

The Heart of the Warrior: The Poser
Quest Spring 2023

In 1854, the American transcendentalist and Harvard graduate Henry David Thoreau penned these words: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” You have probably heard these words before, and maybe even reflected on their meaning. Thoreau, upon observing countless men in his time, concluded that the men of the 19th century lived empty lives, lives that were absent of adventure, absent of nature, absent of meaning and purpose. They were not living the life of a warrior. It was only by escaping to nature to be alone with his thoughts, outside of the hustle and bustle of the modern American life, that Thoreau was able to reflect on his own soul and the souls of other men. That reflection led to this conclusion, that most men are not living the lives that they want, the lives they once dreamed of, the lives they were created to live. Even if we want the heart of the warrior, something is preventing us from having it.

As much as we would like to say that things have changed since the time of Thoreau, I doubt many of us would conclude that men in 2023 live fulfilling lives, chock full of commitment, purposefulness, and adventurous joy. If you were living that way, then my job and Pierce’s job would be much easier, and instead of teaching you sinners on Sunday nights and Tuesday mornings, we could be at home with our families. But, here we are.

The quiet desperation that we experience takes many forms.

For some, it’s the quiet desperation of **a job that we don’t love**. We set out on a career path years ago, maybe even decades ago. At first, the allure of a big paycheck and a fast-paced environment drew us in, but not the monotony of the day-in-day out drag has left us feeling desperate. We can’t quit—we’ve got to provide for our families and maintain our level of comfort. But the excitement of the first day of work has long since subsided.

For others, the quiet desperation takes the form of **an absence with our wives and our children and grandchildren**. We want to be involved, we want to know what is going on in their lives, but we feel distant. We know we could be better, we just don’t know how.

Maybe your quiet desperation happens in a place like this. You look around and see men who know the Bible, who can openly share their faith and their struggles, who seem to have all this spiritual stuff figured out, and then you look at yourself. You come to church when you can, sure, but you haven’t really ever taken this stuff seriously. Again, you’re trying, but you’re still not quite where you want to be.

What I want to argue in this lecture is that underneath all that quiet desperation is a condition that has plagued masculinity since our first ancestor. It’s a condition that we may never fully recover from, but one that is still worth fighting. It’s a condition that prevents us from having the heart of a warrior. And the condition comes in the form of a very simple question. It’s a question that gnaws at our consciences, lurks beneath every email we send and every project

we complete, rides shotgun in our relationships with our wives, our sons, and our daughters. And the question is a simple, yet haunting one: **Am I enough?**

In John Eldredge's modern classic *Wild at Heart*, which we've based this semester's lectures on, this question leads many men to feel that they are a **Poser**. An imposter, a fraud, a phony. Someone pretending to be a person that they're not. We constantly fear that we will be found out to not be as intelligent, witty, caring, loving, moral, or capable as others think that we are. To keep up with the façade, we create the best version of our poser self and try to become more like that person.

Although I don't often quote atheists to prove my point, I'll make an exception here. Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote this: **"All great men are play actors of their own ideal."** (IMAGE 1 WITH QUOTE) And at many levels, that's true. We have an image of what we want to be—a strong man, a competent man, a loving yet fierce man—and then we pretend to be that man, even if deep down we know we are not. We see John Dutton on *Yellowstone*, Maverick Mitchell on *Top Gun*, a professional athlete, a politician, a pastor, and we want to be like them, so we pretend that we are. And that's when we become the poser.

I would suspect that the vast majority of you, if not all of you, have experienced this type of mental anguish before. Maybe in school, maybe in a career, maybe in your marriage, the nagging question of, "Am I enough?" And then, maybe it's just me, but one moment I can ask that question, and the very next, I can be over-confident. I try to cover up my insecurity with being over-secure and over-confident. It's like we have a poser on one shoulder and a narcissist on the other, and they're battling for our souls.

I know I experienced both of these in a single week not long ago. I was selected to be a part of a cohort of young, gifted Methodist pastors from across the southern United States. There were some real studs in this group—men and women who will one day lead large churches, be Bishops, and direct the future of the church. At first, it was quite intimidating. Once I got to know everyone, though, I realized that I was not selected by mistake, and almost immediately I switched over to being overly self-confident, or at least pretending to be so I would fit in.

During our first few sessions of the cohort, the leader walked us through all kinds of personality tests: Myers-Briggs, Strengths Finder, how we deal with change, and the like. We were told time and time again that it didn't matter what our results were—we could all lead, and we were the most special ESTJ green unicorn snowflakes of them all. I continually pressed, asking what I could improve upon to become a better leader and pastor. And continually, I was told it wasn't about changing; it was about being your authentic self.

Finally, when the convener of the cohort candidly asked for feedback, I gave it. I said, "I appreciate learning about myself and how great I am, but I know these things. I want to know what's wrong with me, how I can grow, how I can develop." To which she somewhat lounge-in-cheek quipped, "Well, that sounds like something a person with narcissistic tendencies might say." And I said, "Thank you! That's all I was looking for."

