

Coolness and masculinity; when ‘cool’ is really uncool

By Jay Wegter

False masculinity has been sold to our young men in the form of coolness. Guys have grown up in a market-driven culture, and the countless images of manhood that have been projected in the media are based upon an ideal man that is anything but biblical. Here are some of the reasons why: coolness is associated with passivity, false independence, a lack of servant hood, a lack of pursuing others to do good to them, a rejection of authority, almost no initiative in meeting the needs of others, a refusal in accountability, little care of personal integrity, little passion, and a preoccupation with image instead of character.

For those who know the Word of God, it’s impossible to miss the fact that these supposed male virtues of coolness are actually ‘non virtues’, the very opposite of Christ’s masculine character. Wikipedia summarizes the coolness concept as detached, self-possessed aplomb. Did you catch that? “Self-possessed”—that is the opposite of “Christ-possessed” (1 Cor 6:19-20; Titus 2:11-14). The projected image of coolness, radical independence and self-sufficiency, is the opposite of being members one of another (Eph 4:25). The mutual care of the members of the body of Christ is based upon the gracious reality that every true believer is supernaturally united with all other Christians. Paul spells this out in great detail in 1 Corinthians chapter twelve: our interdependence in action by the power of the Spirit is what produces supernatural ‘body life’. “I am my own man—no one tells me what to do—I define myself; I please myself.”

Young men today have learned their masculinity from market forces. The PBS-Dateline Documentary “Merchants of Cool” details a well-known fact that clothing manufacturers are selling a particular image of ‘coolness’ masculinity along with their clothes. View enough of these ads (without mentoring from a godly masculine man), and you will buy into the world’s false masculine ideal.

So what is the solution for this problem? Do we just hand young men a book about biblical manhood? Or, is it clear from scripture that young Christian men cannot learn biblical masculinity on their own? There is a truism in regards to this matter: *masculine character is learned in a relational space.* In

other words, God has designed men to grown in masculinity by being around other godly men—who invest in them, and with whom they minister (2 Tim 2:1-2).

Moses trained Joshua and Caleb. As our brothers exercise mutual care and model Christ-like godliness, we find great motivation to imitate their example. Christ has told us much about the process of discipleship. We learn from Him that disciples don't just learn from their mentors, they want to imitate their mentors. Therefore, being around our godly brethren who exhibit Christ-like behavior motivates young men to also be radically identified with Christ.

Our Lord modeled many virtues which would not be considered cool today. He was assertive, a servant, He lived a lifestyle of meeting needs. His verbal ministry was characterized by reproving, rebuking, instructing, counseling, imploring, admonishing, warning, informing, and inviting. These proactive virtues are the very opposite of passive coolness.

So much of coolness is an attempt to hide personal weakness. As men we are painfully aware of our inadequacies, we can't stand to have any of them exposed. As a result, much in our life is a compensation for our weaknesses. We feel we have so much to prove, but can never prove ourselves enough. This is why we have such 'obese' comfort zones; our coolness is actually a function of our self-protection.

As a young man, in my own search for masculinity I found temporary relief in watching Clint Eastwood movies. As the western gun-slinging loner on horseback, or as Dirty Harry in San Francisco, Clint killed his enemies with stoic creativity. He was the epitome of cool even while taking human life. He showed no emotion, no empathy—the only giveaway that he was angry was a tell-tale twitch of his chin.

Our young men need to understand that our cultural definition of masculinity, coolness, is actually a strait jacket which inhibits their spiritual growth. There is a hidden fear factor in the coolness index. When young men buy into the pseudo-masculinity of coolness, they are being controlled by some of the following fears: fear of rejection, fear of looking like you are trying too hard, fear of appearing emotional, fear of being too needy, and fear of being too attentive, too predictable, too loyal, too motivated by conviction, and too reliable.

It's easy to see how being controlled by this cultural coolness index isolates us from others. As an older man in full-time Christian ministry I see this passivity and detachment in my communications with younger men. They fear looking too enthusiastic, too grateful, or too communicative. If any one of these attitudes was allowed to be expressed by them, 'it might blow their cool'.

I use email a great deal in my ministry, many people receive Christian counseling and articles from me by email. What I've noticed in the rising generation is that coolness gets in the way of courtesy. I see poor communication skills: I often don't know if my email recipient has received my email or counsel because there is silence on the other end.

I suppose this is not a new problem, for when Jesus healed the ten lepers, only one returned to thank Him (Lu 17:17-19). Still I trace much of this rotten email etiquette to coolness—for coolness gives men permission to be self-absorbed, self-possessed, and self-protective. This means that coolness is huge impediment to success in business and personal ministry. The people skills needed in these vocations require that we be very expressive in our appreciation, as well as highly communicative instead of being always laid back and operating on subtleties and assumptions.

