

MOTHERHOOD
IS NOT
YOUR HIGHEST
CALLING

—
*The Grace of Being a
Good-Enough Mom*
—

VICKI
COURTNEY

The next time I put together a gift basket for a new mom, I'm including a copy of *Motherhood Is Not Your Highest Calling*. As an empty nester with grown children who are now parents themselves, Vicki brings wise, needed, and loving perspective to the gifts and challenges of motherhood (which, unfortunately, can sometimes feel like an all-consuming competitive sport). Vicki lovingly and graciously questions some of the messages we've internalized about what a mother's life "should" look like, and as she does that, she encourages women to lay down unrealistic expectations and parent from a place of grace and freedom. What a relief to remember that an abundant life has lots of different parts—and while motherhood is undoubtedly a meaningful one, it's not the *only* one.

SOPHIE HUDSON, bestselling author of *A Fine Sight to See* and cohost of *The Big Boo Cast*

Motherhood Is Not Your Highest Calling: The Grace of Being a Good-Enough Mom will help set you free from the unrealistic standards placed on mothers. Vicki not only unpacks the lies we believe (which cause endless guilt, shame, and condemnation) but offers a way forward leading to the abundant life Jesus has for every mother. Do yourself a favor and read this if you're even contemplating having children one day.

CHRISTINE CAINE, founder of A21 and Propel Women

This book is a lifeline for every mom drowning in guilt, comparison, or busyness. You don't have to be everything. You just have to belong to the one who is.

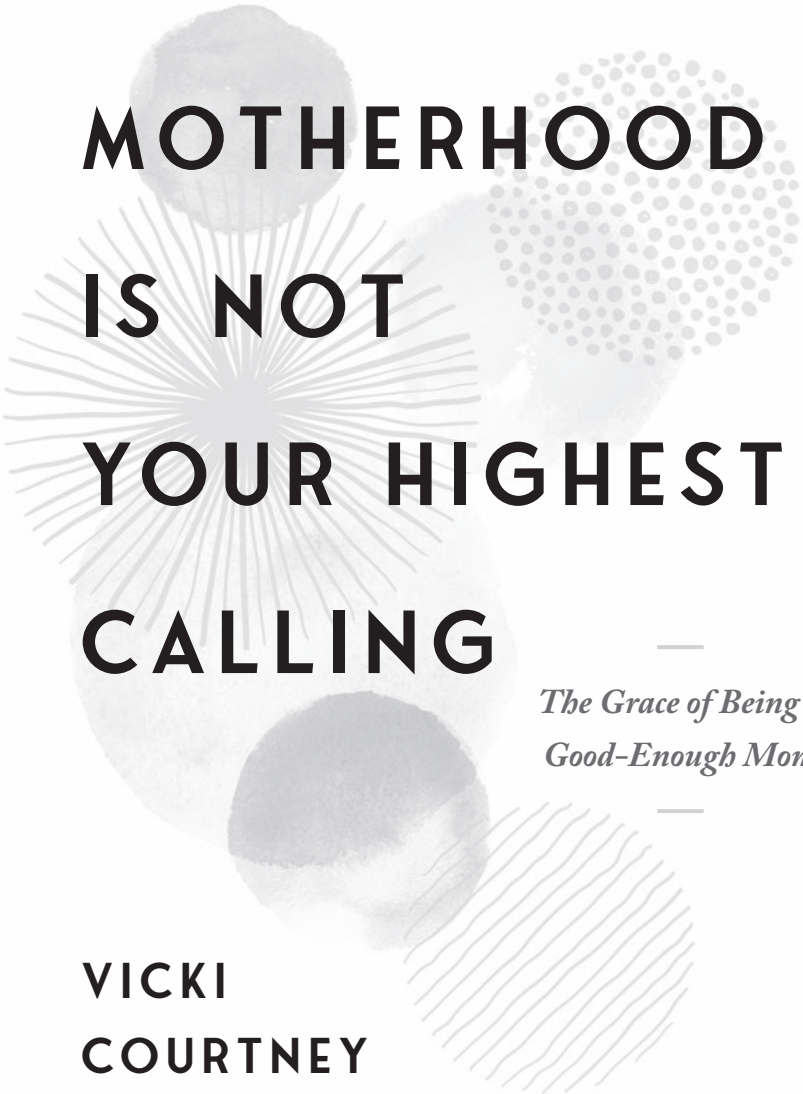
DANNAH GRESH, founder of True Girl and bestselling author of *Lies Girls Believe: And the Truth That Sets Them Free*

My only issue with this book is that I didn't have it eighteen years ago as a new mom. No matter your season of motherhood, we all need the freedom to put motherhood in its proper place to free our hearts from an unattainable pursuit. Another must-read by Vicki!

COURTNEY DEFEO, speaker, blogger, and author of *In This House, We Will Giggle*

This book felt like a deep breath I didn't know I was holding. With humility and hard-won wisdom, Vicki Courtney speaks straight to the ache of moms who've been told their worth is tied to how well they parent. She dismantles the myth of motherhood as our highest calling and points us back to the gentle, grace-filled way of Jesus. *Motherhood Is Not Your Highest Calling* is the kind of truth telling that sets women free.

