



By Gordon Dalbey

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Daddy's A Bad Mechanic (But A Good Son)

"I and the Father are one." (John 10:30)

My dad never taught me much about mechanics. As a man, as a writer, I used to feel ashamed of that--until recently, when my three-year-old son led us all to the heart of grace.

A gifted businessman, however, Dad did teach me how to save money. And there's the rub. My money-saving do-it-yourself mechanical projects always end not with a bang but a whimper, at the extra bill for the plumber or tow truck to bail me out.

At 51, I thought I'd learned my lesson. But then this past Saturday, while checking my mail in the bright, sunlit morning, I beheld a "special discount" oil-change coupon for "just \$25."

"Why, I could do it for half that!" I scoffed, with a surge of excitement that signaled oil-change time for my old VW Golf. When my wife and son left later to go shopping, I began plotting to surprise them--and redeem my masculine dignity.

For a mere \$11.35 plus tax at a local auto supply store, I bought the requisite four quarts of oil and filter, and a special low-sided drip pan.

No need to buy any special covering to protect my porous, white cement driveway; an old piece of plastic drop cloth from last year's Christmas tree would work fine. Nor would I need to shell out for a funnel; the pan had a special pouring lip, so I could pour the old oil directly into a large, empty bleach jug I'd saved.

Proud of my savings, I sped home confidently and parked on a wide section of driveway up near the house. Squeezing under the car, I dragged the drip pan on the plastic sheet and positioned it under the oil pan bolt. With a quick twist of my wrench and a self-assured smile, I watched the shiny spout of black oil pour out.

As I unscrewed the filter, however, a dark splash of oil suddenly spilled onto the drop cloth. No problem, I thought. I'll just wipe it off the plastic later.

Soon, the bolt and filter were replaced, the new oil poured in --and voila! Man and mechanic, merged in victory.

Matter-of-factly, I dragged the drop cloth back out from under the car, now heavy with the full drip pan, and some oil in the pan sloshed over the side. No problem, I thought again; the plastic will...

To my shock, a thick black splotch of oil was spreading under the plastic--torn from being dragged. As the spill on top flowed toward the edge, I leapt down and lifted the cloth--only to see more oil leaking from another tear.

As I knelt there stunned, holding up the plastic and gazing in disbelief at the oil slick covering my concrete--a friendly beep from our van announced that my wife and son were home.

Not good, I thought--or at least, to that effect.

Beholding the scene as they pulled into the driveway behind me, my son leapt out of the car. "Mommy, look!" he shouted. "Daddy thinks he's a mechanic!"

Sheepishly, I bundled up the plastic, rushed behind the fence gate alongside the house, and dumped it in the trash can--only to remember that it, too, had holes in the plastic bottom from where I'd dragged it out to the curb on especially heavy trash nights. As dark oil oozed onto the concrete walkway toward my feet, I recalled a similar scene, in a low-budget horror film.

"Daddy, can I help?"

Behind me, my son's voice cut through the panic, and by some compelling and likely gender-related instinct, I saw my chance.

Sighing ever-so-slightly, my wife smiled graciously, and disappeared into the house.

"Well, uh, sure you can help Daddy, son," I said, turning back to the drip pan. I set the big empty jug on a few newspapers to collect any spill. "If you can just hold this jug with two hands, I'll pour the dirty oil into it."

Uncertain, but anxious to prove himself to Dad, my son grabbed the jug handle gingerly as I lifted the heavy pan.

Happily, the lip worked. As the oil poured out straight, I sighed in relief.

But redemption was short-lived. The small-mouthed jug, the full pan, shaky 3-year-old hands--not to mention anxious dad--and in seconds, the warm, dirty oil gushed over the boy's hands.

"Yucchh!" he scowled--and let go. As I lurched to grab the tipping jug with one hand, more oil spilled from the drip pan in my other hand. "Mommy!" he broadcast once again to the neighborhood, "Daddy's a BAD mechanic!"

The truth, as often said, will set you free--but first, as not often said, it'll hurt like the dickens.

Several days of apologies and costly cement scrubs later, I mentioned the incident in a letter to my parents.

"That's amazing," my mother wrote back. "When I married your father, his mother told me, 'Put tools in his hand and you'll starve. Put a pencil and paper in his hands and he'll make a fine living.'"

I, too, was amazed--and delighted. Strangely, graciously, those few words of truth from my heritage set me free. In fact, I suddenly felt a distinct, even manly pride in my mechanical bungling.

I write this with "a pencil and paper" in my hands. I make a living as a writer. I'm not a mechanic.

But the good news is, the shame is gone.

I'm a son.

NOTE: This article was originally published in New Man magazine.