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Q&A#56 Paul Maxwell on Masculinity

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Alastair Roberts

Today I am giving my thoughts on Paul Maxwell's discussion of masculinity here: https://selfwire.org/article/crisis-masculinity-postmodern-age.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I would love to hear your thoughts on Paul Maxwell's work on masculinity. And the questioner links to an article in which Paul Maxwell goes through his understanding of the definition of masculinity.

And I'll leave the link to that in the notes. But I'll also summarize it here. So he talks about the definition of masculinity and the differences on the one hand between liberalism and then conservatism.

So liberalism resists masculinity as a sort of norm that's imposed upon people. That is repressive, often an oppressive, that presents a particular model of masculinity that is restrictive and which prevents people from being true to themselves. And it's something also that is a form of veiled power as they see it.

It can be a way of upholding male dominance in society, these sorts of things. And so there is a suspicion about definitions of masculinity. On the other hand, conservatism pushes people to conformity with norms.

And so masculinity for conservatives is a particular norm that applies to people. And we should be aiming to live up to this norm, to be people who are manly, people who actually live out what this norm expects of us. And so he connects this difference with the difference between on the one hand postmodernism and the other hand realism.

So postmodernism is associated with liberalism and the left and its suspicions, is concerned with the subjectivity of truth, my truth, things being true to me, authenticity, these sorts of things. And also on the other hand, the danger of truth in scare quotes as power. So many things that are claimed to be true are merely power claims masquerading as claims about the truth.

And so what the truth, what claims to be the truth is really an attempt to suppress certain people and lift up others, give certain groups in society advantages over others. So in terms of the definition of masculinity, it can just be a way of buoying up the patriarchy. That's all that that definition of masculinity does.

And so we need to break down the definition of masculinity and establish a celebration of all these different forms of identity and stigmatize the traditional forms of masculinity, which are in masquerading as truth, really upholding a power claim over women, over people of colour, over people of different sexualities, all these sorts of things. And so that's the postmodern position. And on the other hand, there's the realist position, which talks about being true to reality, a more objective claim that's upon us and duties that are consequent upon that.

And so these two sides lead to two different approaches. One emphasizes speech that rectifies power imbalances and is sensitive to autobiography, my truth. And then there's another form of speech which emphasizes being true to reality, duty to live up to reality, to how things really are.

And Paul Maxwell presents critical realism as a third way, some sort of way of overcoming this opposition between postmodernism and realism. And so instead of having these things at odds with each other, he wants them to be seen as two aspects that we're attentive to both of them. So he talks about the need to think in terms of authenticity and conformity together.

So he writes, authenticity and conformity would, in a critical realist configuration of truth, be cast not as competitive concepts, but rather as cooperative concepts. As cooperative concepts, authenticity is conceived not as unfiltered expressivism, but as creative empiricism, an active shaping of one's experience that is accountable to an objective reality. Likewise, conformity is not conceived as a bold erasure of individuality, but rather of conformity of oneself to a worthwhile and reasonable ideal.

And so what he tries to do is provide a definition that overcomes these problems. And he gives on the one hand, a singular definition and another hand, a complex definition. And

those two things go hand in hand.

The first, the singular definition, the pocket statement that defines what masculinity is, is a man's maximization of his potential for competence. And there are the three elements of that. So there's competence, potential and maximization.

And the competence refers to one's ability to overcome obstacles. And that can be in a number of different contexts. Let's say you're learning some new instrument.

Your competence is your ability to overcome the obstacles and to persevere at that and to actually gain skill on that instrument. And so there are different elements to that as well. There's competitive, the way that you relate to your peers who are at the same sort of stage.

There's performative, the way that you could relate to, say, a teacher. And then there's transformative, the way that you are transformed through that. And so that's competence.

And then there's the potential aspect, which is the sealing of your competence. And that is something that you're constantly wanting to reach your best, to achieve your best, to do that thing which maximizes your potential. And there's a recognition here of the variety of men, because my potential is different from someone else's potential.

What it means for me to achieve my potential in playing a musical instrument is considerably lower than what it means for most other people. And so it's very much about your sealing of competence. And then there's maximization, the elevation of a flexible ceiling, because we can increase our potential by pursuit of competence.