“I’ve got this,” and “I wonder if they’ll find out that I don’t got this” wage war within our heads and our hearts. But we’ve believed the lie that we have to pretend like we have it all together. We can’t ever show weakness, can’t ever let our guard down, we have to portray confidence, even if we don’t feel it on the inside.

Sometimes, this is called “The Impostor’s Syndrome.” Simply put, the impostor’s syndrome is a psychological occurrence in which an individual doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud. You feel it after you get that first big promotion. You know you’ve worked hard, hit the right numbers, shaken the right hands, and impressed the right people, but on the first day on the job you realize that you might not know what you’re doing. You feel it the morning after your wedding day, having pledged your life to the woman you love, but then wondering if she will still love you if she finds out who you really are. You feel it in that delivery room, holding your newborn for the first time and realizing that you have absolutely no idea what you’re doing. Your biggest fear is being exposed as a fraud.

I know I felt that for the better part of my first year here. Being on staff with legends of the faith like Dr. Ed Robb, Mark Sorensen, Mark Swayze, and what’s that long haired guys name who cried all the time? Right. Being on a church staff with these men and women was always a dream of mine, and I never thought I’d reach it. Then, at age 29, I arrived here, and it about crushed me. I remember talking to Rob in his office after one of the first Quest sessions I did, and I expressed all this self-doubt to him. I said, “Rob, you might not realize this, but you’re Rob freaking Renfro.” The beauty of that man is he never really has realized what that means. He helped coach me through it, and even though I have to pinch myself sometimes, I realize that I’m not here by accident. And you’re not where you are by accident either.

Thoreau did not discover this phenomenon, and it’s certainly not new. It extends all the way back to our first ancestor Adam. If you’ve spent any time in church, you know how our Bible begins. In Genesis 1 and 2, God creates everything that is, and says that it’s good. Then He creates mankind in His own image, and declares that it is very good. God gives Adam, the first man, dominion, power, and authority. And almost as soon as God gives Adam that strength and authority, Adam blows it.

Genesis 3:1: Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” 2 And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

In Hebrew, this last statement about Adam being “with her” literally means they were shoulder to shoulder. Adam had the power and authority to convince the one he loved, the one that was literally made for him, to avoid cursing the rest of mankind for all eternity. He was given his chance to be a man and prove that he was capable and enough. And instead of stepping up to the challenge, he folded. He simply stood there passively. Then look what happens:

Genesis 3: 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 8 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” 10 And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

Adam realizes that he had not lived up to his potential. He realized that at his core, he wasn't enough. He feels like a fraud. So he does what every man has done since then; **he hides**. He covers up his brokenness, his nakedness, his vulnerability, and hides from the God who loves him unconditionally.

Adam experiences the greatest fear of the poser: Being exposed. God, who sees all, now sees what happens when the man he has created is left alone with his free will. He is exposed, literally, and feels like a fraud.

This fall from grace repeats itself over and over again in the public sphere. Bernie Madoff's fortune is exposed as a Ponzi Scheme. The smartest men in the room at Enron are exposed as crooks. Even in the past couple months, I've followed the stories of two men who have been royally exposed.

One is a politician by the name of **George Santos (IMAGE 2)**. Some of you might have heard about this story. Santos did the unthinkable; he was elected as a Republican member of the House of Representatives from New York. He had an incredible story—his grandparents were Jewish Holocaust refugees who fled Soviet Ukraine. His father was African American, and his mother worked for a prominent financial institution before losing her life in the September 11th attacks. He persisted through a difficult childhood, eventually going to Baruch College on a volleyball scholarship, and then worked at some of the top financial firms, including Citigroup and Goldman Sachs. A true against-all-odds, rags-to-riches story that the media rightly celebrated. Until they discovered that virtually every detail of George Santos' life was a lie. Really, this guy made everything up. He was exposed as a fraud.

Another recent exposure came from an internet celebrity named Brian Johnson. Johnson, coincidentally enough a resident of Montgomery County, amassed millions of social media followers who sought after this man's life; massive wealth, a beautiful family, and what he claimed was the cure to all sorts of problems like low testosterone, anxiety, depression, and a life of quiet desperation. Johnson, who goes by the name Liver King, said that if we would just

live by the 9 ancestral tenets that he developed, living like our early ancestors, we too could live this kind of life.

We've got a picture of the Liver King (IMAGE 3). Now, I don't know about you, but I wouldn't mind looking like that guy. And the way he talked about it, all I would have to do is eat raw liver (which I do), work out twice a day, and live the rest of his tenets.

Now, brace yourselves for this: it came out a few weeks ago that, shockingly, this guy is doing steroids. Surprise surprise, your chest will not look like that and you will not have an 8 pack simply if you eat raw organs.

All joking aside, we can live with this same fear of Adam, of George Santos, and of the Liver King, that one day we might be exposed too. Now, our façade, our masks, might not be as great; our passivity does not lead to the fracturing of the entire cosmos because of original sin, you probably have not lied about literally every aspect of your resume, and you probably did not gain millions of followers by taking steroids and lying about it. But deep down, we still might be scared of one day being exposed.

