

GOOD MAN

An Honest Journey into Discovering Who
Men Were Actually Created to Be

Nathan Clarkson



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To my father, Clay, and my brother, Joel,
for showing me my entire life
what a good man looks like.

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Introduction

Good Men Are . . .

I didn't really want to write a book titled *Good Man*.

Not because I don't think it's a worthy subject to engage with, but rather because I felt that my fears, faults, and failures disqualified me from even broaching the subject. I do long—and always have—to be a good man. But honestly, I don't always feel that I am one.

When my family or friends tell me, "You're a good man," I feel a twinge of guilt accepting the compliment, knowing the truth of who I really am: a struggling, broken man who wants to be good but fails more often than not.

But in looking through the Good Book in preparation for this project, I found that most of the people God used to build His kingdom and spread His message were flawed, imperfect, and constantly failing individuals.

Thomas was a doubter.

Peter was a liar.

David was an adulterer.
John the Baptist was crazy.
Paul was a murderer.

And so on and so forth. Each of these men had *huge* character flaws and moral failings, but the one thing I found in each of them was that despite their shortcomings, they had the want—a desire to grow, mature, and follow the call the Creator had for their lives.

And through this, through their stories of imperfectly following God, I discovered good men aren't perfect men. Being a good man isn't the absence of failing; instead, it's the determination to decide, and keep on deciding, to get up and continue on.

To keep fighting to become the men they were designed to be.

When I hear the words *good man*, I am bombarded with mental images of what a good man might look like. Even if I begin with only the word *man*, my guess is that many things come to your mind.

“Real men work out.” “Real men don't dance.” “Real men hunt.” “Real men can fight.” “Real men drink beer, not wine.” And the classic, “Real men don't cry.”

But while many of these phrases are tongue-in-cheek, they affect us. Gradually, our definition of a man starts looking a lot like the stereotypes we've seen for decades.

Do you envision a bearded, muscle-bound, gun-shooting stoic with a cigarette in hand and whiskey on his breath? He's able to hunt, fight, and woo women with ease? Maybe he's a rich and charismatic businessman who's able to take from the

world what he wants, showing only undeterred drive—never faltering. Or maybe he’s a rock star, living a life of pleasure and fame, who does what he wants when he wants.

Perhaps these images stem from comic books, action movies, or video games, or perhaps they come from people we know. No matter where they come from, we all have ideas about what makes a man.

Then we add the word *good*. And with the term *good man*, we may envision images of even more refined and pressure-inducing men. Many of us might picture a pastor, spiritual leader, scholar, or “Christian celebrity.” Someone constantly praying and quoting Scripture, able to withstand and deny any sort of temptation. He has a family and a college degree. He waited until marriage to have sex. He has a good job. He’s a steady provider, and many applaud him for his polished life, inspiring Instagram feed, and unwavering goodness.

Maybe your images differ from mine, but either way, I’m willing to wager you have struggled with the feeling that you can’t live up to what it means to be a good man.

For years I’ve struggled with both wanting to live up to my definition of a good man and wanting to give up when I fail.

For a long time, I’ve wrestled with this notion of what a good man is and how I can become one. Eventually, when it was evident the modern world didn’t have the answers I was looking for, I turned to the Creator of men to see if maybe there, in His words, I could find a more satisfying and complete picture of who I was trying so hard to become.

I went back to God’s Word and looked at what the Creator says. I went through history and looked at the men who made

a positive difference in the world, and I looked at the men in my own life who I considered to be good men (there were not many). Then I began piecing together a new image of what a good man might truly be.

What I found in my search was a whole new image of what this man looks like. I found that it was never about how deep his voice was or how much he could bench press, the absence of mistakes or having life figured out, success or romantic prowess. Instead, it was about something much more real, deep, and difficult to attain.

Each man I looked at—whether from the Bible, history, or my own life—was very human. He struggled and failed. He had broken places in his heart and mind. Some were physically weak, and others fought addictions and moral failures. They didn't look alike; some had beards and low voices, some were clean shaven (crazy, I know), and some couldn't speak at all.

So often in Scripture I found that what makes a man is not his outward appearance but his inward heart position. His desire and dedication to pursue (even imperfectly) attributes that mimic God Himself, including unconditional love, generosity, wisdom, forgiveness, the list goes on. God says in the Old Testament, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7 NKJV).

This more elusive but authentic image of a good man is a far cry from the destructive and often toxic image of the “modern man” we have come to know. But that image is one we ought to leave behind us to take up a new one—a better, truer one.

I invite you to explore with me fifteen attributes that a good man must embody.

If I'm honest, I was scared to write this book, mostly because while I have always wanted to be a good man, I still struggle, fail, fall, and doubt.

But I'm so thankful that the definition of what a good man is, spoken from the Creator Himself, doesn't rely on me being perfect—just willing.