So as I increase my ability, I can raise to a new level. I can have go step up a gear. And that is something that happens as I pursue competence.

I raise my potential. And this is a matter of choice and responsibility. To actually maximize your potential is you have to choose that.

You have to pursue it. You have to be responsible in that. Now, the problem with this definition, he argues, is that this could simply map onto a definition of femininity.

You could say that femininity is a woman's maximization of her potential for competence. And that would leave us with questions. It would seem to present an obstacle to giving any definition of manhood or any definition of masculinity, because those definitions can easily switch over into definitions of femininity.

And so somehow we need to account also for all men everywhere. We have to fit all men into this and present them as somehow fitting within this model. And so what he tries to do then is give a complex definition.

And there are three different strands to this. There's maleness, manliness, and manhood. And each one of these involves different elements.

One's maleness is just a very brute fact of being a man, of having male genitalia, of having male chromosomes, of having male gonads, all these sorts of things. The basic biological fact of being a male. And often the aptitudes and competencies that go along with that.

So the particular strengths that a man can have. And those sorts of things can be developed through, for instance, weight training or something along those lines. On the other hand, there's manliness.

That's cultural masculinity. And that's all the different things that come along with the social hierarchies, with the expectations in our society, and the ways that men relate to each other, to the wider society and how they achieve social well-being. And this is a socially constructed thing.

It's not just natural. On the other hand, it is grounded in something natural. So going a bit off what Maxwell is talking about here, but we could think of it as something akin to clothing or language.

That every single society has different language and different styles of clothing. But if you find a human society, pretty much invariably, they will be speaking language and they'll be wearing clothes. And language and clothes serve certain purposes, greater purposes in the world.

They correspond to something of what it means to be human beings. If we didn't have language and if we didn't wear clothes, we'd be like beasts rather than... And that's why we often struggle to fit young children into our society, because they've not yet attained to that level of wearing clothes and speaking language, which is part of what it means to be a mature human being. And in the same way, attaining to a sense of manhood and womanhood is part of that.

That every single society does this in a slightly different way, but there are great commonalities across human societies. And it's pretty much unavoidable. Every single society has a sense of what a man is and what a woman is.

And that's socially constructed, but grounded in something inescapable, that we really have to have such definitions in some way or other. And there are different aspects again to this. There is fraternal and then there's paternal manliness.

So the competencies relative to other people of your own sex, to other men, and then competencies relative to one's broader responsibility to those that you have a duty towards. So your family and your community, these sorts of things. And so that paternal manliness is a duty to protect others, to provide for others, these sorts of things.

And that can be an area in which cultural manliness is perceived. And that's perceived alongside the way that you compete and you relate and you interact with other men. And then the final aspect is manhood.

And that's a far more individual concept for Maxwell. It's the way that a man integrates all these sorts of things together in a healthy way. So you've got the basic fact of being a man, of being a male.

And then you have the fact of being a man within your particular social setting and structures. And the way that you pursue social well-being in a gendered way within those structures. And then you have the way that you have your individual personality and character and aptitudes and traits.

And you seek to integrate all of those in a way that's healthy. And that will often involve filtering out things that are unhealthy, things that, for instance, certain norms that can apply to men in certain situations that aren't good. So a certain extreme stoicism that just isn't healthy and can be resisted if it prevents you from having emotional well-being.

And so manhood is very much where the rubber hits the road for the individual person. And it's a recognition also that there are a complex, there is a complex relationship between elements of maleness, manliness, and manhood. These things don't always fit together neatly.

So just becoming more and more manly can often be in contradiction to manhood. Many people who are pursuing that as an absolute goal, they just don't achieve anything healthy. And the competencies that exist in different aspects.

So if you just become stronger and stronger and develop strength, that doesn't actually make you a good man or good, even good at being a man. In many cases, those two things can be distinguished. When we think about what it means to be good as a father, good as a brother, good as a son, these sorts of things, that's not necessarily something that cultural standards of manliness will equip you for in many situations.