CASSANDRA SPEER, bestselling author, Bible teacher, podcast host, and vice president of Her True Worth



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NavPress 

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INTRODUCTION

TOO MUCH AND NEVER ENOUGH

I was scrolling on Instagram when a video from a mom influencer popped up on my feed. Within thirty seconds, I was catapulted into the woman's homesteading life on a farm with her seven children, the youngest of whom she had recently delivered in her bathtub. Her weekend recap moved at a breakneck pace. Children circled around a table eating German pancakes with fresh whipped cream and syrup on top, all of which had been made from scratch. (And I'm not talking about pancake mix in a box or heavy whipping cream in a carton—this mom has her own milk cows and mills her own flour.) Next up was a pic of the salad of microgreens she'd grown in trays in her kitchen with a side of fresh bread made from one of many jars of sourdough starter. At the end of the video, the whole family skipped out the door for church, all dressed up and smiling.

I am more than a dozen years post-empty nest . . . and that video left me feeling like I needed to call my adult children and apologize for buying bagged salads and feeding

them a steady diet of Pop-Tarts and Toaster Strudels for breakfast. The modern-day “trad wife” influencer may have been a stranger to me, but the message she was peddling was all too familiar: *Being a mom is your most important role, and getting it right with your kids is your most important job.*

Long before *trad wife* was a social-media catchphrase, I went through my own phase of experimenting with cloth diapers, making my baby food from scratch, and playing classical music in the background to enrich my children’s lives. My idealistic intentions were always short-lived, smothered by the realities of motherhood, but the guilt lingered.

At some level, we’re all trying to live up to some idealized version of motherhood. Some women have the resources and support to make the pursuit look seamless and tidy, but we all feel the same sense of failure when we don’t measure up to the expectations mothers are bombarded with from every direction we turn. We live with a perpetual ache in our souls that we’re not doing enough for our kids, that our homes are not tidy enough, our choices are not good enough, our children are not well-behaved enough—and try as we may to hit the mark, nothing we do ever seems to be enough.

Motherhood is hard, but you know that already. (For the record, I’m impressed you have the bandwidth to add this book to your plate.) But as someone down the road—my husband and I have three children who have grown up, gotten married, and blessed us with ten grandchildren—I’m here to tell you that all these weights and expectations are built on a dangerous lie. And that lie is crushing the life out of you.

You are more than a mom. No doubt your children can bring much joy to your life, but they were never intended to *become* your life. Motherhood is not your highest calling.

EXCEEDING OUR LIMIT

I see you. I see what you're carrying. You're having to manage your anxieties in the face of around-the-clock doom-and-gloom news stories about childhood dangers, societal violence, and natural disasters that can leave you wanting to Bubble Wrap your children and never leave home. You face the pressures of judgmental eyes on social media and in the grocery store and are inundated with strong opinions from armchair experts. And the nonstop discourse about gentle parenting, birth plans, health choices, and education decisions that pit mom against mom leave you questioning your own instincts and feeling like a failure.

I recently stumbled upon the term *Depleted Mother Syndrome*, which perfectly describes what many mothers are feeling. “Depleted Mother Syndrome (DMS) occurs when a mother feels emotionally, mentally, and physically drained from the constant demands of parenting.”¹ In a nutshell, it's a fancy label for motherhood burnout. It's a simple equation: We are doing too much and are told we should do more—and eventually our load exceeds our limit.

I'm reminded of a recent trip where I found myself waiting for an elevator on an upper level of an airport parking garage. Out of three elevators, only one was operational, and it was taking a while for it to get to the top of the parking

garage. By the time the doors opened, a crowd of people had gathered. Not wanting to miss our flights, we all crammed in until my claustrophobic self was on the verge of a panic attack. Just as the doors began to close, someone else raced up and asked, “Room for one more?” A guy toward the front yelled, “Sorry, man, we’re at the maximum load limit!”

Maximum load limit is a construction term for the maximum load a structure can sustain before risking collapse. It’s probably something we should pay more attention to, but most of us look right past the signs. The same is true for the load we carry as mothers. Rarely do we pay attention to the signs that we’ve pushed past our limits. We’ve accepted it as the norm and then wonder why we are often on the verge of collapsing. It’s a miserable way to live, but it’s all we know.

Why does this happen, and why does it feel inevitable?

Somewhere along the way we swapped *good enough* for *perfect*. Because our culture, our family systems, and our church contexts tell us that our children, our marriages, and our families depend on us not getting a single thing wrong. And, it turns out, there are just way too many things to get right.

Try harder. Do more. Get your act together. Be like her. Lose weight. Exercise. Eat better. Deal with that messy house. Play with the kids. Do the flash-card drills. Volunteer at the school. Go to church. Join a Bible study. Be a better wife. Be a better mother.

The constant pressures to live up to an unattainable standard are easier to notice in the myriad of symptoms they produce. The loss of the person you were before you had children. Running yourself ragged attempting to offer your children the best of everything, all while experiencing a

nagging feeling that you're not truly present for the moments that matter most. The constant comparison to other mothers and the belief that others are doing a much better job. The clutter from overconsumption in the quest to provide all the things that contribute to a magical childhood, and the resulting angst when the magic doesn't show up as promised. The never-ending guilt trip to get everything—and I do mean *everything*—right. The undercurrent of worry over the *what-ifs* you can't stop thinking about and the constant exposure to *what-ifs* you hadn't thought about before. The neglect of your own needs and self-care in the pressure to live up to the expectation that everyone else should matter before you do.

Can you relate?

