

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

RAISING A MODERN-DAY KNIGHT

**A Father's Role in Guiding His Son
to Authentic Manhood**

ROBERT LEWIS



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RAISING A MODERN-DAY KNIGHT

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FOREWORD

Wow! Let me get right to the point. If you're a man, you need this book. And if you have a son, you *really* need this book. Frankly, our whole culture needs this book.

Every once in a while a volume comes along that stands alone, separating itself from the myriad of others coming off the presses like thousands of tiny aspirin tablets on a conveyor belt. *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* is such a standout book. I picked it up on New Year's Day before the games started. Now, I love football, but you would not have known it that day. Robert Lewis reached up out of the pages of this volume and thrust his message down into my chest with such captivating force that I forgot all about my favorite sport.

Emotion. Reflection. Instruction. Inspiration. Commission. It's all here. This is a great book because it's well written by a great man to address a great need. There is a passion in it—and a vision.

Here's why you need this book: Our culture is in deep trouble, and at the heart of its trouble is its loss of a vision of manhood. If it's difficult for you and me as adult males to maintain our masculine balance in this "gender-neutral" culture, imagine what it must be like for our young sons who are growing up in an increasingly feminized world. C. S. Lewis summed it up years ago when he stated that modernists "castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

We men are beginning to find the trail back. And we've got to show it to our sons. The Bible provides an absolutely accurate map, and Robert Lewis has helped us calibrate our compasses. *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* is a magnificent field manual for fathers who want to see their sons become men. Real men. Godly men.

Just how does a boy become a man? It certainly doesn't "just happen" anymore . . . if it ever did. What is a man? What processes produce such a man? And how do you know when you've become a man? These three questions are critical. You'll find the answers to all three between the covers of this book. Where does a young man go to become a man of strength, heart, conviction, and vision? He ought to be able to go to his dad! Boys become men by emulating older men, especially their fathers.

Let me tell you just a word about Robert Lewis. I've known him for more than 20 years, and I trust him. Every now and then you come across a man you could "ride the river with." Robert Lewis is such a man. He is a man of strength, heart, conviction, and vision. He has always been a leader—on the football field as a Division I linebacker . . . in the church as a pastor of a dynamic, growing, and influential church . . . and across the country as a nationally recognized speaker and author addressing critical family issues.

Robert Lewis has given fathers a magnificent, manly curriculum for turning boys into men. It is, by far, the finest I've seen. There is clear definition . . . and thoughtful process . . . and invigorating ceremony. As always, with Robert, the material is rock-solid biblical and intensely practical. I wish I'd had this book 20 years ago. I'm glad you've got it in your hands now. Devour it.

Stu Weber

Gresham, Oregon

INTRODUCTION

It begins as a typical Saturday morning. You're enjoying your second cup of coffee while reading the newspaper. Suddenly, you notice your son in a new way. He doesn't know you're watching him, but in this special, reflective moment, you realize *he's growing up*. I mean, *really* growing up.

Like never before, it becomes obvious to you that the contours of childhood are starting to disappear. Look at him! There's real hair on those legs! A muscular physique is emerging. You're beginning to see "the man" in him.

But what kind of man?

This is one of the most important questions of our day, because it targets a process missing in many homes. How does a boy grow into a man? A real man? A godly man? One with character, conviction, and vision? Where does he go to find a manly sense of himself? Who confers upon him the title and responsibilities of manhood?

If questions like these scare you because you intuitively sense they are *your* responsibilities as a dad, join the crowd. When a mom asked me such questions years ago, expecting articulate answers because I was not only a father of two sons but also a "family expert," I stumbled badly. How *does* a son grow into a man? I didn't know.

But I determined then and there to find out. This soon became one of the most rewarding journeys of my life.

In sharing my discoveries here, my hope is that you will not only be joined in a more significant way to your sons, but also to other men in a special masculine bond.