Often you need to recognise that you need a healthy integration for yourself, a way to fit these things together that takes account of the reality of manliness, takes account of the reality of manliness, but then also recognises your particular character and the way that fits together. And so Maxwell is challenging the danger of conservatives, that conservatives often reduce things to manliness and don't take account of this manhood. The need to be authentic, this need for authenticity and attention to individual situation, these sorts of things.

And on the other hand, leftists take cultural constructs to be arbitrary and oppressive and to be resisted in the area of manliness. And so in both of these cases, there is something that's a problem. And his definition is an attempt to capture both aspects, the

aspects of the fact that this needs to be true to me, it needs to be something that's authentic to myself as a particular man.

But also there's a standard, there's something to live up to. There's something that has a claim upon me, reality can draw me towards something beyond myself. And that is not just arbitrary, it's not just individual, it's not just subjective and it's not just a power claim.

There is something more to it than that, something more real to it. And so he's protecting both of those different dimensions. And then speaking about the need to configure one's manliness for oneself.

So I'll read the conclusion that he has. This definition satisfies the postmodern concern for the relevance of each man's autobiographical data, the abstract definition of masculinity and the realist concern for the objectivity of masculinity as an ideal toward which men ought to strive and often fail. This critical realist configuration of masculinity enables men to call themselves to higher physical, cultural and psychological standards, while retaining the right and duty to reject misappropriations of maleness or manliness to the final goal of masculinity, to optimally configure one's manhood for oneself in a way that is both true to oneself in a postmodern sense and true to the world in a realist sense.

And so what do I think of this? I think there are a lot of strengths in this approach. I think the attempt to recognise the limitations of a form of manliness that is overly objective, that doesn't take account of recognising our individual traits, our individual aptitudes and the needs to cater to that, that's important. It's very important for psychological health, for instance.

Then the attempt to recognise an objective standard that there is something that we need to live up to and people can fail on that front. There are people who are effeminate. There are men who are effeminate and unmanly and that's not good.

It's not attractive or appropriate and they have fallen short. That is real too and it's something that people, coming from a more liberal perspective, they can rankle at that. That really stings because the idea that there is something real to this and that there are ways in which people can fail is seen as the heart of that power play and that oppression.

The idea that some people do fall short. I think he protects both areas of this well. There's a lot of helpful material within this article and I suspect it's just one aspect of a far bigger picture that he has that fits together various elements in ways that are a bit more complex than he does within this short piece.

So I don't want to represent his view as if this is the sum total. There's a lot more to it

than that, I suspect. I think there are a number of things behind this debate.

Part of them is, is there such a thing as human nature? And one of the issues on the left is the question of, is there such a thing as human nature? That's one of the challenges for the humanities because if there's not such a thing as human nature, then why are we studying these texts from across different cultures? And are we trying to learn something about ourselves? Is this about our humanity? Or is it really about technical skills of deconstructing texts and recognising the arbitrariness and contingency of the power games that exist in culture to culture? And I think that's often what the left has produced out of the humanities. It's lost any sense of there being a human nature and a human nature that is found across cultures. That if you went to ancient Rome, you'd recognise the guys that you met there.

They're the guys that you have in various contexts in your life today. They are not a foreign species. And so when we're thinking about these sorts of issues, those sorts of realist or postmodern oppositions, I think are very much in play.

And they come down to very deep questions as in, is there such a thing as human nature? Can we speak to people's human nature? Is there such a thing as masculinity? Because if there isn't such a thing as human nature, then can we speak to people and say that there's a way that you should live out what it means to be a man? Now, I think it's also important to ask, why are we having debates about the definition of masculinity in the first place? In the past, people might have talked about this issue, but now it's become a real concern. People talk so much about the need for a definition. I get this a lot.

People say, what is the definition of masculinity and femininity? And in many ways, that's putting the cart before the horse, I think. If we have become so obsessed with this, it probably says that there's something that's gone wrong. Something that's gone seriously wrong somewhere along the way.

The very definition that the definition has become such an issue is a sign that something of the natural reality of being men and women has been lost. And it's become not just troubled by ideology, but there's something more basic than that. And I think that's one of the areas that I would want to add to this article.