Add to all that the reality that our culture isn't set up to support moms. The contribution of stay-at-home moms is undervalued and taken for granted as moms find themselves in the endless cycle of caring for everyone else twenty-four seven while their own needs go unattended. Working moms carry the weight of helping support their families financially, balancing job demands with the stress of finding affordable childcare and managing school pickups—and feeling the guilt of being constantly torn between both worlds. All the while, moms can feel lonely and disconnected, struggling to find supportive friendships and wishing they lived closer to family who could help—or that they had family they trusted to help.

And while church should be a safe place for mothers to gather and find support, it can quickly become another place where the expectations are too much and the help is too little. A recent Barna study found that while Christian mothers

are often responsible for the discipleship and faith formation of their children, they are “notably underserved” in the church.² “Just one in 10 U.S. pastors strongly agrees their church prioritizes mothers,” the study explains, “and nearly half of moms say that their church ‘never’ provides materials to help support them as a mother.”³

Mothers are in desperate need of support that extends far beyond childcare during worship services. Motherhood can be soul crushing at times, and church should be a place where mothers can come—with no strings attached—to catch their breath and be reminded that their well-being matters too. I am a huge proponent of local expressions that support the gathering together of the body of believers, and not every church is missing the mark when it comes to offering support for mothers—but many are. It’s no wonder many churches are struggling to attract younger families. Show me a church where mothers feel supported, and I’ll show you a growing congregation.

It doesn’t take a mathematician to recognize the gross imbalance that results from an increase in expectations and a decrease in support. Something has to give. Just recently, the former surgeon general issued an advisory on the mental health and well-being of parents, highlighting the urgent need to better support them. Additionally, he called for “a fundamental shift in how we value and prioritize parents’ well-being.”⁴ This is not all in your head. You are not alone.

You might believe that the constant white noise of *never enough* comes with the territory of motherhood. It has become your default rhythm. It’s hard to even imagine a

version of motherhood where you wake up free from the grip it has on your life.

But I have good news for you: You can, in fact, be free.

LIVING LIGHTLY

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus offers an invitation:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

The Greek word translated “burdened” in this passage is *phortizō*, which means “to load up (properly, as a vessel or animal).”⁵ If you’ve had babies or toddlers, you’ve probably felt like a pack mule from time to time, carrying as many things as possible, including your child. Or as you parent older children, the emotional burdens and weighty situations may feel too heavy to bear. Both are the kind of heaviness Jesus is talking about.

But then he goes on to say, “Take my yoke upon you.” A yoke is “a bar or frame of wood by which two draft animals are joined at the head or neck in order to work together effectively in pulling a plow, harrow, or wagon.”⁶ For years, whenever I read this passage, I assumed it was a picture of Jesus taking on our burdens. But Jesus is not saying he will carry our entire load. Nor is he saying he will adapt to *our* load capacity. He’s not offering to step in and help you check all the boxes on your

long to-do list. He won't help you fold the laundry, shuttle the kids to their after-school activities, or start a pot of chili on the stovetop for dinner. He doesn't wash windows, and he won't change diapers. No—Jesus offers something better: partnership rooted in the reality of who we are in him.

He wants to take you under his wing and show you a better way. He makes it clear: “*My yoke is easy and my burden is light*” (emphasis added). He's saying to us, “Learn from me—follow *my* lead, and trade your load for mine.” The load we're carrying to be the *best mom* who never lets her kids down is the equivalent of us dragging a wagon by ourselves. Allowing Jesus to trade our load for his means that we need to take a serious look at where we've been placing our identity—and more importantly, what having this misplaced identity has done to our souls.

I won't promise you that unpacking your load will be easy (it won't), but I can promise you that it will be worth it in the end. A new perspective, new patterns, and new habits will take some time to adjust to. You didn't arrive at where you are overnight, so extend grace to yourself on the journey to gain God's perspective of who you are. The first step is to say yes to Jesus.

I love *The Message* translation of Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?
Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover
your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk
with me and work with me—watch how I do it.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

MATTHEW 11:28-30, MSG

Jesus has extended an invitation to help you *recover your life*. Do you want to take him up on his offer to "live freely and lightly"? You don't have to carry your burdens alone. The same Savior who carried the burden of his own cross to his crucifixion knows a thing or two about heavy loads. Will you let him show you the way?

ONE

MORE THAN A MOM

The Grace of Remembering Who You Are

Remember always that you not only have the right to be an individual, you have an obligation to be one.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

I plucked a well-worn Christian parenting book off my bookshelf one afternoon and, out of curiosity, began flipping through it. It didn't take long before my eyes landed on a phrase common in many Christian parenting books from my young-motherhood days. This particular book referenced motherhood as "a high calling" and went on to declare it "perhaps, the highest calling God can give a woman."¹ I grumbled under my breath, triggered at the false, impossibly heavy expectation that had been placed on mothers of my generation.

Sadly, the book I'd picked up was a book I had written ten years ago! I was part of the problem. At the time, I had sincerely believed that motherhood was a woman's highest calling, echoing what I had been taught over the years under the guise of biblical womanhood. *Biblical womanhood* had become a catchall term of directives and expectations—many

of which were nowhere to be found in Scripture—that determined whether a Christian woman was sufficiently living up to who she was “meant to be.” Culture at-large reinforced the expectation that a woman’s life was incomplete without marriage and children. As a result, many Christian books and Bible studies reiterated this idea that marriage and motherhood were core to a woman’s identity.

One Sunday years ago at my previous church, the service specifically addressed the topics of biblical womanhood and biblical manhood. The men and the women were placed in separate groups and taught a lesson that had been prepared by a male pastor on staff. I was out of town on that Sunday, but in the aftermath, multiple women reached out to me because they had found the lesson troubling.