And because of that fear, we live lives of quiet desperation. We're risk-averse, choosing to only do the things that we're good at. If we're good in the office, we stay late because at home we may feel like a failure. If we're strong in the gym, we avoid engaging in intelligent conversations, fearing that our lack of intelligence might be exposed. John Eldredge (IMAGE 4 AND QUOTE) says this, **"Any day now, I'll be found out' is a pretty common theme among us guys. Truth be told, most of us are faking our way through life. We pick on those battles we are sure to win, only those adventures we are sure to handle, only those beauties we are sure to rescue."** And when it's outside of our expertise, we just pretend.

Eldredge in *Wild at Heart* admits to something that is true about me (And Rob Renfro): We are not handy-men. I can't fix much, and when I try, I get frustrated, feel worse about myself, and say bad words. But when I go to the mechanic to get my car looked at, I pretend to know what's going on. They diagnose the car, and then he comes with a greasy hand reaching out to shake mine, and says that it's a simple but expensive fix: I've got a leaky spark tube, my blinker fluid is out, and the hinges of the transponderer need respooling. "Ah, of course. I just respooled them last year, but that's what I thought it would be."

We're pretending to be someone we're not. Scared of being exposed for our ineptitude or passivity, we live a life of quiet desperation. And it all stems from that question: Am I enough?

"Am I enough?" is a question that haunts us, prevents us from being the men that we're called to be, and leads to self-doubt and a self-limiting way of living. So if that's the diagnosis, what's the solution? I want to suggest three ways to combat the poser mentality and to destroy the Impostor's Syndrome

First, Admit It. Admit that you're not the jack of all trades. Admit that no matter how old you are, how much experience you have, or how many times you've been around the block, you still have things to learn and areas to grow. This can break down the façade that you have it all together. It's a humbling experience.

Isaiah 6: In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" 4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

What happened? The prophet Isaiah encounters the holiness and perfection of God, and comes to a realization that he, Isaiah, is neither holy nor perfect. And so he confesses it. Men, hear me: It's okay to not be perfect. It's okay to not be okay. Because you're not. And if anyone tells you otherwise, chances are, they want something from you. Part of breaking down the false self and living into who you really and truly are is to simply admit that you don't have it all together.

And that can happen best in the context of the second way to break through the Poser mentality: **Through Authentic Community.**

This is my second pastoral appointment. My family and I moved to The Woodlands in October 2020, and before that, we were in the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey, College Station, Texas. And in both settings, College Station and The Woodlands, I've had people ask me about one of the hardest parts of being a pastor. They ask if it's the funerals or the counseling or having to work on the weekends. Sure, those things can be difficult, but I tell them all the same thing: The hardest thing about being a pastor is having to always be "on."

Now, please hear me: It's also one of the greatest blessings. What I mean is that whether I'm standing on a stage in Loft, teaching here from the Lectern in Quest, shopping at HEB or working out at Villa, I'm a pastor. There's no escaping it. And I love that. It's fun to have chance encounters while out and about, to catch up with you, and like Mark said to the congregation a few weeks ago, if you ever see me in public, please come say hi. But it can also be exhausting.

So in both places, in College Station and here, one of my first orders of business was to find some guys that I can just be Daniel with. I might be their pastor, but first I'm their friend. I can be real with them. They won't judge me if I confess a sin to them. They won't think less of me if I ask them how to deal with a situation in my marriage or my parenting. They won't tell anyone if I accidentally let a word slip after chunking a 9 iron. I can be real with them, my true self.

You need that too. A study in 2021 found that only 27% of men have six close friends, and 15% of men have no close friendships at all. For those men, they always have to be “on.” If they’re in the office, they’re trying to impress their boss. If they’re in church, they’re trying to fit in and appear holy. If they’re at the gym, they’re lifting heavy and keeping to themselves. As a result, the Poser becomes their true self, leading to a life of never knowing who they truly are.

We’re working on how to keep tables together during the off seasons of Quest. I know that many of your tables stick together in the summer and winter, and we encourage that. But all it takes is one of you to initiate a lunch, a coffee, an outing as a table. Be that one.

The final way to combat the Poser that lives inside of us is simply by **Accepting the Gospel**. That may sound elementary, that might sound like preacher talk. Chances are, if you’re here with us, at some point, you’ve accepted the Good News that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man. He walked this earth 2000 years ago teaching us how to love and how to live. And then He was convicted to death upon a cross, and on that cross, He took all of our sin and shame away so that we can have a relationship with God, not by our own righteousness, but by His.

You know that story, but think of its implications. Sure, believing in the Gospel guarantees you eternal life, but it also should affect your life now. The Poser constantly wonders if they are enough, if they’ve done enough, if they’re good enough. The Gospel says no, you are not enough, you haven’t done enough, and you’re not good enough. But you don’t have to be. The Gospel says that we don’t have to work our way up to God, because He has worked His way down to us. You are accepted, loved, and cherished by the one being who knows you better than anyone else. And it’s His eternal opinion that matters more than anyone else’s.

Hear me: Men who have accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ can still live lives of quiet desperation. But truly embracing who Christ is and what He has done for us is the first, and most important, step to being the warrior that God has called you to be.