And I'll develop some of these thoughts now. I think it's important to take account of where we are standing when we're having these debates. And he treats it very much as an ideological conflict, which it is in part.

But that ideological conflict is in many respects grounded in a deeper social and material situation that has raised these problems in the first place. It throws up these problems. And then these ideologies respond to those difficulties.

And so if the left is characterized often by a feminacy and sort of unmanliness, the right is characterized a lot, increasingly by insecurity about manliness. A constant need to pursue it directly. Ever more ridiculous performative displays of masculinity, whatever that is.

It's there is a sense of we don't feel like men anymore. We need to pursue this. We need to discover what it means to be a man.

We need to find a definition. We need whatever it is. And there's something that's gone seriously wrong that we should even be standing at this point.

So if you want to get to an understanding of masculinity, I wouldn't start from here. What we need to do is trace our steps back and think, how did we get here in the first place? And I think that increasingly desperate attempt to pursue masculinity directly and whether that's by performative practice or by definition, I think is in itself a sign that something has gone seriously wrong. And what has gone wrong in many respects is that we've lost naturally occurring masculinity.

And that has been lost because we've lost the condition, the conditions and the context within which masculinity flourishes and thrives and grows and becomes apparent and clear. And now what we try and do is we try to synthesize it. We try and produce it in an artificial way.

But what we should do is ask why we have lost it in the first place. Because that is where the problem really lies. Not in the fact that we don't have a clear enough definition or in the fact that we're just not lifting enough weights.

Whatever it is, these attempts to pursue masculinity very directly miss something. And there's something rather unmanly about the fact that we're constantly talking about manliness. Real men don't generally talk about manliness all the time.

And that's, again, that should be a tip off. Why are we having these conversations to begin with? What has gone wrong that we have landed up here? And I think there are a number of factors that are involved in this situation. I think one of the most basic ones can tie into some of the things that he talks about.

The need for fraternal manliness. The need for context, the need for a place, way in which we can compete with other men who are peers. The need for context of maleness.

All these sorts of things. What we have lost is the soil within which manliness grows. And so if you want to see manliness, you need to provide it with the soil.

It's like looking at a seed and saying, what is a tree and then trying to deduce it from that seed and say, you must be true to all seeds. And you then sow those seeds in different contexts. And many of them grow up in stunted and poor forms.

And then you're trying to be true to all of those things in some way. But we need to pay more attention to the soil. We need to think about why are we having these issues.

And so I think there are a number of ways in which this is broken down. Manliness to thrive, it needs context, fraternal context, context of brotherhood, context of male companionship, deep, strong male companionship in fellow labour. Not just having groups that we talk about our manliness and hug it out, but groups where we work together, where we struggle together, where we live together, where we labour together.

And that's where it develops in many respects. And when we've lost those, and we have lost those in so many contexts, then manliness will struggle. We won't have a sense of manliness.

And what we'll do is we'll tend to go into these little pockets of puerile manliness. So manliness around video games or manliness around consuming certain forms of pop culture or manliness that's just developed in a gym as a form of bodybuilding. Whatever it is, it's a very, it's an attempt to synthesise some sort of manliness that has been lost in a very real sense.

Manliness is developed within male groups that have something worth doing, that have something to labour for. And what we've done is we've lost these contexts because these male contexts create power. These male contexts are naturally powerful.

And so in our culture, where we've hollowed out certain other realms of society, women want to enter into these realms. And to enter into these realms, you have to purge out manliness. If there's one thing that our society does not have space for, it's virility.

Because virility is dangerous and threatening to women. It's something that a virile man is a highly competitive, a strong man, and a man that will make clear that women are the weaker sex. And just by the very fact of his existence, it's difficult to deal with a virile man when he's actually exercising his strength.

And so we have increasingly traditional contexts of male labour, of male thought, of male action. They have been collapsed into gender neutralised spaces, where for the healthy inclusion of women, we have to purge out virility and manliness. And we end up with a sort of definition of manliness that is just self-effacing manliness, where there's no manliness left at all.

