

13 Things Every Young Boy Should Be Taught

Youth /

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1. How to Say "Thank You", "I'm Sorry", and "Please"

After learning to say Mommy and Daddy, the above-mentioned five words are the most essential. In fact, they are the very pillars of civilization. I am not exaggerating when I say that without a boy (or anyone for that matter) learning these concepts, the world would descend into darkness. Some refer to the word "please" as the magic word, but I would argue that all of these words are magical. Indeed, if I were to reduce religious doctrine to three phrases, it would be these. Why? Because if a boy is never taught about gratitude, he will never begin to recognize that sometimes everything is a gift. The man who "deserves" nothing is grateful for everything he has, whereas the man who is an ingrate will always be resentful about that which he doesn't have.

The words "I'm sorry" are magical, because they are rare jewels in a world that is always a victim and is therefore always right. This oblation of humility calls to mind the magic of the story of Scrooge, or It's a Wonderful Life, not to mention the indelible image in every family of your little monster, transforming into your little angel. These words are so powerful, that they can even disarm the perfect justice of God (just consider His endless mercy in the Sacrament of Confession).

And last but not least is the so-called "magic word" itself. Now perhaps we regard it as particularly magical because it is the opposite disposition that Adam and Eve expressed when they took for themselves what was not for them to take. Was it the fruit that killed them, or was it the way they took it? To fail to teach a young man to say "please" is to turn him into a thief who takes everything without permission. For this fiend, not even the world is enough. On the other hand, the child that is thankful for what he has, sorry for the wrongs he has committed, and humble about the demands that he places on others is truly on his way to living a happy life, no matter how rich or poor.

2. How to Lead a Prayer

Obviously it is essential for any young man to learn (and be taught) how to have a conversation with God. But when it comes to leading a public prayer (however simple), this can be just as essential. Why? Because while a man may be able to converse with God in the silence of his heart, there are times where a man's silence can also be his excuse. Indeed, if he never learns to externalize his worship of God, it is possible that he will never learn to externalize his faith at all. Men/boys are geniuses when it comes to fading into the woodwork. Teaching them this skill not only forces them to find their spiritual voice, but it teaches them how to find their voice in general. The natural shyness of men is not a bad thing, but if that is the only way they express themselves, then they will never learn how to use their voice on behalf of their family, both in spiritual and worldly matters. When I demand this of my students, I make sure to tell them that they will one day be leading their family in prayer, and that they dare not shrink from developing this important skill. These words (I hope) put into perspective for them that it is not acceptable for them to simply hide behind their spiritual shyness and social machismo. Instead they should use whatever "coolness" they have in them in order to lead others in a meaningful way.

3. How to Shake Another Man's Hand

The feeling of a cold limp fish is not what most would call a pleasant experience, however, for whatever reason this is often what young men are inclined to present instead of a firm handshake. There is, of course, a balance to be met here. On the one hand (no pun intended), the type of man who wears a cowboy hat, a western tie, and calls you little buckaroo, all while throttling your hand into oblivion can be equally annoying. And that's the point. A good handshake neither overwhelms the other person by crushing their knuckles, nor does it underwhelm them as if the individual were attempting to donate his outstretched hand to you. Rather, what a firm handshake seeks to do is to demonstrate both a respect and awareness of the other individual, all while exhibiting a sense of self-respect. It should also be noted that coupled with a good firm handshake, one should "always look eye" (as Mr. Miyagi once suggested), for this too also demonstrates the appropriate level of respect and dignity. See the video above for some handshaking tips!