The male who has bought into the coolness error fears that as a man he might be too passionate, too compelling, too grateful, too well-dressed, too expressive, or too caring. As a result, he goes for the laid back route ("I am here just checking things out; I don't really need anything or anybody here"). Therefore, the default mode of coolness is quiet detachment—just wait around, don't risk being highly active in relationships—and by all means, don't actively pursue others for the sake of close relationships.

Jesus did a lot of things that aren't cool by our standards of coolness *zeitgeist* (a socially acceptable way of acting). He wept openly at Lazarus's tomb. He frequently disappointed people, crashing their expectations because he always pleased his Heavenly Father first. He rebuked and offended people who were full of themselves, pronouncing woes on them (Mt 23). He could be fierce and righteously indignant; He drove out the money changers with a whip He had made (Mt 21:12).

Jesus constantly initiated in His relationships, He loved fervently from the heart by constantly taking action. He pursued people and He loved them by telling them the truth, He was always stimulating others to love and good deeds (Heb 10:22-25). His commitment to the glory of God caused Him to incessantly speak of the treasure of the Kingdom (Mt 13). His speech was characterized by reproofing, rebuking, exhorting, admonishing, teaching, imploring, warning and correcting, all with love and patience. He was a lover of men but not a pleaser of men. Pleasing His Heavenly Father was His ‘meat and drink’.

Jesus made it clear that He was ‘on mission’—everyone who heard Him knew that His authority came from His submission to His Father. His extensive prayer times were for the purpose of drawing close to the Father and receiving power to do His Father’s will. This is the opposite of today’s cool male, who tries to establish his masculinity by rejecting his father.

The pattern of Christ’s ministry is as follows: *He prayed, He risked, He initiated, He ministered, and He cared.* Christ’s masculinity is distinct from our cultural masculinity today, because Jesus deliberately kept company with rejects (Mk 2:15-16). He socialized with broken people who could not ‘raise His coolness index’. He looked in the mirror of His Father’s approval and not in the mirror of public popularity.

Coolness in so many cases is a device to try to cope with our male inadequacies. Coolness projects an image that says, “I’ve got it all together, I need nothing, I’m content in myself.” But the self-conscious detachment of coolness is the polar opposite of the Christian man described in Scripture (1 Tim 3). God has a plan for our masculinity. His plan means we will have to lean into our fears, developing the habit of leveraging ourselves on God. This means expecting Him to act on our behalf. The puritans called this “holy expectation.” This is an entirely new way of thinking. Coolness says I am sufficient in myself, my life is not a function of trust in another, but God’s plan for your manhood is for strength through the habitual entrusting of oneself to Christ. It is power perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:5-10). That means that your weakness becomes a *staging area* for God to work. Therefore instead of covering your weakness with coolness, you are aware of God working through your weakness. Instead of diligently protecting and insulating your fears through coolness, you take risks because you are leveraged upon God.

A majority of Christian men are somewhat stuck in a condition of arrested development in regard to their godly masculinity. That means they tend to be ruled by, and paralyzed by their fears. What is fascinating about this subject is that God has built into every man's masculinity the need to regularly take calculated risks in order to keep growing in manhood. The book of Proverbs says that a great deal of wisdom and discernment is 'publicly available'. Proverbs likens this to a person called 'Wisdom' crying out in the streets, "You may have my goods for free, if only you seek them diligently" (Prov 1:20-21ff.).

Wisdom says that life operates in a certain way—the way God designed it to operate. This is even recognized by unsaved men. I recently read a story of a world class climber who has scaled some of the highest peaks in the world. He stated that almost every expedition he has led started the same way: he has an idea to conquer a particular mountain; but no team, and not enough money. Only when he makes the commitment without looking back do the team members appear and the financial resources as well.

This should be a lesson to us as men who know our God, that He wants us to test His faithfulness. We need to meditate on who God is, His works, His ways, His wonders, His will, and especially who God is towards us in Christ, that is His new covenant faithfulness. The unbeliever knows there is an equivalency relationship between risk and reward, but the unbeliever does not have the knowledge of our Heavenly Father working all things together for good (Rom 8:28-29). We can only grow in our godly masculinity when we take risks for the Kingdom of God.

The dominion mandate described in Psalm 8 tells us that God has put us over the works of His hands. The risks we take are not merely to advance ourselves, but to bring order, accomplishment, productivity, and fruitfulness in God's service. The principal of bringing order into a cursed world includes everything from learning knowledge, to starting a lemonade stand, to painting a painting, to ministering to the poor, to preaching the light of the gospel into darkness.