One of the women sent me the outline, and upon reading it, I could certainly understand the concern. The lesson stated that a woman’s ultimate life purpose was to “help men’s worthy leadership with submission and respect and prioritize the nurturing and raising of children.”

A woman in the class lodged a formal complaint to the staff that the teaching had suggested that a woman’s value was directly dependent on her role as a wife and mother. She argued, “I am complete in my relationship with God, with or without a man or children.” She went on to share that she had served for many years as a missionary prior to meeting her husband and that, once married, she had struggled to have children. She and her husband were in the process of adopting a child, and the lesson left her feeling as though she was “less than” or out of God’s favor.

Other women took offense that the responsibility of nurturing and raising children was laid solely on their shoulders. Many worked full-time jobs to help pay the bills, some even outearning their husbands or working longer hours than them to make ends meet.

Worst of all was the fact that this brand of womanhood was (and often still is) presented as biblical, suggesting that women who don't follow the template and fulfill their so-called purpose (marrying and having children) are disobedient and outside God's will for their lives.

I thought about how hurtful this teaching is to so many women in the family of God. Single women who dream of marriage and motherhood but aren't sure that dream will ever become reality. Or married women who long to be mothers but struggle with infertility. Or women who simply don't feel called to have children. How invisible they must have all felt in a church culture telling them that marriage was what every woman was destined for and that children were a mandatory by-product of marriage. I felt a wave of compassion for all the women who had been exposed to this toxic teaching and were left wondering if they were less loved by God and all the women who were questioned and challenged over the years about being single or childless or working outside the home. This hardly sounds biblical.

That lesson became a turning point for me. I began to rethink many of the "biblical womanhood" teachings I had accepted without question over the years and sadly even recycled into some of my early books and Bible studies. Fortunately, those books are now out of print, but it grieves

my heart all the same to know I may have added to the confusion and pain many Christian women experience in unpacking their identity.

I began to dig deeper into the Scriptures about the roles of women in the church and home and could find nothing that supported the assertion that a woman's primary purpose is linked to marriage and motherhood or that being a mother is a woman's highest calling. Given the amount of attention the topic has generated over the years, you would expect there to be a score of Scriptures supporting the oft-taught conclusions that a woman's ultimate purpose is to be a helpmeet to her husband and bear children. The lack of Scriptures that speak to women's roles, let alone parenting, is truly astounding.

What I further realized is that, if I was going to be wise and responsible in discerning the meaning of different passages of Scripture, I needed to consider the few that speak to women's roles within the larger context of the patriarchal times in which they were written. Over the years various Bible theologians have studied these passages without agreeing on their meaning, but context gave me clues that my original understanding of biblical womanhood was far too limited. One much-touted example is the Proverbs 31 woman (also known as the "virtuous woman" or the "wife of noble character"), who has been propped up as the ultimate biblical role model for Christian women because of her domesticity and her devotion to her husband and children.

But what we can too easily miss is how extraordinary this woman is *beyond* marriage and motherhood. When was the last time you heard someone highlight the fact that she runs

a business selling linen garments (verse 24) and ensures her trading is profitable (verse 18)? Or that she dabbles in real estate and uses the earnings to plant a vineyard (verse 16)? Or that she prioritizes caring for those in need in addition to caring for her family (verse 20)? Or that she has servant girls to help her on the home front (verse 15)? And never mind that she isn't even an actual woman who existed but rather a list of idealized attributes in the form of an acrostic poem thought to be recited by pious Jews of the day!

My point is that many of the positions we've been taught related to the roles of women often rely on isolated Bible verses taken out of the context of the whole of Scripture or the time they were written (and the cultural norms of the day). When this happens, we create burdens for ourselves and others that God never intended for us to carry.

One of my greatest joys in life has been being a mother. While I consider it an important calling, it is not my highest calling. Nor is it yours. And that should come as a great relief.

RETHINKING THE FAIRY TALE

Many of us would admit to, at some level, dreaming about the fairy tale—the prince, the castle, and eventually, the laughter of little royal offspring echoing through the corridors. We can blame it on chick flicks, romance novels, or our mothers (who, by simply being mothers, get blamed for almost everything). Oh, sure, we are products of our environment, but I also believe we enter the world hardwired to want what every fairy tale offers: a life of *happily ever after*. Disney movies and

sappy song lyrics play on that desire, exploiting our vulnerable yearning to be *complete*.

In my treasure trove of keepsakes, I have a checklist my daughter handed me when she was just seven years old:

Someday I will marry
a man who is .



1. is a cristen

2. has blue eyes

3. is a Longhorn

Despite coming from a long line of University of Texas Longhorns and college-football brainwashing from birth, my daughter ended up going to Auburn University, where she did, in fact, meet her future husband (who, for the record, has green eyes). But if my son-in-law was going to match only one-third of my daughter's fairy-tale wish list, at least he got the most important one right. (And thanks to a quality education, I'm happy to report that my daughter can now spell *Christian*.)

My daughter's fairy-tale pursuit was off to a good start. Within a year of getting married, she and her husband bought their first "castle" and decided to officially start trying to build their family.

For as long as I can remember, my daughter has wanted to be a mother. She tended to her dolls as a young

mother-in-training. She staged mock weddings with neighbor boys and played pretend house for hours at a time. She talked about how many children she was going to have one day and what their names would be. And throughout her childhood, I reinforced the teaching that marriage and motherhood were key factors in the happily-ever-after formula of biblical womanhood.

