

From Boy to Man

The Marks of Manhood



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When does a boy become a man?

That interesting question was recently posed to me, and it raises some of the most important issues facing Christians today. While the world seems increasingly confused about matters as basic as what it means to be male and female, Christians are called to frame our arguments in distinctively biblical terms.

All around us, cultural developments and media messages communicate a fog of confusion over questions of gender. In reality, these issues lie right along the fault lines of today's culture war and its most controversial points of debate. For many years, this society has been experimenting with the most fundamental realities of human existence. The essence of what it means to be male or female has been routinely discounted by a society infatuated with unlimited self-expression and assertions of personal autonomy. Women are now joined by men, who complain that traditional expectations about gender roles are oppressive, limiting and intolerant. An entire generation of young women is trying to find a way to genuine womanhood against the tidal force of ideological feminism. Similarly, boys and young men are desperately looking for models of manhood and answers to their urgent questions of male identity, male responsibility and male roles. Christians understand that God created human beings as male and female - for His glory and for our good. The differences between the sexes are not matters of evolutionary accident, but are clear indications of God's sublime and perfect design for human happiness. As followers of Christ, we understand that it is our responsibility to embrace, affirm, and fulfill the roles and responsibilities God has given us.



In the context of this confusion, boys are especially vulnerable. The feminization of society, mixed with confusing cultural signals, has led many boys and young men to be uncertain and unaware of their masculinity and proper role. In a desperate search for a secure male identity, some are attracted to gross distortions. Some embrace a brutalized and arrogant posture while others retreat into insecure manhood, never understanding a man's responsibility to lead. We now face the phenomenon of perpetual boyhood on the part of many males. Refusing to grow up, these young men function as boys well into their twenties - some even into their thirties and beyond. An extended male adolescence marks the lifestyles, expectations and behavior of far too many young males, whose masculine identity is embraced awkwardly, if at all. When does a boy become a man? The answer to this must go far beyond biology and chronological age. As defined in the Bible, manhood is a functional reality, demonstrated in a man's fulfillment of responsibility and leadership. With this in mind, let me suggest thirteen marks of biblical manhood. The achievement of these vital qualities marks the emergence of a man who will demonstrate true biblical masculinity.

Spiritual maturity sufficient to lead a wife and children.

The Bible is clear about a man's responsibility to exercise spiritual maturity and spiritual leadership. Of course, this spiritual maturity takes time to develop, and it is a gift of the Holy Spirit working within the life of the believer.

1.

The disciplines of the Christian life, including prayer and serious Bible study, are among the means God uses to mold a boy into a man and to bring spiritual maturity into the life of one who is charged to lead a wife and family. This spiritual leadership is central to the Christian vision of marriage and family life. A man's spiritual leadership is not a matter of dictatorial power, but of firm and credible spiritual leadership and influence. A man must be ready to lead his wife and his children in a way that will honor God, demonstrate godliness, inculcate Christian character, and lead his family to desire Christ and to seek God's glory. Spiritual maturity is a mark of true Christian manhood, and a spiritually immature man is, in at least this crucial sense, spiritually just a boy.

Personal maturity sufficient to be a responsible husband and father.

Christians often speak of raising boys to be men. In the face of today's cultural onslaught, this is an important goal. However, it is just not enough. Biblical manhood is always defined in terms of functions, roles and responsibilities.

2.

True masculinity is not a matter of exhibiting supposedly masculine characteristics devoid of the context of responsibility. In the Bible, a man is called to fulfill his role as husband and father. Unless granted the gift of celibacy for Gospel service, the Christian boy is to aim for marriage and fatherhood. This is assuredly a counter-cultural assertion, but the role of husband and father is central to manhood. Boys must be raised to see themselves as future husbands and fathers. They must be taught what to look for in a godly wife and how to fulfill all of the responsibilities that Scripture invests in a husband and father. Marriage is unparalleled in its effect on men, as it channels their energies and directs their responsibilities to the devoted covenant of marriage and the grace-filled civilization of the family. Boys must be taught what it means to be a husband, how to respect and honor marriage, and how to earn the respect and confidence of a wife. Similarly, boys must be taught about the responsibilities of fatherhood. Christians must reverse generations of inattention by speaking directly and clearly to boys about their future responsibilities, including the care, training, education, protection and discipline of children. They must aspire to be the kind of man a Christian woman would gladly marry and children will trust, respect and obey.

Economic maturity sufficient to hold an adult job and handle money.

Advertisers and marketers know where to aim their messages - directly at adolescent boys and young men. This particular segment of the population is inordinately attracted to material goods, popular entertainment, sporting events and other consumer options.

3.