It's just the man who leans back so that women can lean in, or the man who's always empowering women, but never actually exercising his power in a far more positive and strong sense, an assertive way. Rather, he's just the ally. And that is something that has also taken place in many Christian circles, where what it means to be a man has been reduced to being the sort of person who's all about serving women.

And that's all he's about. Rather than actually exercising any sort of dominion within the

world, he's just reduced to an ally. And there's a problem with that, just as there's a problem with the idea that a woman is merely about what she brings to a man, that she is not creating something that's truly her own, but she's merely someone who's equipping and empowering a man.

There's a problem with that, and there's a problem with the idea that the male is just the ally. And so we need what we have lost in these male contexts, and the idea that men can actually play to their strengths, that you don't always have to play to people's weaknesses around you, but you can actually play to your strengths in a male group. Once you lose that, maleness will tend to migrate to these very puerile contexts, and it will tend to take immature forms.

It will tend to be far more untrained, it will not be a mastered masculinity, it will often be a very abusive masculinity, a sort of masculinity that attempts to take advantage of others, rather than a masculinity that is trained through generations from father to son in a way that is strong exercising power within the world, and exercising dominion, but in a way that benefits everyone, that serves as the backbone of society. And when you lose that, you lose a lot of things. And when you lose these male groups, what you also lose is the security that comes with that, because what you have in this definition and many other definitions is the implicit expectation that this is a very individualized thing.

And what you lose there is the fact that if you're just trying to work this out for yourself and perform masculinity all by yourself, you will be very insecure about it. You need a group of men around you, you need to find a sense of what it means to be one of the men. And that's where a lot of the strength of masculinity comes from, in knowing that you are one of the men.

It's not just you alone, but there's brothers and fathers and there's sons and all these other relationships, and you're part of this group and you're men together. You're not having to bear the weight of this all by yourself in a performative fashion. Part of the realism of it is that you have brothers and you have fathers and you have people that are able to initiate you and help you grow within what this means.

And the more that we've lost that, the more that we've tended to root it in individuals and in a highly performative way, where you have to perform these traits of masculinity and you lose a lot as a result of that. And so that focus upon manliness directly is a result of that. It's also a result of the weight of the world being lost.

When you end up with a very shallow society, when you end up with removing the weight that gives meaning to these things, then it's very hard to have a masculinity that has weight and that has body to it. If you don't think about... If manliness is increasingly something that you're just developing for your emotional security and your sense of who you are, then there's something limited about that. Manliness is needed for the world.

Manliness is needed for men's children, for their wives. It is something that gives the backbone to society. It's the strength and the power of societies found in its manliness, in the relationships between fathers and sons, in the bonds of brothers, and in the work and the labour that they do within the world.

And when you've lost that, you've lost that weight. And that's one of the things within this article. There isn't a lot said about those things that elicit your manliness, those pressures, those challenges.

And if you don't have challenges, there's nothing to live up to. If you don't have something that... A world that is weighty, there is nothing that draws forth your strength. There's nothing that shows the heaviness and the seriousness of what it means to be a man.

And so we've ended up with a very puerile society where men try and find their identity in very performative things, in the forms of consumption they engage in, in the games that they play, in the sports that they watch. And there's no weight to that. And it's not surprising that we have a crisis of masculinity in this context.

If you don't have a sense of being about something bigger than yourself, being about something bigger than just securing your sense, fragile sense of masculinity, then there's going to be a problem naturally. And so you need that sort of brotherhood. You need that weight in the world that draws you forth, that elicits your strength.

And you need these contexts to give you a sense of honour, a sense of standing. And he talks about competition, male status, and that's a big thing. Men need male groups in which they can find status and belonging.

They need to be part of that hierarchy. And that hierarchy is in many senses primarily a realm of belonging because many people just aren't on the hierarchy at all. They're not even playing the game.

And other people may be lower down, but they have dignity. They're on it. They're related to a group of men that are in a particular task, generally working together.

And they have respect for each other within that. And when that's lost, you have a lot of insecure men that are the result of that. And so one of the problems we have is that men do not naturally want to be part of women's groups.