I could not have imagined at the time that her future fairy tale would not play out as scripted. After a year of trying to get pregnant, my daughter was diagnosed with unexplained infertility. Another two years went by, years of back-to-back appointments and procedures with a fertility specialist. Watching my daughter and son-in-law suffer one heartbreak after another was unbearable. At one point, while my daughter and her husband were living with us for a short time before moving into a new home, my oldest son and his wife discovered they were expecting their second child. Knowing how difficult it would be for my daughter to hear the news, they asked me to tell her.

I will never forget the scene. As I entered my daughter's room and saw her sitting on her childhood bed, I had a flashback to her as a small child, tucking in her dolls and stuffed animals for the night. When I told her the news, the dam broke, and she collapsed in my arms. I sobbed along with her. As I attempted to comfort my daughter in her grief, I fumbled with the right words to say. I tried to reassure her that she had value and worth apart from motherhood and that her happiness did not depend on her ability to bear children. But as I spoke these words, I struggled to believe

them. Could *I* have been happy had I not married or had children?

In my years of ministry, I had taught that Jesus alone satisfies our souls and had warned others against finding their worth and value in anything other than Christ. Yet as I comforted my daughter, I was forced to confront the reality that I wasn't sure I really believed, deep down, that Jesus alone was *enough*.

Seeing my daughter's pain as she attempted to reconcile whether her life could have purpose without children shook me to the core. That night I confessed to her my own wrastlings over what I'd been taught regarding a woman's ultimate purpose. I apologized for imparting the false teaching that a woman's happiness is tethered to marriage and motherhood. Somewhere along the way, I had believed a lie, and sadly, I had taught her to believe it too.

There is nothing wrong with dreaming about marriage and motherhood. There is nothing wrong with finding joy and meaning in those things. I love being a mother. Raising my children has been one of the greatest joys of my life. But we must quit declaring motherhood to be a woman's highest calling and conflating it with a woman's ultimate purpose. You are more than a wife. You are more than a mom. You are first and foremost a child of God. Nowhere in the Bible does it say your worth is directly linked to a life role you may or may not play.

When we list marriage and motherhood as key components of biblical womanhood, we suggest that women who do not marry or have children are somehow unbiblical. Even worse, connecting these roles to womanhood in general suggests that women who don't marry or have children are lacking

the defining characteristics of being a woman. Likewise, if motherhood is a woman's highest calling, does that mean that women who aren't mothers are, by default, relegated to some lesser calling in life? Do they have less value in the eyes of God?

Of course not! Our identity is rooted in who we are in Christ, not in what we do or a role we have.

Sadly, a recent study found that 35 percent of mothers described being a parent as the single most important aspect of their personhood.² This is not surprising, given the emphasis in our culture on making our children the center of our lives. Being a mother may be an aspect of who we are as women, but it is not our primary identity.

When motherhood becomes our primary identity, we have made it into an idol. In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, the late Timothy Keller writes, "An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.'"³ The sobering truth about idols is that they always disappoint. If we rely on motherhood to give our lives meaning, make us feel valued, and help us feel significant and secure, we're going to quickly find ourselves scrambling to do everything right to avoid any feelings of failure. When we mess up, we're more likely to try to explain it away or to hide in shame. When our kids make painful choices, we're more likely to experience a deep personal shame that we project outward to our kids or become so obsessed with fixing the problems that we introduce unhealthy codependency into the mix. Motherhood, like anything else we make into an idol, will not deliver the true satisfaction our hearts seek—satisfaction found only in Christ.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

If I asked you the question *Who are you?* and gave you thirty seconds to answer, what would you say? Would you talk about a role you play? A job title you have? Qualities you possess? Accolades you have earned? How likely would it be for the word *mother* to be in your answer?

Of course, motherhood can be a huge part of who we are, but it does not define our true identity. At our very core, we are beloved children of God. Why, then, do so many Christian women mistakenly link their identity to their status as a mother?

Even despite outside societal pressures and spiritual expectations within the church at-large, most of us as Christians know the biblical answer to the question of our true identity—but we usually struggle to practice it. How do I know this? Because I've been this woman. (Knowing the right answer doesn't automatically mean we live from the truth.)

Almost every book and Bible study I've written to women and girls over the years contains a specific passage of Scripture that has been revolutionary in reminding me where my identity lies and, most importantly, where I can find the only source of *enough*. When I find myself retreating to the same dysfunctional patterns, looking for worth and value in all the wrong places, I preach this passage from Ephesians 3 back to myself over and over. I'll ask you to read through it slowly and soak it in:

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in you

hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

EPHESIANS 3:16-19, NLT

In this beautiful prayer, as the apostle Paul prays for Jewish and Gentile believers, he acknowledges that the source of inner strength is from the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of God's people. When we're in the habit of relying on the Holy Spirit for inner strength, Paul tells us, we see ourselves and the world through a different lens. That's because Christ is at home in our hearts, deeply rooted in our lives.⁴

But it's difficult to base our identity and worth on the status of *being* a child of God when we live in a world that links identity and worth to doing and performing. The truth is that many of us moms are accustomed to relying on our own strength to solve our problems. That's one of the dangers in centering our identity on motherhood: We become so focused on doing everything perfectly that we forget we're not the ones in charge of the outcome.