No matter who you are, where you're from, what's been done to you, or what you've done—you have the capacity to choose to live the design God has created, one that will ever so slowly shape you into the good man you were made to be.

Will you journey with me?

ONE

Adventurous

My brothers. I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of wolves and shattered shields when the Age of Men comes crashing down, but it is not this day! This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good earth, I bid you stand.

Aragorn, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*

I can still remember the sting of cold air hitting my face as I threw open the laundry room door and stepped into my backyard. A sharp mountain wind blew off the plains and around my childhood house.

In my hand, I held a perfectly straight stick. I had carved one end into a point with my favorite pocketknife and tightly wrapped the other in twine, creating a handle. This was my sword. I squeezed it hard, my frigid fingers wrapped around

its hilt, as I headed up the steep hill and into the mountains of Colorado.

I had recently seen my first PG-13-rated movie, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, and there on a magical night in an old movie theater as the epic images of Middle-earth swirled around me, I had suddenly known who I wanted to be.

I was twelve, on the cusp of manhood—ready to leave behind the boy I had been and step into the life of the warrior I had in my heart. That day on the mountain I wore a Gap sweatshirt that served as my armor, the hood my helmet, and as I reached the top of a foothill, I caught my breath and looked out over the ever-expanding view stretching as far as the eye could see down the Rockies and into the endless western sky.

Then, as I turned around, my eyes fell upon my castle, perched at the top of a nearby hill. Fashioned out of old, splintery shipping pallets and leftover rope from our move, my castle overlooked our neighborhood. I approached it and crawled in carefully, ignoring the creaks and groans of the old wood. There I prepared for the battle that lay ahead.

I could see my breath as I waited cross-legged on the cold, hard floor. The yellow afternoon light beamed through the cracks in the walls and bounced off the dust hanging in the air. Out of the corner of my imagination, I saw a horde of dark and ruthless enemies right outside my fortress, dawning the hill and ready for battle. I took a deep breath as I drew my stick and centered it between my eyes before I charged out of the castle. I took the first mighty swing, beginning the fight by whirling my sword with what I imagined were the skillful moves of a trained ranger, one by one defeating the shadowy figures that threatened all that was good. I fought until I was out of breath,

until the final imaginary enemy had fallen, and there I stood on the hill, victorious.

Now, sitting in my studio apartment almost eighteen years later, pushing thirty years old, I am forced to think about how far I've come from that boy I once was; I am no longer a chubby adolescent, but a six-foot-three, 230-pound man. My voice is deeper, and I have a beard.

I no longer play in rickety forts. I traded in my sharpened stick-swords for pens, and my imaginary enemies have become real-world struggles.

But as I think back, I realize that something is still lingering in my heart, something that was also present in me as a boy. As I close my eyes, letting my mind and heart wander, I find that the "something" is a strong and steady voice calling out to me, urging me to be a good and great man. It gives me a deep desire to use my life for something bigger than myself and to live out a true and epic story.

I wish I could say I've always listened to and followed the call, but life has a way of drowning it out with the noise of tedious work, mental illness, broken relationships, and unrealized dreams. But still, it's been there beckoning me—sometimes whispering, sometimes yelling—reminding me that I was made for more.

The voice that calls to me is the same one that spoke the universe into existence. It's the unchanging, ever-present, and timeless voice of my Creator calling out to the deepest parts of my being. And while I have wandered, stumbled, and fallen along the way, my Creator's voice still speaks. Even though I'm an imperfect and struggling man, it calls to me just as it did when I was a young boy fighting imaginary enemies, telling me I was created to be a good man. And I can be, should I only listen and obey.

The voice of God that calls my name calls to all of us, and He has been calling since the first man walked the earth. God is inviting us into the beautiful story He has waiting for us. The one He designed at the beginning of time that tells us who we are and who we were made to be: good men.

But what is a good man? Somewhere along the way we wandered away from the beautiful design we were made to live into—we walked away from the grand story that was written for us. And in doing so, we lost ourselves.

We traded kindness for cruelty,
peace for pride,
servanthood for selfishness,
love for lust,
goodness for greed,
hope for hate,
and desire for despair.

Through the years, we have forgotten what makes good men and why we desperately need them. In the hubris of modern culture, we have left behind the ancient ways that were written for us thousands of years ago. But now, for the sake of the world, we must return to them.

We need only to take a quick look at our culture to see that men are in crisis.

- The rate of suicide among men continues to dramatically rise to almost four times that of women, being one of the leading causes of death for men under the

age of forty-five, and almost half of men who have considered suicide haven't shared those feelings with anyone.¹

- New statistics show a staggering 80 percent of teenage to adult men regularly view pornography, even though it has been heavily linked to increased rates of sexual dissatisfaction, divorce, sexual harassment, and even sexual assault. The average age of exposure to sexually explicit material is only eleven years old.²
- One study shows that 85 percent of domestic violence is committed by men and the vast majority of mass shootings, gang violence, and serial killings are perpetrated by males.³

Even beyond statistics, we can plainly see in our everyday lives our desensitization to violent music, movies, and video games. We've become accustomed to crude and misogynistic locker-room talk from our peers, comfortable with destructive masculinity. We are deadened to the shocking news of yet another abusive Hollywood figure being outed, a corrupt politician wielding his power for selfish gains, or even our beloved spiritual pillars getting caught in years of moral compromise.