You need to know, Dad, that your son and thousands like him are presently being stripped of their maleness by a modern, secular,

feminist culture. Over the last few decades, this culture has steadily and relentlessly undermined healthy notions of what it means to be a man. Once-noble images of masculinity have now been replaced by images of men behaving badly . . . or incompetently . . . or both. Manhood is no longer a unique calling; it's now seen more as a problem to overcome.

At the same time, many young men are confused because of their *lack* of connection with their fathers—socially, emotionally, and spiritually. All this has created an acute masculine identity crisis. If you were to ask most young men today, “How does a man act?” or “What are his unique responsibilities?” or “What role should he assume in his marriage?” you would receive little more than a blank stare. Many have no concept of this kind of man they should become. Not a clue. Listen to the poem one young man penned for me out of his own personal manhood vacuum:

What is a man?

Is he someone who is strong and tall,

Or is taut and talented as he plays ball?

Is he someone who is hardened and rough,

Who smokes and drinks and swears enough?

Is he someone who chases women hard,

With a quest to conquer, but never dropping his guard?

Is he someone with a good business mind,

Who gets ahead of the others with his nose to the grind?

Or is he someone who tries his best,

Not really caring about any of the rest?

What is a man? Does anyone really know?

TELL ME!

Who is the prototype? To whom shall I go?

Dad . . . *your* son is asking those very questions right now as he grows up under you. In fact, many of the social problems of our day (plummeting morality, rising crime, violence, abuse, reckless pleasure-seeking) spring from the soil of directionless, disconnected sons.

Conversely, I believe a healthy, vibrant masculinity goes hand-in-hand with social stability. So, I feel hope when I see the work of movements such as Promise Keepers. It's obvious that many men today are searching again for their true masculine identity.

The *best hope* still lies in the hearts of fathers . . . in dads who are beginning to ask, "How can I raise my boy into a man? A real man?" These are the right questions from the one who is most naturally suited to give answers that will stick for a lifetime.

As I have presented to a number of fathers the ideas and practical how-to's offered in this book, the response has been instantaneously positive. *Dads want answers!* They want a process that calls their sons to be godly men. They want ceremonies that can celebrate their sons' passage from boy to man. We are all desperate for ideas and images that will help us empower our sons with masculine energy. We want to leave them a legacy of masculine health that will empower their families and communities of the next generation.

The question is *how?*

Hopefully, the answer is in your hands.

PART I

THE NEED FOR
A MODERN-DAY
KNIGHTHOOD





CHAPTER I

ΜΑΡΗOOD: DON'T LET YOUR SON LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT

When I was a child,
I used to speak like a child,
think like a child, reason like a child;
when I became a man,
I did away with childish things.

—THE APOSTLE PAUL, 1 CORINTHIANS 13:11

Dad, try to imagine the following scenario. Your 18-year-old son is standing in front of you, tears welling in his eyes. In 30 seconds he will get into his car and drive away to college. Except for the occasional holiday and summer visits, he'll be gone. Forever.

Nervously, you reach out to wrap your arms around him. The touch of his flesh against yours releases a flood of emotions—in him as well as you.

And then the memories come.

You recall the day of his birth and how proud you were to have a son. You remember his first words, and his first hit in tee-ball—he ran to third base instead of first! You recall the fishing trips and holidays, the ties he gave you for Christmas, the cards you received on Father's Day, and the special way he looked out for his little sister.

The years have passed so quickly.

In that moment, between muffled sobs and nervous laughter, you realize what a fortunate man you are . . . to have a son like this.

The embrace ends. You and your boy brush the tears from your cheeks. You tell your son how proud you are of him. He says, "Dad, I love you." Then he turns around, gets in the car, and drives away.

But what does he drive away *with*? A few precious memories? An emotional good-bye? Or possibly, when your son leaves, will he know in his gut—like a select few—what it means to be a man?