Paul acknowledges in this passage that the love of Christ is too great to understand fully, which is why following him is an act of growing deep roots and actively dwelling in his love. The problem is, most of us fail to dwell in Christ's love and

instead jump right back into our performance-based rituals to satisfy the ache in our souls.

Christ is not content to be on the fringes of our lives, an afterthought in times of need. He wants to be at the absolute center of our lives. As we become more rooted and established in his immense love for us, we will finally experience what our hearts truly long for—to “be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God” (Ephesians 3:19, NLT). This is our identity. This is what moves us from striving to be *enough* to living confidently in being *already good enough*.

The Greek word translated “made complete” in this verse is *plērōō*, and it means “to fill (a container),” or we might say “level up (a hollow thing).”⁵ Our deepest desire is to level up the hollow places in our hearts. As fulfilling as motherhood can be, it is not enough to satisfy or complete us. Our hearts were wired for God.

He is the only one who can level up the hollow thing and satisfy our souls. Nothing else will do.

Let’s lay aside the false belief that everything depends on us getting motherhood right. Let’s remember our identity as God’s children, deeply and unconditionally loved. Only then will we be able to rely on Christ to get us through each day, one challenge at a time. Only when we know who we are will we know whose we are.*

* Entire books have been written on our identity in Christ, but I have included several verses in the appendix that directly speak to who we are in Christ. I encourage you to meditate on them and even commit them to memory if you struggle with mistaken identity.

LIVING LIFE ON PURPOSE

How does our identity in Christ reshape our understanding of ourselves and our purpose in life? How does that change our approach to motherhood? Once we understand the foundation of our identity, we are better equipped to walk in our ultimate purpose.

Do you believe you have a purpose in this world? Sadly, one research survey found that “less than one in five moms (19%) [say] they regularly feel they are ‘able to contribute meaningfully to the world.’”⁶ I suspect one reason for this heartbreaking statistic is that mothers are told they should accomplish far more than Christ commanded when it comes to their life purpose. It’s no wonder so many of us feel we are always coming up short.

The purpose we are invited into is no different from that of any human being, regardless of role, gender, age, ethnicity, or status—and to learn about it, there is no better source to go to than Jesus himself. When asked by a Pharisee, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus does not break his answer down into gender-assigned duties and distinct roles for men and women. Rather, he replies,

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

MATTHEW 22:36-40

As part of our purpose, we are called to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds. Loving God was never meant to be a duty or a chore but rather a natural by-product of having first been loved by God.

All too often, loving God has been reduced to a chore or spiritual discipline. When I was a young mother, I was also a fairly new believer. I benefited greatly from a small group that was led by an older, godly Christian woman who drilled home the importance of a daily quiet time—basically, spending time in God’s Word and prayer. When we would meet as a group, she would ask at the beginning how we were doing with our daily quiet times. While I understand the sentiment of encouraging this discipline, I began to equate loving God to time spent reading the Bible and praying. In other words, completing a checklist of tasks was tangible evidence that I loved God. When I missed a day or more, I felt like a failure as a Christian and imagined God shaking his head with a low-level sense of displeasure and disappointment. Ironically, the more I saw God through that lens, the less I wanted to spend time with him!

Life with God was never meant to be this complicated. He is not logging quiet-time attendance on a chart or weighing your love for him on a scale.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 JOHN 4:10

We love because he first loved us.

1 JOHN 4:19

We can't help but love God when we dwell first on the love he has for us.

The love that defines us and motivates us, that keeps us connected to God and shapes how we relate to everyone around us, spills over into every part of our lives. And motherhood is one of those places.

Let me say that again: We don't start with *How can I be the best mother?* Motherhood and parenting aren't the first priorities. Our identity, based on being rooted and established in the love of Christ, is the first priority; motherhood is one of the ways we live out this primary identity. In fact, we see this exact thing when Jesus is informing the Pharisee of the greatest commandment. Jesus is giving a nod to the Shema in Deuteronomy 6, a declaration and prayer that ancient Israelites recited daily and many practicing Jews still recite today:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
Love the LORD your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your strength. These
commandments that I give you today are to be on
your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk
about them when you sit at home and when you
walk along the road, when you lie down and when
you get up.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-7

This Deuteronomy 6 passage is one of few in the Bible that address parenting directly. But look at the order of this passage: As important as it is to impress God's commandments

on our children's hearts, the Shema begins with who God is and with our primary identity as people who dwell in God's love. As we grow in our love for God (with heart, soul, mind, and strength), the logical by-product will be a desire to share his love with others. Our universal purpose as believers is to spread the Good News of his gospel (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 14:23; Acts 1:7-8). We should live out our callings in such a way that we are seeking to know God and make him known in every realm of our lives.

Once again, you cannot make known what you do not personally know. This is why establishing our identity in Christ is essential. As we dwell in his love, it is impossible not to want to share that love with others. When Jesus gave his final earthly charge—best known as the great commission—to his eleven disciples, he didn't say, "Therefore go and tell the people to get married and make babies," as if populating the earth were our greatest responsibility. Nor did he designate gender-specific callings. His charge to his remaining disciples is his universal charge to all his followers: "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul lays out our calling in greater detail:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal

through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-20

Did you catch that? We have been given a ministry! Thus, we are ministers who have been given the awesome privilege of partnering with God to share the Good News that God is no longer counting people's sins against them. Paul then gives us a title: "Christ's ambassadors." The Greek word translated "ambassador" in this passage is *presbeuō*, which generally refers to a respected (often elderly) representative.⁷ We are called to be Christ's representatives to any and all within our spheres of influence. Again, had it been important to designate gender-related roles, Paul could have given this ministry call exclusively to the men and added a footnote to indicate "unless you are a woman, and then your ministry is only to your husband and children."

