

4 Reasons Christian Men Struggle Spiritually

Last weekend, I led a three-day retreat for 125 men in Pittsburgh. The guys came from more than a dozen states as well as Canada. There were teenagers, college students, 20-somethings, hipsters, jocks, young fathers, businessmen and a few retirees. And the ethnic mix included Ugandan, Korean, Ethiopian, Russian, Hispanic and Ghanaian.

Despite our racial diversity and age differences, all the men shared pretty much the same spiritual needs. After 35-year-old youth pastor Daren Duncan preached a compassionate but confrontational message about pornography on Friday night, men from every background stepped up to the church altar to ask for prayer for freedom from the shame of past sins.

It was wonderful to see some of those guys, both young and old, weep openly as they confessed their mistakes to another brother in Christ. When the event ended on Saturday afternoon, the men didn't want to leave because they had found so much support from their new friends.

What happened in Pittsburgh needs to be repeated all over this country because Christian men are in crisis. Their marriages are shaky, their families are under siege and men themselves are struggling spiritually—yet they rarely tell anyone what's going on underneath their inch-thick protective body armor. Too many Christian men are on lockdown, silently suffering but too afraid to admit they are in pain.

After leading these retreats for men for the past 10 years, I've identified four main reasons why men in our churches are hurting.

1. We have deep father wounds. The very word “father” hits a raw nerve for a lot of guys. Many men suffer from what we

could call a “father ache.” A lot of guys have a deep void in their hearts because their dads were either absent entirely when they were young, emotionally distant, abusive or addicted. That’s a big reason they struggle to understand the unconditional love of the heavenly Father.

2. We don’t have supportive relationships. When I was a boy, everyone was familiar with the Marlboro Man, the most recognized icon in American advertising. This rugged cowboy was always with his horse in a Western setting, and he was always smoking a cigarette. His tough-guy image carried the subliminal message that real men are always alone.

Those cigarette ads are no longer permitted in magazines today, but the idea that men should be isolated is still a common belief. In fact, young American guys in 2019 are even more isolated than men were 50 years ago because of technology, pornography and video games. We are witnessing an epidemic of loneliness in today’s culture, and it’s evident in churches too.

David Smith, author of the book *The Friendless American Male*, says of Christian men today: “The fragmentation of community life; corporate pressures; the breakdown of the extended and nuclear family; the drive for success and the rate of mobility have all taken a tremendous toll on the numbers of intimate friendships we acquire and sustain.”

3. We strive to find our identity in worldly success. Many men today have something to prove. They are frustrated and insecure because they didn’t get the affirmation they needed from parents, especially fathers. So they are driven and performance-oriented. Christian men who are bent in this direction base their identity on what they do, not who they are.

Performance orientation leads to all kinds of dysfunction. It drives some men to keep insane work schedules. It fuels a

competitive atmosphere in the workplace. It pushes men to climb the ladder of success so they can buy the latest toys. Driven men often develop this tendency because they couldn't please their own dads. So the church ends up being full of tormented overachievers who hurt others—especially their own families—in their pursuit of success at all costs.

4. We prefer to medicate our emotional pain. God created us with the capacity for emotional release. He gave us mouths so we can talk honestly about our struggles. He gave us tear ducts so we could cry when necessary. He gave us ears so we can listen to others when they are hurting. And He gave us arms and hands to be able to soothe and embrace each other when we are dealing with grief or tragedy.

Pain must be processed; it cannot be stuffed away. But what happens when we don't use those God-given outlets? When a man buries his problems, he will almost always find a way to medicate his pain. This is why so many men—including Christian guys—become addicted to alcohol, nicotine, porn, illegal drugs or prescription medicines.

Are the men in your church struggling? Are they paralyzed by shame, loneliness, secret addictions and a lack of spiritual passion? We can't build healthy churches if we don't have healthy men. But churches today are ill-equipped to meet the needs outlined here.

Let's ask the Lord to send fresh grace to heal men's hearts.
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