4. How to Engage in a Real Conversation

Speaking of "always look eye", what's also important to teach a young man is how to communicate with an adult. This is important because in order to learn how to communicate as an adult, you need to learn how to communicate like one. It is no small task to help a boy transition from the land of Mr. Mumbles to the land of "Fine Young Man". The manner by which one does this is two-fold. First, one needs to teach a young boy to work through his natural awkwardness, and instead engage the other individual in such a way that respectfully acknowledges their presence. In other words, one must raise their eyes and voices to meet that of the other individual's. Grunts, quiet mumbles, and shoe-lace gazing are strictly prohibited. Yes, it will require virtue and inner strength to do so, but it is nevertheless necessary that every young lad should pass from the realm of "sloucho the marble-mouthed slump", to the fairer country where adolescent boys successfully transition to fine young men. Secondly, a young man needs to learn not only how to answer a question thoughtfully, but also how to ask one. I remember when I was twelve or thirteen years old and my aunt asked me rather brusquely: "Do you only talk about yourself, or do you ever ask anyone else how they're doing?" (Ouch). It hurt, but it changed my way of thinking. It doesn't have to be a brilliant question, but if you can learn how to express interest in others, people will always find you engaging, and more importantly, you will learn the real "give and take" of conversation. This, as opposed to an interview whereby you answer all questions with as few syllables as possible, and everyone's glad when the exchange is over. Indeed, the grunting caveman must make way for a more enlightened and evolved child.

5. How to Write a "Thank You" Note

Perhaps this is a bit of an extension of #1, but it deserves its own category for one simple reason. As important as it is to express gratitude for gifts in a generic sense, it is just as imperative to reward a great act of kindness by going to the next level. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that one should do this on every occasion, but there are times when an act of generosity deserves a greater response. What is learned by such a practice is that gifts involve two people, and that the proper return for such an unmerited grace

should be something of a surprise as well. There is nothing worse than someone making a great effort to find something meaningful for another person, only to hear nothing in response. It is like complimenting another with great exuberance, only to be utterly ignored. This type of behavior doesn't exactly inspire one to express further exuberance. But the larger point is this: the reason such a silence is deafening is because it is purely selfish. The gift giver has placed some good thing (presumably) into a bottomless pit of nothingness, and so in turn the joy of sharing a gift is completely asphyxiated by the terrible demons of narcissism and solipsism. But most importantly what is lost is an opportunity for a child to reflect on the meaning of a particular act of kindness. Indeed, by reflecting upon it and writing it down, the heart naturally becomes even more grateful, for it is compelled to lend voice to a feeling that might otherwise remain nebulous or without shape. Even if the gift is not precisely what the child wished to possess, the exercise is important at least with respect to educating him as to how to be gracious for the effort, even if no material gain is achieved.

6. How to Bow, Kneel, and Genuflect

There are some people who seem to take great pleasure in the words "chivalry is dead". I can only assume that such an atrocious axiom is a popular sentiment in Hell. From the standpoint of heaven, the act (or art) of genuflecting is merely a physical manifestation of a kind of loyalty and devotion. It is an acknowledgment of one's vulnerability, while at the same time an expression of one's readiness to serve. In stark contrast, the kind of "service" that can be found in Hell is more akin to servility. The slavery that is proposed by Satan involves an usurping of the will so that he or she is no longer in possession of themselves (rather, they are possessed). In Heaven, the gift of self is given to God by the individual in perpetuity, while in Hell it is raped/robbed from the individual ad infinitum. On a more practical level, however, what all this kneeling, bowing, and genuflecting communicates is an attitude of respect and reverence. Just as a soldier is careful to be exacting and purposeful in saluting authority, so also a young man needs to learn that his religious gestures should not be sloppy and mindless, nor should they be "half-assed". He needs to stand at the ready! All the same, the beauty of these postures (especially in the context of the Church) represent far more than blind obedience. Indeed, if understood properly, these actions will no doubt inspire a sense of gratitude in a young man's soul, and better still, allow him to connect a pair of ideas that so often in our modern world are disassociated: God and Romance.