REMEMBRANCES OF A SON

For decades, Sam Rayburn was arguably the most powerful politician in America. During his lengthy tenure as Speaker of the House of Representatives, presidents came and presidents went, but Rayburn remained at the center of power. Rayburn *alone* controlled the legislative process in Washington. No bill came to a vote without his approval; no president could expect to succeed without his support.

In later years, when Sam Rayburn looked back upon his illustrious career and recounted the most influential moments in his life, one experience stood out above the rest.

It occurred at a railroad station in East Texas, far removed—in both time and space—from the marbled halls of Washington. Throughout his life, Sam Rayburn would talk about this singular event with great joy and deep reverence. In fact, he recalled the moment, says biographer Robert A. Caro, “at every crisis in his life.”¹

On one particular day in 1900, surrounded by the windswept Texas prairie, Sam’s dad had hitched the buggy and driven his 18-year-old son to town. The boy was going off to college and would be leaving the farm that his father, a poor man, had tilled his whole life. Standing together on the railway platform, father and son awaited the approach of the train. Sam’s “suitcase”—actually, a bundle of clothes tied up with a rope—lay at his feet. No words were spoken.

Then, when the train arrived and Sam prepared to board, his father reached out and placed a fistful of dollars into his hand. Twenty-five dollars. According to Caro, “Sam never forgot that; he talked about that \$25 for the rest of his life.”

“Only God knows how he saved it,” Sam would say. “He never had any extra money. We earned just enough to live. It broke me up, him handing me that \$25. I often wondered what he did without, what sacrifice he and my mother made.”

With tears in his eyes, Sam turned to board the train. Again his father reached out and grasped his hands. The four words he spoke would echo forever in the boy’s memory. He said, simply, “Sam, be a man!”

A BLESSING AND A DILEMMA

This memorable exchange between a father and son illustrates both a blessing and a dilemma.

The good side is obvious. In that one moment, Sam learned just

how much his father loved him. At life's most demanding and difficult times, Sam would look back and recall with fond affection his father's sacrificial expression of love.

But the statement "Sam, be a man" presents a dilemma—not just for Sam Rayburn, but also for every boy.

When *does* one become a man? Does it "just happen" when a boy reaches puberty or when he leaves home? Does he achieve it when he bags his first buck or drinks his first beer? Does it come with a driver's license or with a diploma at graduation? Does it take a woman to help him become a man?

And where do you fit into all of this, Dad?

In my estimation, fathers today are coming up short with their sons at three critical points. First, we have failed to deliver to our sons a clear, inspiring, biblically grounded *definition of manhood*. How critical is that? It's comparable to a hunter without a gun . . . or a soccer game without a ball . . . or a cross-country trip without a map. Telling a boy to "be a man" without defining manhood is like saying, "Be a success." It sounds good. But, practically, it takes you nowhere.

Second, most fathers lack a *directional process* that calls their sons to embrace the manhood they should be able to define. Typically, what passes for masculine training in most homes is vague and hit-or-miss. We assume sons will somehow "get it." But most don't. This hit-or-miss pattern sends conflicting signals and suffers under the weight of its own inconsistency. Worse still, it handicaps a son in knowing how to move out of childhood and into manhood. What he really needs is specific language and training that takes him to the place where, like the apostle Paul, he can say, "When I became a man I did away with childish things."

A third shortcoming involves the loss of *ceremony*. How many dads today think of formally commemorating their son's progress or

passage into manhood? Very few. A pioneer of the secular manhood movement, Robert Bly, makes this penetrating observation: “There is no place in our culture where boys are initiated consciously into manhood.”² Manhood ceremonies have, in fact, become a lost art form. And sons have lost these powerful, life-changing moments where, in the presence of Dad and other men, they can mark either their progress toward or passage into manhood. In the absence of these special ceremonies, sons are left to wonder, *Am I a man?*

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. But if dads like you and me are going to have better outcomes, we must invest these three missing assets into our sons' manhood portfolios.

