gordon Dalbey (W Publishing Group, 2003).

Raising A Modern-Day Knight by Robert Lewis (Focus On The Family, 1999).

The Silence Of Adam by Larry Crabb (Zondervan, 1995).

To Be Told by Dan Allender (WaterBrook Press, 2005).


When Help Is Needed—a biblical view of counseling (CB931).

When Disappointment Deceives—how to handle the lies that mislead us (CB041).

When Forgiveness Seems Impossible—understanding and applying Christlike forgiveness (CB941).

OTHER RBC BOOKLETS ON RELATED TOPICS

When Anger Burns—defusing anger’s explosive potential (CB942).

When Violence Comes Home—help for victims of spouse abuse (CB951).

When Words Hurt—dealing with verbal abuse in marriage (CB011).

The complete text of all the RBC booklets is available at www.discoveryseries.org

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