As His stewards, we imitate God in bringing order out of chaos. But risk is involved because we may encounter failure—our efforts at bringing order are resisted. God's plan for our success means getting up again and again from failure and not quitting. Real success is not the absence of failure; success is

based on your response to failure. That's why coolness can kill your potential—the laid back attitude of coolness involves risk avoidance.

The Christian man has a Heavenly Father who is totally for your manhood. This is our Father's world—that means that when we lean into our fears and face them, He creates circumstances to melt away our fear. This is how we grow, God is honored and new adventures are opened up as we leave our bubble of protection. The alternative is like the unrighteous steward in Jesus' parable who hid his talent out of irrational fear (Mt 25:25). You can be safe and die unwounded, or you can incur wounds along the way and touch many as Paul did. The Apostle Paul is an example of masculine leadership. He meditates and prays then he purposes and risks, and then people follow his vision.

God wants you to be faithful where He has planted you—then when you bloom a little bit where you are planted, then and only then can you think about other fields in which to labor. Because we are supported by God we can risk more than others think is safe, we can care more than others think is wise, we can imagine more than others think is practical, and we can expect more than others think is possible. Dreaming and risking in a good way, means seeing the Almighty and the gloriousness of His plan, and then walking through doors of opportunity that you never could have imagined. When one of these incredible doors opens for me I often hear from older Christians “How did you do this? What did you do to make this happen?” I believe that's the wrong question. I believe they should be asking “How wonderful that God did this and that He is using you?”

So let's review, we meditate on who God is towards us in Christ; that is His new covenant faithfulness. Then out of that meditation we find the courage to lean into our fears, to risk and to expect God to act on our behalf. This means your vision will grow, and you will start to live a missional lifestyle. That is a contagious thing in a world full of men living in mediocrity.

God calls us His fellow laborers (1 Cor 3:9). This is an incredible dignity that the God of the universe should designate us His ‘fellow workers’. This issue of being in partnership with the Lord is part

of the Gospel promise—for we are His hands and feet. We have been given a direct, personal, working partnership with God as His children.

God's glory and your highest good are joined in the Person of Christ. Jesus promised in John 15 that if we abide in Him and His words abide in us we will bear much fruit and our Heavenly Father will be glorified. The choice for coolness is a choice for stagnation, for coolness has a neutralizing effect on our spiritual progress—for coolness says “Whatever fear and quiet desperation I have, I will stuff down inside my lonely and internal universe because I’m too weak to trust.” By contrast, God is calling us to develop the habit of entrusting ourselves to Christ—who is given to us for all we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3-5). In reality we are either advancing or retreating. We are either ruled by faith or ruled by fear. The believing man who is growing in godly masculinity is the man who is pursuing Christian character with all his might (2 Pet 1:5-8). The promises of the Gospel by meditation must become your working ‘data bank’, must become your operational life view, and then your choices will be a testimony to God’s faithfulness.

Striving according to His power which mightily works within me; run so as to win; run with endurance; etc.VERSUS: laid back, don’t let ‘em see you sweat, don’t look like you are trying too hard.

Rock music the ‘sacrament’ of the fatherless generations—we assume that it is the medium of our culture so that our worship style must conform to it. We go to the cultural default medium of rock worship. Rock has historically been the musical medium of the ‘unrestrained vision’ (see Thomas Sowell). Rock gives tacit ‘permission’ to the passions, thus as a medium it contradicts the very lyrics it accompanies. Notice how many ‘praise songs’ are about my experience, and not God’s holy character. Ken Myers (and Alan Bloom) on rock music emphasize the passion-permission element. Classical music was written to appeal to our higher person/self—expressly to remind us of divine order in the universe—that cultivating virtue and self-control are infinitely worth it because our lives ought to be ordered with God’s moral order, OR, we risk decay, fragmentation, degeneration. Classical music says that we look to the divine order, and not to our passions as a standard for our behavior. Self-control and attention to first principles is the cost of virtue. In

the fatherless generations, rock became associated with masculinity. Unrestrained passion, violence, boasting, posturing, rapping, being ruled by one's passions—and then calling that 'strength and freedom'. Without fathers controlled by a transcendent cause, these young men have not been 'initiated' into the world of honor, masculine values which are biblical—they have never been taken under the wing and shown the world of virtue, character, honor—the glory staircase. Our national 'initiation pastime' is rebellion against one's father. No wonder rock is the sacrament of the fatherless. We just assume we need it to 'reach' the fatherless generations.

Coolness is often a symptom of the fatherless generations; of not really having a connection with a caring older mentor who holds you in their heart and who is for you. So, the 'cool' man fakes that he has no father wound. His outward life is a huge compensation for the inward vacuum of an emotionally absent father. We know Christ is the answer. His love fills our yearning hearts. He is a Father to the fatherless (Ps). Cultivating our abiding in Him is what must replace our coolness exterior. We're done living a lie.