Women can get together in groups and men don't generally want to push in upon those. In some cases they do, but that's not generally the case. Whereas male groups are powerful.

They create power. Male groups tend to be ordered around shared agency, around doing things that make a difference to the world. And that's where they really come into their

own.

And the problem is that those groups create things. They make power. They are powerful.

And so people want to get into them because they offer power. The more close you get to them. And so male groups tend to break down because male sociality is the big threat to the feminist revolution.

If you have strong male groups, if you have bands of brothers, and if you have strong relationships between fathers and sons, then what you have is a patriarchy. And just about every single human society has had some form of patriarchy or other. Now that can often be a veiled patriarchy with a very strong matriarchy as well, with women having a lot of weight and influence within a close-knit social society.

But there has always been this strong bond between brothers and fathers and sons that has performed the role of the backbone of society. It's been very much the strength of society. And so we have a problem in our society where you try and equalize things out.

What you will try and do more than anything else is break up male groups, break up male sociality, because that male sociality is always going to be a concentration of power. A concentration of strength and influence and weight within the world. And if you want a gender-neutralized, equalized society for all individuals, then naturally that's going to have to be undermined.

And that is one of the big problems that we have. And so what you have is a lot of women entering into these groups. And women can achieve within their own realms.

And now they can achieve within male realms as well. Men only really have their own realm. And once those have been increasingly taken over and ruled according to female expectations, where you can't be rough with each other, you can't really elicit other people's strength, you can't play to strength, you can't expect manliness from each other, because that is something that would be exclusionary of women.

You have to remove virility from these realms. And you have to act in a very restrained way. And you can't actually really exercise your strength.

That is going to be a problem for men. And so the crisis that we have in many respects is a result of this. That men can no longer exercise their strength and agency within the world.

And so we need to create exclusively male spaces. If we want manliness, if we want masculinity, you need to have male spaces. Realms that are exclusive to men and realms that can have weight in the world and make a difference.

You can't just restrict these realms because you're afraid of them creating power. They will create power and that power can be good. It should be a power that's used for the benefit of all.

But that does not mean that all should be included within those spaces. And that is one of the big struggles that we have in our day and age. Also, the way that things such as childbearing are missed out of this picture.

When you marry and have children, and one of the things, what gives weight to marriage is it's not just a companionship for pleasure and satisfaction and emotional fulfillment. It's a calling to responsibility. And it's a calling to responsibility in large measure because it is apt for bearing children.

And that's one of the things that elicits manliness, that elicits responsibility, that elicits male agency within the world. And our constant urge to be inclusive of all different sorts of people and to recognize, OK, well, single and unmarried people and childless men can also be manly. Sure, they can, but that's not... There is something about bearing children, being a father, being a husband that elicits certain strengths, that elicits certain sorts of manliness.

And we need to talk about that. We need to be honest about that and say that there are exceptional cases, sure. But for most men, this is the form that things will take.

Work, laboring with brothers and acting as a father and a husband. Those are the things, the soil in which your manliness will grow. And if you don't have that soil, yes, there are other ways you can develop your manliness, but it will be more of a struggle.

It won't be so clear. And our constant urge to be affirmative of everyone. Oh, everyone can be a man.

Anyone, any male can be a man. In one sense, they can, but there is a bit more of a challenge to it than that. There are things that call us to exercise strength.

And we need to speak very clearly about the weight, the gravity of those things in the world, because it's their gravity that elicits the weight of manliness. In the same way, when you lose a sense of the gravity of things, you lose a sense of the need for manliness. You lose a sense of a need for male strength.

It's one of the things about women in pastoral office. What as we have lost a sense of the gravity of what's taking place here, the life and death stakes of what it means to be a guardian of the people of God, of what it means to uphold the truth and defend the faith in those contexts. And the need for a context where we can actually struggle and contend.

You lose a sense of the need for manliness. And so increasingly, the feminization of

pastoral ministry is a large result of the loss of a sense of the gravity of something that calls for strength, that elicits strength, that elicits these male characteristics and these manly traits from people and calls for virile people. Not just men who happen to be male, but for men that have backbone to them and men who are prepared to fight and struggle and contend.