7. How to Hold a Knife and Fork

All of the previous examples are great, you might be thinking, but how can the manner in which one holds their fork and knife be of consequence? Teaching a young man this important task/technique is part and parcel of the overall program of working to prevent your little barbarian from turning into a giant one. Granted, taking the time to show him how to avoid eating like a Visigoth can be rather taxing for the both of you, but it is well worth the effort. I am obviously all for a good feast, but in order to enjoy it properly, the old axiom of "grab and growl" must not be the only governing influence. The truth is when you hold your fork and knife like the child pictured above, your eating mentality will probably reflect that. In other words, eating is a communitarian event, not an exercise in isolation. It is not intended to be an event wherein one never lifts one's head, and simply positions themselves about an inch away from their food. Holding the fork and knife properly (I'll leave the actual lesson to the experts) gives one distance from one's food so that one may engage with others in conversation- all while enjoying their food at a reasonable pace. Of course there are times where one is famished and a little leeway should be granted. Nevertheless, this trend of utilitarian eating must be reversed, lest we reduce every meal to a series of grunts and groans, slurping and crunching, a mouth filled to the brim with food (teaching one to chew with their mouth closed is probably another good lesson), but never with laughter and grand storytelling. Incidentally, holding your fork and knife in the proper way is actually the most effective way to cut your food once you get used to it. So it's a practical thing as well.

8. How to Dress for Formal Occasions (Especially When Attending Church)

I often hear people say that it doesn't matter how one dresses for church, because the Lord wouldn't care as long as you show up. And it is true, that if it came right down to it, and you had no other options, you should come as you are. Yet if we wouldn't accept that kind sloppy attitude in other formal situations, why should we do so when it comes to the most important one of all. In fact, the way many young men (and older) dress for church today, it's as if they are actually going out of their way to dress poorly. From Teva sandals, to untucked golf shirts, it seems there is no limit to how low some people will go to dance the sartorial "limbo". Here's the problem with the message that this sends to young men: The trouble that you go to (or don't go to) when attending a function represents the degree to which you value it, and so what does it communicate to yourself and others if you wear the same outfit to the highest function that you would wear to the lowest. This is a psychological truth as well as a practical one. If you simply roll out of bed and wander bleary-eyed with your torn "jorts" and flip-flops to Mass, what does that say about how much you value the Lord's death and resurrection? If what you wear to the movies is the same as what you wear to church, what does that say about the relative importance of the latter? Would you wear that to a job interview? A funeral? A nice restaurant? Of course not! And how much more important is our creator, and what we are celebrating at church, than any of those things? So why are we becoming culturally comfortable with this behavior? Some may argue that society as a whole is becoming more and more casual, and that therefore makes all of this OK. But whether that mentality is acceptable or not, one thing is irrefutable: if we treat everything like it is barely worth the effort, we should not be surprised when our children take that mentality one step further.

9. How to Extend Hospitality

In many ways hospitality seems like another one of those virtues "better left to the fairer sex". However, this is another one of those lies of machismo. The word "hospitality" derives from the Latin, "hospes", meaning stranger or foreigner. It is perhaps our natural inclination as males to frown at the prospect of permitting someone "from the outside" into our fold, either because we like feeling superior to others, or because we don't want to put forth the effort. But whatever the case, the truth is welcoming a stranger can hardly be regarded as an action that derives from weakness. To the contrary- such kindness takes a real concerted effort, and more importantly it requires certain genteel virtues that are not always prominent in young males. To teach a young man hospitality is to teach him the virtue of kindness. To be kind is not to be soft, but rather to restrain one's boorishness as well one's natural (or unnatural) scorn for anything that is not familiar. It is easy to trample something- but it requires an entirely different order of power to defend that which is vulnerable. And so whether one is introducing one's self to a new student, welcoming a guest into one's home, or simply reaching out to anyone who feels marginalized, there is tremendous courage in such a disposition. Far from being the type of behavior that arises from weakness, the importance of this virtue is the very essence and point of the story of the Good Samaritan.