The portrait of young manhood made popular in the media and presented as normal through entertainment is characterized by economic carelessness, self-centeredness and laziness. A real man knows how to hold a job, handle money with responsibility and take care of the needs of his wife and family. A failure to develop economic maturity means that young men often float from job to job and take years to “find themselves” in terms of career and vocation. Once again, an extended adolescence marks a huge segment of today’s young male population. A boy must be taught how to work, how to save, to invest and to spend money with care. He must be taught to respect labor, and to feel the satisfaction that comes from a job well done, and a dollar honestly earned. Too many boys are coddled and entertained, demonstrating a laziness that will be highly detrimental to their future prospects as husband and father. Slothfulness, laziness and economic carelessness are marks of immaturity. *A real man knows how to earn, manage and respect money. A Christian man understands the danger that comes from the love of money and fulfills his responsibility as a Christian steward.*

Physical maturity sufficient to work and protect a family.

Unless afflicted by injury or illness, a boy should develop the physical maturity that, by stature and strength, marks recognizable manhood.

4. ■

Of course, men come in many sizes and demonstrate different levels of physical strength, but common to all men is a maturity, through which a man demonstrates his masculinity by movement, confidence and strength. A man must be ready to put his physical strength on the line to protect his wife and children and to fulfill his God-assigned tasks. A boy must be taught to channel his developing strength and emerging size into a self-consciousness of responsibility, recognizing that adult strength is to be combined with adult responsibility and true maturity.

Sexual maturity sufficient to marry and fulfill God's purposes.

As a boy develops into a man, he becomes aware of the sexual powers God has put within him. In an age saturated with distorted sexuality, bombarded with sexual stimulation and confused by unbridled sexual passion, boys must be taught to discipline their sexual energies into anticipation of marriage.

5.

Even as the society celebrates sex in every form and at every age, the true Christian man practices sexual integrity, avoiding pornography, fornication, all forms of sexual promiscuity and corruption. He understands the danger of lust, but rejoices in the sexual capacity and reproductive power God has put within him, committing himself to find a wife, and to earn her love, trust, and admiration - and eventually to win her hand in marriage. Boys must be taught to respect this incredible gift and to protect this gift until, within the context of holy marriage, they are able to fulfill this gift, love their wives and look to God's gift of children. Male sexuality separated from the context and integrity of marriage is an explosive and dangerous reality. The boy must understand, even as he travels through the road of puberty and an awakened sexuality, that he is accountable to God for his stewardship of this great gift..

Moral maturity sufficient to lead as example of righteousness.

Stereotypical behavior on the part of young males is, in the main, marked by recklessness, irresponsibility and worse. As a boy grows into manhood, he must develop moral maturity as he aspires to righteousness, learning to think like a Christian, act like a Christian and show others how to do the same.

6. ■

The Christian man is to be an example to others, teaching by both precept and example. Of course, this requires the exercise of responsible moral reasoning. Boys will not learn this on their own. They must be taught. True moral education begins with a clear understanding of moral standards, but must move to the higher level of moral reasoning by which a young man learns how biblical principles are translated into godly living and how the moral challenges of his day must be met with the truths revealed in God's inerrant and infallible Word. Biblical manhood does not develop in a vacuum. A boy's most important teacher is his dad, and one of a father's chief responsibilities is to instruct and inspire his son into true manhood.

Ethical maturity sufficient to make responsible decisions.

To be a man is to make decisions. One of the most fundamental tasks of leadership is decision-making. The indecisiveness of so many contemporary males is evidence of a stunted manhood. Of course, a man does not rush to a decision without thought, consideration or care, but a man does put himself on the line in making a decision - and making it stick.

7.

This requires an extension of moral responsibility into mature ethical decision-making that brings glory to God, is faithful to God's Word and is open to moral scrutiny. Parents often leave their sons unprepared for this role by making decisions for them and by failing to teach boys how to think and reason in responsible terms, how to weigh evidence and think clearly, and how to prioritize values according to a biblical standard. A real man knows how to make a decision and live with its consequences - even if that means that he must later acknowledge that he has learned by making a bad decision, and then by making the appropriate correction.

Worldview maturity sufficient to understand what is really important.

An inversion of values marks our postmodern age, and the predicament of modern manhood is made all the more perplexing by the fact that many men lack the capacity of consistent worldview thinking.

8. ■

For the Christian, this is doubly tragic, for our Christian discipleship must be demonstrated in the development of a Christian mind. The Christian man must understand how to interpret and evaluate issues across the spectrum of politics, economics, morality, entertainment, education and a seemingly endless list of other fields. The absence of consistent biblical worldview thinking is a key mark of spiritual immaturity. A boy must be taught how to translate Christian truth into genuine Christian thinking. He must learn how to defend biblical truth before his peers and in the public square, and he must acquire the ability to extend Christian thinking, based on biblical principles, to every arena of life.

Relational maturity sufficient to understand and respect others.

Psychologists now talk of “emotional intelligence,” or EQ, as a major factor in personal development. While the world has given much attention to IQ, EQ is just as important. Individuals who lack the ability to relate to others are destined to fail at some of life’s most significant challenges and will not fulfill some of their most important responsibilities and roles.