And so when we lose that sense of gravity within the world that calls forth the weight of what it means to be a man, what we are like, the example I give often, is astronauts in microgravity who have lost a sense, who've lost the natural connection between their circadian rhythm and the diurnal patterns of the earth with day and night. Who've lost a sense of the relationship between their bodies and their muscles and the sense of orientation and the earth's gravitational field. And if you want to understand manliness, if you want to understand what it means to be a man, you need to root that within the soil of a realm where those things have weight.

And we've lost that weight. And we've also ended up with these things being a problem. Because if you have men who have a sense of strong agency, if you have men who have a sense of virility, those are a problem in this day and age.

First of all, they're a problem for the boss who wants to control, have the agency of the people who work for him. And so he has mastery over their agency and he doesn't want them to act in a manly way. Because if they act in a manly way, then they won't be cooperative and submissive to him.

On the other hand, and it's also a shrinking of men's realm of dominion, that men actually don't have a realm in the world that is their own. Not just a private realm, but a realm that they stand for, that they defend. The realm of the household, for instance.

Once that has been lost, manliness is a challenge. Because manliness will push against the order that exists. It won't fit in neatly.

And virility is a problem as well. Because if you have strong virile men, then it's difficult for them to fit into a gender neutralising society. Where they have to be hypersensitive all the time.

Where they have to constantly play to other people's weaknesses and play nicely. And be someone who doesn't actually use their strength. Who doesn't act with a manly dignity.

And who doesn't actually pursue male companionship in any weighty realm within the world. Just in those puerile realms of games and of cultural consumption. And of these sorts of things.

And so these are the problems that we're wrestling with. And many people talk about these problems as if it were just... They talk about the problems of masculinity as if it

were just the problems of traditional masculinity. And its norms imposed upon us.

The idea for instance men don't cry. And there is a danger in certain forms of masculinity of constraining men's emotional health. If you look at most traditional male... If you look at most dense male contexts, men wear their hearts on their sleeves.

This is not something that is emotionally constricted in many of these contexts. Where it becomes emotionally constricted is where men increasingly have to exert a performative masculinity in more gender neutralized contexts. They end up with a very brittle masculinity.

Whereas when you have strong male groups and male companionship. And a strong relationship between fathers and sons within society. And the intergenerational dynamics of masculinity.

You end up with men that are constantly able to express their hearts. It's not that hard. And the loss of these contexts has led to a loss of the ability for men to have that sort of emotional health.

For instance if you want to see men who are performatively romantic. That is something that depends in large part upon those men being part of male groups. And it's one of the things even within our modern boy bands.

It's the camaraderie of the boys within the band. That enables them to sing these soppy love songs. In a way that does not make them look even more pathetic and foolish than they are.

Because they have that camaraderie. They have that shared manliness or boyishness for the most part. That they have that companionship in being men together.

Then they can perform outwardly to women in a way that puts their hearts on their sleeve. And we have that more generally within society. Men who have a strong context of male companionship in weighty things in the world.

Who labor with other men. Who do most of their work. Spend most of their days working with other men.

Who live with other men in community. And who struggle with other men. Who have their strengths elicited by other men.

Who have strong relationships with their fathers. And other people of their parents' generation. Other men of their parents' generation.

And are brought into deeper forms of masculinity. When that exists, men can be very emotionally expressive. That's why we have male voice choirs and things like that.

Can sing the most sentimental songs. Because they have that strong male camaraderie. They have that security in being men.

They don't have to perform it all the time. And so they can be relaxed and have a healthy manhood. And the struggle that we have today is often that disintegration.

Either you seek for emotional health. In a way that just abandons masculinity and manhood. Or you end up pursuing a very brittle sort of masculinity.

That is shallow and ends up being often destructive of men. In a way that does not give them health. And so I think we have these things in the church as well.

Why do men struggle with the church? Is it because we're just... Is the church just a feminized environment? In many ways it is. If you look at Christ, for instance, in scripture. He spent almost all of his time surrounded by a band of brothers.

What it means for Christ to be a man. Is not just that he's an individual man. All by himself performing his masculinity in an appropriate way.