How much better would it have been if Sam Rayburn's father had fleshed out a definition of manhood years earlier? What if he had taken Sam through a process that enabled him to become a man? And what if, after Sam had completed the process, his father had sealed and certified his manhood with a ceremony?

Is there some way to introduce these three elements—a definition, a process, and ceremonies—into your son's life? Yes. And it begins by looking back to another day and another time for inspiration . . . back to the age of knights.

THE RELEVANCE OF KNIGHTHOOD

This medieval figure casts an impressive masculine shadow. Clothed in chain mail, brandishing a sword, and mounted on an invincible steed, the knight remains even today a powerful symbol of virile manhood.

Vestiges of knighthood still dot our cultural landscape, from our language to our ideals to our traditions. For example, when a woman speaks of “my knight in shining armor,” she envisions a man of noble

character, romantic sensibilities, and brave deeds. Our concept of the “gentleman” had its origins in the chivalric code of honor. Many military ceremonies and traditions were birthed in the kingly courts of thirteenth-century Europe. The U.S. Army’s sports teams from West Point are still called “the Black Knights.”

And who among us boys didn’t thrill to the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table? The knight survives in our collective consciousness like an ancient Superman, committed to a code of conduct that Tennyson summarized as “Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King.”³

Even though historians would probably say the knight once popularized by literature was more an ideal than a reality, still he remains a powerful metaphor. In fact, I will be so bold as to argue that knighthood—despite some of its shortcomings—offers to any dad a powerful outline for his son’s successful journey to manhood.

What’s even more encouraging is to remember that the light of knighthood arose in the suffocating moral darkness and social chaos of the rough-and-tumble Middle Ages. In that sense, knighthood provides for modern-day dads a *model of hope* for raising healthy sons with moral and spiritual vision, despite our own increasingly dark and crude culture.

THREE DADS WITH A MISSION

Two other dads and I fell upon this knighthood concept some years back as we wrestled with how to help our sons become the kind of men we and God would be proud of. It was natural for us to do so, in light of the many ways our lives had overlapped. Bill Parkinson, Bill Wellons, and I first met at the University of Arkansas during the late ’60s. What brought us together was our common desire for spiritual



Bill Wellons, Robert Lewis, and Bill Parkinson

discovery and growth. As young Christians, we were in Campus Crusade for Christ together; Bill Parkinson was actually one of the staff members.

After graduation we went our separate ways, only to be brought back together in 1980. This time, we were pastors of a new church in Little Rock. As the years went by, we not only developed a special professional relationship, but a deep personal friendship as well.

By 1989, with seven sons now growing up underneath us, we began to feel an urgency to give them some clear masculine tracks on which to run. The growing cultural controversy and confusion about men in general, and men's roles in marriage and society in particular, sparked our initial discussions. So, too, did the rising passivity and irresponsibility we, as pastors, observed in the lives of more and more young men around us.

Our sons needed something more from us than just love and support. They needed help in becoming men. But what would that

help look like? We were amazed at the lack of answers and resources available.

Take, for instance, that simple question we have already mentioned: “What is a man?” We found it immensely difficult to formulate an answer; it was like “trying to nail Jell-O to a wall.” In time, however, our efforts paid off. We landed a definition we believe is clear, concise, and, more importantly, anchored by the weight of Scripture. (You will eat the fruit of our effort in Chapter 4, where our definition of manhood is set forth in detail.)

Another question was how to teach this concept of manhood to our sons in a way that would be life-changing. Someone suggested that we create a family crest to help present our manhood concepts symbolically. This crest could not only hang in each of our homes, but also be passed down to each of our sons. Having spent the previous summer in Poland on a missions trip, I had explored a number of castles and seen a number of knightly crests still hanging along the corridors.

So, our discussion went from crests to castles to . . . *knights*, and how one became a knight, and if knighthood could be used as an outline to move our sons to manhood. The answer we found was “Yes!”