The truth is that we've made this far too complicated. We're defining our value, purpose, and worth through the wrong lens. I'm not talking about adding more to our plates but rather readjusting our definition of value and purpose as it relates to God's calling on our lives: discovering our identity as *ministers* rather than as *mothers*.

Let me ask you this: Do you think of yourself as first and foremost a *minister* or a *mother*? You are assigned your life purpose when you become a believer, not when you become a mother. Our role as mothers is encompassed within our calling as ministers. Your children are part of the ministry assignment you are called to, and while being a mother is an important role, it is not your only role.

Most Christian mothers are doing an amazing job fulfilling their roles as ministers to their children. They make countless holy deposits in the lives of their children on a daily basis, whether it's guiding them in bedtime prayers, leading family devotions, taking them to church, teaching them about God and his love, training them to make wise and biblical choices, raising them to love others and treat one another as fellow image bearers of God, modeling love for the Bible and its commandments, or pointing to nature and the beauty that surrounds us as evidence of God.

But our calling expands far beyond the walls of our homes. What an honor it is that Christ invites us to play any part in his Kingdom purposes! Whether you are married, single, a mom, a grandmother, an aunt, a coworker, a friend, a student, or quite simply a follower of Christ, you are meant to fulfill your calling in your church, neighborhood, workplace, school, ballpark, extracurricular activities, and community as you go, in every chapter of your life.

Yes, in the busy years of raising children, it can feel overwhelming to expand our ministry beyond the demands on the home front. We often conflate ministry with preaching, teaching, and serving, but it is so much more. On some days, your ministry may be a simple prayer for a friend who is in need. It can be an offer to watch the child of an overwhelmed mother and receiving the same help yourself when needed. It can be a text to someone God places on your heart to let them know you are thinking about them. It can be the confident encouragement to those in your sphere that Christ is worthy of our trust and desires relationships with us.

As you live out the beauty of the gospel in your own life and become entrenched in God's immense love, your life will become your ministry. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)—will be evident and offer hope to others who desire to know the source. When you mess up, your humility, vulnerability, and ultimate security that you are unconditionally loved by God will be contagious to others who long for that kind of love and acceptance. Ministry is not always *sharing* the power of the gospel but also *showing* the power of the gospel.

AN EMPTY-NEST PERSPECTIVE

While scrolling my social-media feed one day, a reel popped up of a popular parenting influencer who treated their followers to a spontaneous video tour of their messy home. I suppose the goal was to help normalize the reality of raising children. As the parent walked through the living room, they navigated an obstacle course of toys strewn across the floor. Then they made their way to the kitchen, offering a glimpse of dirty dishes piled up in the kitchen sink. Finally, the camera turned to the washroom and its pile of dirty laundry the size of Mount Everest on the floor. The simple caption read,

Let this reel remind you to live in the moment, with the mess and chaos and dirty laundry. It won't always be like that . . . and that should break your heart.⁸

Hmm, I thought, glancing around at my post-empty-nest living room, clear of toys and clutter, as I sat on my well-earned cream-colored sofa free from toddler fingerprints, smudges, and stains. While I understood the sentiment of the post and would endorse the advice to “live in the moment, with the mess and chaos and dirty laundry,” I didn’t feel heartbroken over the absence of it all. I may miss certain moments of raising my children, but I’m also celebrating the stage I’m in. I earned my stripes. The empty-nest chapter isn’t a heartbreaking and dreaded reality of life after children—it’s a reward.

Curious, I scrolled down to the comments to see whether anyone shared my perspective. One mother of young children had the courage to weigh in and admit that while she loves her children very much and sees it as “an honor to be their mother,” she is also looking forward to the years when she can have more time to herself. She explained that her philosophy is to find happiness in each chapter of her life and not look to her children to provide that happiness. “Instead of being nostalgic over the absence of my children,” she wrote, “I plan to enjoy my life in the future (without the messy toys and chaos).”

Sounded like a reasonable and emotionally healthy response to me! But it didn’t go over well with some of the commenters. One simply replied, “I feel sorry for you.” Another one chimed in, “Feeling so sad for your kids right now.” And another: “Sorry but I think you have a problem.” And another: “Go to therapy.” And possibly the worst: “I pity your children that they have a mother such as yourself.”

You would have thought by reading their comments that this mother had advocated for sending her children to a wilderness boot camp until they turned eighteen. Apparently you can't express a desire to have a life beyond your children on social media without an angry-mom mob coming for you. I shook my head in disbelief and felt sadness for the mother who was the target of their bullying. But I also felt a tremendous sadness for the mothers whose entire lives are defined by their status and role. The empty-nest years are going to be a rude awakening as they struggle to figure out who they are in the aftermath of their children leaving home.

I have witnessed this reality firsthand among many women my age. In that very social-media post, a few older empty-nest moms had commented an amen to the original sentiment, some saying they would give anything to go back to the days of raising their children, messes and all. I wasn't really surprised. My generation embraced a child-centric brand of parenting, and many mothers tethered their identity and purpose to motherhood. Once the children were gone—and along with them, the never-ending list of responsibilities and activities revolving around their children's lives and schedules—these women felt completely lost.