He's got a band of brothers around him. And those band of brothers set Christ and men more generally off over against women. They're distinct from women.

And that enables Christ to act towards women. But most of his time is spent around men. When he actually talks to a woman like the woman of Samaria.

His disciples who spend most of their time around him are amazed that he's talking to a woman. Alone. Because he spends most of his time in a male group.

And then when he actually interacts with women. It's mostly within a group. And so it's rare that he's alone with a woman.

Very rare. And we struggle with this today because we want to gender neutralize society. And we also are concerned women want to ascend the social status.

The realms of social status that traditionally male realms provide. And so they need companionship with men. They need men to be their allies.

And there's an asymmetry to that relationship that we don't talk enough about. The Pence rule and the Graham rule. It's important to recognize that this is about the relationship of men with power and influence.

With women that do not have the same power and influence. And that asymmetry is a lot of it. Women want those relationships.

Because it enables them to ascend the hierarchy. And to get access to the people at the heart. And often the pushing back against these rules.

It's a pushing back against the limitations of women to rise within these male groups. But it's important to recognize that the aid and the support is pretty unidirectional within these relationships. It's one of the reasons why people are rightly suspicious about them.

Because a man in a position of power and authority and influence. Who's constantly serving as an ally for a woman with much less. What is he getting out of it? Now many men in those positions are truly just being altruistic.

But that asymmetry is not the natural context for friendship to develop. Rather there's something more complex going on. And we need to be aware of that.

And so within these contexts what we often see is the loss of male spaces. The loss of male status groups. Ends up producing a situation where men have to tone down their virility.

Where men can't actually be emotionally expressive. Partly because being emotionally expressive looks different for men and women. Male emotional expression can be a lot more rough and vigorous.

And spirited than women's at points. It's a lot more externalizing. And that can be difficult for women to handle in mixed groups.

Often male groups are very good for expressing male emotion. And when you are starved of those male groups. It can be very difficult to express that.

And again deep companionship grows from those groups. So if you think about the deep relationships between men. The intimate relationships between men that we see in history.

Those arose out of groups of male camaraderie. Male companionship. So struggling together on the battlefield bonds men together as brothers.

Or the experience of a common quest binds Frodo and Sam together. In a very affectionate relationship. And an intimate relationship.

But when that bond and that quest are lost. When those struggles within the world are lost. When those contexts of male companionship are lost.

Men get isolated and lonely. Because they don't have contexts in which these relationships can emerge. And again this is one of the areas where we need to think about.

How an agenda neutralizing society is deeply unhealthy for men. It prevents them from rising to an emotional health. It prevents them from developing what it means to be a man.

Among men in a healthy way. To be secure in their identity. To have belonging in those groups.

And to express their emotions. To enjoy that sociality. And also to enjoy all of those things.

And to exercise those things for the service of wider society. Not just as individuals trying to secure their identity. And not just as individuals within a gender neutralized group.

Where you need to recognize you can't actually exercise your virility that much. Because that will constrain women and make it difficult for them to succeed. Rather we need our different spaces.

We need to be apart from each other for most of our time. That is something that is a challenge to our society. But it is really important for a healthy society.

To have differences between men and women. That have weight within society. And that give space for men and women to grow.

And so the more that we try and focus upon definitions. Upon direct pursuits of masculinity. What we're doing we're trying to synthesize something.

That has been lost as a naturally occurring reality. Because we don't pursue masculinity directly if we're doing it well. Rather it's something that we discover.

That is developed in us through the struggles. And difficulties and challenges of life. Through the struggling and the sharpening of brotherhood.

Through the responsibilities of being a father and a husband. From the strength and agency that you must learn to exercise. You labor upon the world and change things.

The dignity that is found in having a realm of dominion. A realm that is your own. That you protect and you advance and you defend.

And when all those things are lost. We will increasingly focus upon definitions. And synthesizing a masculinity that is no longer naturally occurring.

So there's a lot more that could be said about this. And I could get into it at some other point. If you have any further follow-up questions.

Please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and other videos like it. Please do so using my Patreon account.

And thank you very much for listening. And lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.