What followed was a series of trial-and-error efforts that not only exceeded our expectations, but spawned new ideas. A whole manhood language evolved among us and our sons. We established special ceremonies to mark specific moments in our boys’ journey to manhood. Puberty, for instance, became more than just a passing moment of physical transformation. It also became a key moment of manhood instruction and challenge, celebrated by a ceremony that would leave an unforgettable mark on each son as to who he was becoming and where he was going.

Other dads around us began to pick up on the things we were

doing. Without any persuasion on our part, they began to take our ideas and personalize them with their own sons. The feedback from these dads confirmed that their experiences were just as exciting as ours! Sons delight in knowing about manhood. In the sacredness of these manhood ceremonies, they bond with their dads in a way that must be experienced to be fully appreciated.

Sons need fathers who are involved in their lives—dads who will love them, teach them, and discipline them. But clearly, sons also need a masculine vision. They need a manhood language. They need a ceremony. And they need other men. Knighthood, as an outline, offers all this and more.

First, the knight *embodied a well-defined set of ideals*. Many knights sincerely adhered to and embraced a moral code of honor. They pledged themselves to their lord, their king, and their God.

One historian writes:

Honor was the shrine at which the knight worshipped: it implied renown, good conduct, and the world's approval. The "word of honor" was the most solemn oath the knight knew, and this alone became the reason for the most extravagant exploits.⁴

Many knights also became *milites Christi*, "Knights of Christ." As such, they believed they bore responsibilities to the kingdom of God and to society as a whole, not just to the lords they served. This chivalric code of honor formed the moral and social bedrock of noble life; it gave order and substance to an age otherwise in chaos and confusion.

As a symbol of manhood, a knight's chivalry points to one of the most pressing needs of young men in our generation: a well-defined set of ideals. Ideals set parameters; they shape a boy's identity and motivate

him to higher levels of excellence, just as they did for the medieval knight. For a son, these ideals become a moral and spiritual beacon.

Unfortunately, nothing is more absent in our day than well-defined masculine ideals. Too many sons grow into adulthood cursed by the void of these “higher things” of manhood. Listen to what one young man wrote in a letter to me. It is a portrait, I believe, of what many young men inwardly feel about themselves:

As I reflect back, even though my father was around me, I learned little of what it means to be a man. So how will I become one when, at age 29, I’m still questioning whether I know what it really means? Never in my life have I felt such a burden as that of the responsibility of being a “man” for my family. But what am I supposed to do? It puts me in a place where I’m left to figure all this out somehow. Where can I find a man to be an example for me of real masculinity? I don’t know.

In Part II of this book—“The Knight and His Ideals”—I will assist you, as a father, in formulating three specific ideals for your son: a vision for manhood, a code of conduct, and a transcendent cause. As I mentioned, I’ll answer the critical question “What is a man?” in Chapter 4 and then give you practical suggestions for implementing this answer in your boy’s life.

There is a second reason why the medieval knight speaks to the modern boy’s journey to manhood. Just as his chivalry embodied a well-defined set of ideals, his life also *outlined a well-defined process*. The boy who pursued knighthood followed a clearly marked path.

At age seven or eight, he became a page. He was removed from his mother’s care and went to live in a castle, usually with an overlord

or relative.⁵ Here, the page learned about armor and weapons and falconry, the rudiments of knighthood. He also performed household tasks for the “queen of the castle.”

At the age of 14, the page became a squire. He attached himself to a knight and traveled everywhere in his company, serving him in the most menial of tasks: He carried the knight’s lance, woke him in the morning, and even helped him dress. The squire also competed in tournaments and perfected the skills he had learned as a page. Such rigorous discipline prepared him for the final stage of his journey.