9. ■

By nature, many boys are inwardly directed. While girls learn how to read emotional signals and connect, many boys lack the capacity to do so and seemingly fail to understand the absence of these skills. While a man is to demonstrate emotional strength, constancy and steadfastness, he must be able to relate to his wife, his children, his peers, his colleagues and a host of others in a way that demonstrates respect, understanding and appropriate empathy. This will not be learned by playing video games and by entering into the privatized world experienced by many male adolescents. Parents - especially fathers - must draw their sons out of inwardness, and demonstrate what it means to relate to others as a man and as a Christian.

Social maturity sufficient to make a contribution to society.

While the arena of the home is an essential and inescapable focus of a man's responsibility, he is also called out of the home into the workplace and the larger world as a witness and as one who will make a contribution to the common good.

10. ■

God has created human beings as social creatures, and even though our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, we must also fulfill our citizenship on earth. A boy must learn to fulfill a political responsibility as a citizen and a moral responsibility as a member of a human community. The Christian man bears a civilizational responsibility, and boys must be taught to see themselves as shapers of the society even as the church is identified by our Lord as both salt and light. Similarly, a Christian man must learn how to relate to unbelievers, both as witness and as fellow citizens of an earthly kingdom.

Verbal maturity sufficient to communicate and articulate as a man.

Here's a striking phenomenon of our times – many adolescent boys and young men seem to communicate only through a series of guttural clicks, grunts and inchoate language that can hardly be described as verbal. A man must be able to speak, to be understood, and to communicate in a way that will honor God and convey God's truth to others.

11.

Parents must work with boys, requiring them to speak, to articulate and to learn respect for language. This respect must extend to an ability to enunciate words so that articulation is clear and communication succeeds. This skill must be learned at the dinner table, in family conversation and in one-on-one talk, especially between father and son. Beyond the context of conversation, a boy must learn how to speak before larger groups, overcoming the natural intimidation and fear that comes from looking at a crowd, opening one's mouth and projecting words. Though not all men will become public speakers, every man should have the ability to take his ground, frame his words and make his case when truth is under fire and when belief and conviction must be translated into argument.

Character maturity sufficient to demonstrate courage under fire.

The literature of manhood is replete with stories of courage, bravery, and audacity. At least, that's the way it used to be. Now, with manhood both minimalized and marginalized by cultural elites, ideological subversion and media confusion, we must recapture a commitment to courage that is translated into the real-life challenges faced by the Christian man.

At times, the quality of courage is demonstrated when a man risks his own life in defense of others, especially his wife and children, but also anyone who is in need of rescue. More often, this courage is demonstrated in taking a stand under hostile fire, refusing to succumb to the temptation of silence and standing as a model and example to others, who will then be encouraged to stand their own ground. In these days, biblical manhood requires great courage. The prevailing ideologies and worldviews of this age are inherently hostile to Christian truth and are corrosive to Christian faithfulness. It takes great courage for a boy to commit himself to sexual purity and for a man to devote himself unreservedly to his wife. It takes great courage to say "no" to what this culture insists are the rightful pleasures and delights of the flesh. It takes courage to serve as a godly husband and father, to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It takes courage to maintain personal integrity in a world that devalues the truth, disparages God's Word, and promises self-fulfillment and happiness only through the assertion of undiluted personal autonomy. A man's true confidence is rooted in the wells of courage, and courage is evidence of character. In the end, a man's character is revealed in the crucible of everyday challenges. For most men, life will also bring moments when extraordinary courage will be required, if he is to remain faithful and true. Parents should give close attention to their sons' character, for if character is corrupt, nothing else will really matter.

12

Biblical maturity sufficient to lead at some level in the church.

A close look at many churches will reveal that a central problem is the lack of biblical maturity among the men of the congregation and a lack of biblical knowledge that leaves men ill equipped and completely unprepared to exercise spiritual leadership.

13.

Boys must be taught to know, to treasure, to honor and to understand the Bible. They must know their way around the biblical text and feel at home in the study of God's Word. They must be taught how to read with care, "rightly dividing the Word of truth," and they must learn how to apply the eternal truths of God's Word to the challenges of modern manhood. Furthermore, they must stand ready to take their place as leaders in the local church. While God has appointed specific officers for his church - men who are specially gifted and publicly called - every man should fulfill some leadership responsibility within the life of the congregation. For some men, this may mean a less public role of leadership than is the case with others. In any event, a man should be able to teach someone and to lead in some ministry, translating his personal discipleship into the fulfillment of a godly call. There is a role of leadership for every man in every church, whether that role is public or private, large or small, official or unofficial. A man should know how to pray before others, to present the Gospel and to stand in the gap where a leadership need is apparent.



When does a boy become a man?

I'm glad I was asked this question, and this booklet represents my attempt to provide an answer that will be both faithful to Scripture and applicable to the real-life challenges faced by men today.

More urgently, it was good for me to think through this question and articulate these hallmarks as I seek to show my own son how to grow into biblical manhood. I am absolutely sure that there is more to be thought and more to be said, but this may help us all to see the challenges before us.

Dads, you are crucial to the process of man-making.

No one else can fulfill your responsibility, and no one else can match your opportunity for influence with your son.

By word and by example, we are teaching our sons the meaning of manhood. May God make us faithful as we seek to lead our boys to become true Christian men.