Some reacted to the shock by inserting themselves into their adult children's lives—attempting to manage their college schedules, trying to oversee their activities from afar, and having unrealistic expectations about involvement in their lives even after marriage. Others sunk into a deep depression, numb and unsure how to navigate the future. Sadly, yet others separated from or divorced their husbands due to

a lack of common interests, oftentimes because they had long prioritized their children over their marriage.

I want to camp out on this point for a minute. We've already discussed the issues with tying our identity to motherhood rather than living out of our identity in Christ. But another danger with making motherhood our identity is that it disrupts the way God created marriage to work. "Leave and cleave" isn't just about preparing our kids for marriage; if we are married, it should remain the first reality in our marriages as well.

In his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy Keller writes that God "didn't put a parent and a child in the Garden" but "a husband and a wife. When you marry your spouse, that must supersede all other relationships, even the parental relationship. Your spouse and your marriage must be the number one priority in your life."⁹

Sadly, many Christian families have bought into the lie that the needs, wants, and desires of the children should come before the needs, wants, and desires of the parents. Kid-centric homes have become the norm in our culture. Several years ago, a Christian woman told me she and her husband hadn't been on a single date since marrying; instead, they do "family nights." Of course, there is nothing wrong with having family nights. But family nights do not prioritize the marriage—they prioritize the children. And if you only prioritize your children, you will find yourself, after your last child flies the nest, waking up to a virtual stranger every morning. It's not a coincidence that the divorce rate for couples over fifty has quadrupled over the last thirty years.¹⁰

I'm not saying this to shame anyone. I know how loud the never-ending needs of kids can be and how easy it is to push the relatively quieter needs of a marriage to the back burner. Shortly after my husband and I married, we found out we were (unexpectedly!) expecting our first child. Our one-year anniversary was spent at a Lamaze childbirth class. Exactly thirteen months after our wedding day, our son was born, and instantaneously our identities shifted to *Mom* and *Dad*. Two more children followed, and sleepless nights and colicky infants replaced date nights and adult conversations. In those early, comatose years, we told ourselves that someday, when the children weren't so dependent on us, we'd have time to focus on being a couple again. But *someday* never seemed to arrive.

By our six-year anniversary, we had a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and a newborn. Even amid the noise and chaos of three young children, we both felt desperately alone. By the eight-year mark, my husband and I landed in a counselor's office with our marriage on life support.

By far, one of the best takeaways we learned during our counseling sessions was the importance of scheduling regular, consistent date nights. Date nights had been one of the first things to go when we'd become new parents. Aside from the fact that it was costly to get a babysitter and go out to dinner, it was impossible to get out the door without the kids melting down in the background. Year after year, we made excuses. Without a designated date night that focused on our marriage, the kids became our common bond. They were the topic of 99 percent of our conversations. Our

counselor encouraged us to start dating again (and suggested not talking about our children on our dates!) to rebuild our friendship. Without a friendship as the foundation, true intimacy—the kind God intends for marriage—would not be possible.

Our weekly dates helped us realize how much we had missed each other. We started laughing again and having fun. We began acting like a married couple rather than two people who happened to live in the same house and parent the same children. And in the process, we became better parents and modeled what a healthy marriage looks like to our children.

My husband and I are a couple of years shy of our fortieth wedding anniversary, and he is truly my best friend. We love doing life together. I can't imagine where we'd be if we hadn't taken the time to rebuild our marriage and, more importantly, our friendship. Now, with our children grown and gone, we see the value of the investment we made to nurture our marriage in the earlier years.

There's a lot of negative press about the empty-nest years, especially among Christian mothers. It saddens me to hear young mothers speak of it with dread. And it certainly doesn't help to hear older women my age echo, "Enjoy it while you can—you will miss this stage when they're gone" or "These are the best years of your life—it's never quite the same once the children leave." But an empty-nest perspective equips us to make decisions today for a healthy, life-giving future—for us, for our husbands, and for our children.

With an empty-nest perspective, you remember that your children are not yours to keep. You invest in your friendship with your husband, the person who will live with you far longer than your children do. You cultivate a perspective, identity, and rhythm of life that equips you to know who you are and find purpose and delight in the post-child years.

If you have embraced the truth that you are more than a mom, you will learn how to live at peace with the lopsided love of the parent-child relationship. Children will never love their parents in the same way their parents love them. We pour into them, nurture them, love them, train them, guide them, and then release them to go and do likewise if they marry and have children. If this makes you sad or anxious or upset, please know that I am not telling you this to stir up your emotions. I am encouraging you to discover who you are apart from being a mother, because a day will come when your job will be complete. This is God's plan, and it is healthy to keep that in the forefront of our minds.

As someone who found great joy in mothering my children, I can speak firsthand to the benefit of having an empty-nest perspective along the way. Letting go of something you love is never easy. New normals always come with learning curves. Knowing who you are in Christ, walking in your God-given purpose, and remembering that you are more than a mom will make the transition much easier.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways did you buy into the fairy tale that marriage and motherhood are key components to a life lived “happily ever after”? What role did marriage and motherhood play in your understanding of biblical womanhood?
2. When it comes to your identity, how much does motherhood play into your primary identity? How would you answer the question *Who are you?* How does the biblical truth of who you are in Christ show up in your everyday life?
3. When it comes to your ultimate purpose, do you see yourself as more of a *minister* or a *mother*? How might you walk more intentionally in your calling as a minister first? How does that calling encompass your role as a mother?
4. How might having an empty-nest perspective help you redefine your God-given identity and purpose?