When he turned 21, he was eligible for knighthood. An elaborate initiation, which included a night-long vigil, a ceremonial bath, and a dubbing, marked the completion of the process. He was now . . . *a knight!* He took his place in the order of knighthood and pledged himself to uphold the code of honor.

From page to squire to knight—a young man could envision the process, count the cost, and pursue his dream. Sadly, for a boy today, there is no equivalent path on the journey to manhood. There are no landmarks or milestones to guide a boy’s journey and no ceremonies to tell him when manhood begins. With all of the discussion today on the subject of manhood, there remains a great void.

In Part III, I will address four specific stages that you, as a dad, can put to use. In fact, I will refer to them in Chapter 8 as “The Page Stage,” “The Squire Stage,” “The Knight Stage,” and “The Promise/Oath Stage.” Each offers a specific opportunity for you to challenge and instruct your son in a special way. Each builds upon the previous one. Each leads him toward godly manhood.

Part III also captures a third characteristic of ancient knighthood: *ceremonies*. Becoming a medieval knight required rigorous training, but it also was sealed in an elaborate ceremony that was powerful and unforgettable. In Part III—“The Knight and His Ceremonies”—I

will describe a number of memorable ceremonies for celebrating your own son's journey to manhood. I will also suggest one you can use to celebrate his becoming a man.

In Part IV—"The Knight and His Round Table"—I speak to the importance of including other men in a son's march to manhood. It is in a chorus of masculine voices (not just Dad's alone) that a son recognizes his noble call. "In abundance of counselors there is victory," the Scripture says (Proverbs 11:14). I have found, with great delight, a "victory" for our sons in the abundance of other men calling them to manhood.

Finally, in Part V—"The Knight and His Legacy"—I come back to you, Dad. There you will discover the vital role that integrity—your integrity—plays in your son's life.

"Not all knights were great men," writes R. A. Brown about the Normans, "but all great men were knights."⁶ Chivalry exacted a heavy toll upon its followers; it demanded submission, obedience, and courage. But it gave to the world knights and, in the words of Will Durant, one of the "major achievements of the human spirit."⁷

I believe it is time to resurrect the chivalrous knight: his *ideals*, his *process*, and his *ceremonies*. I want him to speak to a new generation that also has the potential for greatness but lacks only the opportunity: our sons!

A FINISHED PROCESS

I remember when Bill, Bill, and I finished the last of our four manhood ceremonies with the first of our seven sons. We had already determined that this last ceremony would take place before their weddings. Bill Parkinson's son, Ben, had beaten the rest of the boys to the

altar, so we planned his ceremony to occur at the conclusion of the rehearsal dinner.

I am not sure what the hundred or so guests thought of our public ceremony. We did offer a brief explanation of our years together mentoring Ben. Then we three dads stood before a beloved son and rehearsed back to him the commitments he had made to us and to God years earlier in his “becoming a man” ceremony. Ben had not departed his homestead, like Sam Rayburn, with “Be a man!” ringing in his ears. On the contrary, he had left home knowing he *was* a man! He had been initiated by us into manhood and its responsibilities years before.

As our ceremony continued, we each offered Ben a special word of wisdom for this new “Promise/Oath Stage” of life. Our personal comments—“swords of the masculine spirit,” we call them—were intended to arm him for another campaign of honorable living.

We finished our ceremony by presenting to Ben and his bride-to-be, Aimee, a family crest. A similar crest has hung in each of our families’ homes for many years. It has become a sacred item. It contains, symbolically, all the manhood messages with which we, as dads, had sought earnestly to empower our sons. Now, in this last ceremony, we invited Ben to come and stand with us as we presented to him a crest of his own. For this son, our manhood process was now complete. The final challenge was for Ben to pass these masculine truths on to the next generation.

Manhood . . . don’t let your son leave home without it, Dad.

As I left the rehearsal dinner that evening, my mind went back to another wedding day I remember so well—my own. What a startling contrast between that moment and the one I had just experienced. Let me share it with you.

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