Even as I write this, it feels overwhelming. What are we to do about this broken male culture that we are a part of? Are there good men left? Were there ever any to begin with? Is it even possible to be a truly good man?

The answer is yes.

The truth is, men of this generation have become passive, angry, selfish, predatory, violent, and bored. But that's not where the story has to end.

Men were designed by a good Creator with intent. We were made to be dedicated, peaceful, serving, protective, kind, and purpose driven.

It is clear that men were made for more, but we have lost our way down a dark and destructive path. Inside each of us is a longing for meaning, a yearning for greatness, and a search for truth. Because of the broken world we live in, we have lost our way.

But just like me at twelve years old, in the heart of every little boy and every grown man is a hero, the soul of a good man who has the capacity to bring life into his world, protect innocence, create beauty, seek truth, love deeply, laugh loudly, explore, discover, adventure, provide, help, heal, and worship his Creator.

It was the day of my thirteenth birthday. Finally, it had arrived. As I opened my eyes that morning, the world felt different. I was finally a man. I stood in the bathroom carefully gazing into the mirror at the pale, skinny-fat boy staring back at me. I flexed, hoping to magically see more muscle on my arms now that I was officially *not* a kid, but I found the same soft limbs I'd had the day before. I looked for facial hair around my jaw but saw nothing but skin. Even though not much had visibly changed in the course of the short eight hours that ushered me into young-adulthood, I could feel something shifting inside of me.

My mom called to me from the living room, interrupting my thoughts, to tell me to come downstairs. With one more look in the mirror, I shut off the lights and headed to the living room. Excitement in my steps took me around the corner, and there was my dad, holding a real, honest-to-goodness, gold-hilted, silver-bladed sword. It was just like the ones used by the heroes

of Middle-earth, just like I had imagined in my backyard, but this was no sharpened stick.

My heart skipped a beat, and I quickly drew a breath. I took the sword, and as I wrapped my fingers around its hilt, I felt a strange sense of power and strength. With the gift came a speech, or perhaps an exhortation from a king to a knight, and my dad told me that this sword was to represent how I ought to see myself as I lived and moved in the world. I was to take on the identity of a warrior fighting for what was right, defending beauty, and protecting innocence. The sword was supposed to serve as a reminder of the responsibility that comes with strength.

But most of all, the sword was to be a symbol that I had been called out and invited into an epic story designed by my Creator. Should I listen and follow this call, I would find who I was created to be.

The sword now hangs in my childhood home in Colorado. So often I have come home after a long year and seen it as I opened the door to my old room, causing the devastating realization of how far I've strayed from those truths about myself and my calling. But still it hangs as a reminder of, or perhaps an invitation back into, the journey I began those many years ago. It's beautiful that no matter how far I've wandered from, forgotten, or failed to be the man I was made to be, God still calls to me. He asks me to listen to His voice ringing out from the deepest parts of who I am, to come back into the story He has for me to tell. And even at twenty-nine years old, I will wrap my fingers around the mighty sword's hilt, lift it up to my eyes, and once again imagine myself to be the hero I still have in my heart. The hero He created me to be.

Our Creator is calling all of us—every man. No matter who you are, where you're from, what you look like. No matter how big or small you are, what your education level is, how much money you make. No matter your IQ score, how old you are, what's been done to you, or what you've done, God is handing you the sword and inviting you into (or back into) His epic story to become who you were made to be . . . a good man.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever felt the desire to be a good man, to live for something greater than yourself and be a part of an epic story? If so, when do you first remember feeling this?
2. What ways do you notice men falling short of who they were made to be both in popular culture and in your own life?
3. What do you think are some qualities a good man must possess?

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.

Hebrews 4:12

A PRAYER FOR **OUR JOURNEY**

O God, who has before time seen and known us, who has counted the hairs on our heads, who has knitted us in our mothers' wombs, and who has created a story for us to live and a path for us to follow, help us hear Your calling on our lives. Let it draw us to the beautiful and fulfilling path that leads us toward You, our Creator, the giver of all life.

Let us not be distracted by the seductive voices of the world but instead keep our eyes on the path You have asked us to walk and our hearts on the song You have composed for us to play.

May we take courage in Your love and grace as we embark on the ancient way, the only one that leads to true redemption and ultimate fulfillment.

Give us strength to keep going even when the storms of life rage, and keep us ever in Your sight as we seek to find who we were created to be and the story we were made to tell.

Amen.