10. How to Treat a Lady

Obviously much could be said about this, but let me attempt to crystallize what is at the core of this essential value. Jesus is the king of chivalry, and the reason for this is because at the heart of his efforts is the work of elevating and honoring his beloved Bride, that is the Church. The genius of Christian chivalry is that it doesn't seek to emasculate man by turning him into a second-rate woman, nor does it seek to reduce the feminine to a kind of second-rate masculinity. What it attempts to do is to celebrate the strength and beauty in both. Hence, a Christian man is to use all of his manliness, not for the purposes of machismo, but for the purposes of elevating the Lady. He honors her through acts of courage, service, and sacrifice, and yes, she "submits" and permits him to serve her in these ways. So when he opens the door and pulls out the chair, he is not taught to do this as if she were too weak to twist a door knob. Rather, he is taught to do this as an act of deference, a profound acknowledgment of her innate worth and feminine power. Indeed, all women should receive

said treatment not because they are less than men, but because all women are royalty. Yet the power of women is not necessarily an explicit thing, which is why in the ancient world women were often treated as property. Why? Because they were physically weaker (might makes right). Consequently, to not teach a young boy of a woman's inherent dignity and worth, is to condemn him to barbarism, and her to servility. Thus, do not hesitate to teach your young boys to pull out chairs, open doors, remove their hats, and bow in the presence of a lady. Teach him to propose on one knee, to defend her honor against the insults of the world (as our Lord did). And if he is hated and spat upon for it, and if he is told disparagingly that chivalry is dead, he can take solace in the knowledge that Chivalry did die, but rose again on the third day.

11. How to Be a Leader

My advice on leadership is relatively simple, and it involves behavior that anyone can accomplish. Assuming that one is a sentient being, one can achieve what I propose. If a parent, teacher, or anyone else for that matter is in need of help (whether they ask for it or not), resist the inclination to fade into the woodwork, and rather step up and volunteer. Moreover, if you are called on to perform some task, do it like it's your business, and avoid all of the requisite moaning and groaning. Make sure to accomplish it completely, and if you can, go the extra mile. When you say you will be somewhere, then "be somewhere". Be a man of your word, and if you happen to be late, say you are going to be late and apologize. We live in the age of semi-reality, where people choose whether or not to mean something at any given moment. They say "yes" on Facebook, maybe in their mind, and no in reality. If your words mean nothing, then you are little more than an insubstantial ghost. Hence, by accomplishing these basic tasks, a young man can quickly establish himself as trustworthy and reliable, and if he creates that perception he will no doubt be regarded as a leader. In these specific ways, then, a young man can impress those around him and set himself apart, especially in the midst of a generation that is distracted, unreliable, and half-hearted in their work.

12. How to Sit Quietly

The phrase; "silence is golden" is often bandied about these days as if it could only have a negative connotation. However, the original meaning of the phrase had little to do with the idea that one should simply be "seen and not heard". To the contrary, what it implied was the inherent value and virtue in the practice of taking a little time away from the noise and mayhem of everyday life. Our world is excellent at noise, what it is not good at is the art of contemplation. Yet without a little quiet introspection what kind of wisdom can one hope to attain? The most important religious lesson that any child can learn- apart from learning about God- is the virtue of how to sit still. If a child can learn this most difficult practice, he is all the more likely to become a champion of the intellect, not to mention a champion of prayer. How shallow the man who cannot bear silence? How shallow the individual who relies solely on machines to do the work of the imagination? Consequently, silence is golden, especially when a young boy is being taught how to contemplate and meditate on the great mysteries of life.

13. How to "Be a Man"

Nothing I have put in this list thus far involves a recommendation that is impossible for any young boy- no matter what his personality may be. And this last example is no exception. What I mean by the above phrase; "be a man", has nothing to do with whether or not a child is an athlete, or even physically tough. What is meant is something more akin to a disposition and/or attitude that should be taken when confronted with any challenging project or endeavor. Now, mind you, this is not a call to accept any and all displeasing projects, but it is advice on how to handle them when they come your way... and they will. My advice is this: whenever one feels the inertia or strong push to avoid one's duties, one should immediately recite this phrase, either audibly or inaudibly. Notice there really isn't an equivalent for women. Apparently it is presumed that when the going gets tough, they don't need much prompting. At any rate, how should a young man know when it is time to say these words? As suggested before, the moment one senses that one is responsible for a task, while simultaneously feeling a profound aversion for that task... it is on! What value is there in only doing what is asked of you, either when you want to, or when you do so only in the most begrudging and whiney fashion. I do not care who you are, or how weak you may feel, if you can accomplish this much, then you are worthy of the high honor of being called a man.