

Mother's Encouragement Group January 14, 2016

For the next several meetings I want us to revisit some of the material we began with back in 2012-13 when I basically gave you what I considered to be some of the most basic principles of raising children for the Lord. Our reasons (Dawn's and mine) for starting this group were several: first, and foremost, was that we both remembered what life was like for us when our children were little (how overwhelmed we often were—I suspect I was more overwhelmed than Dawn!—and how often we doubted ourselves and our ability actually to do the job of raising our children, let alone doing it well). Second, we wanted to respond to the Lord's directive as older women to be teachers and helpers of the younger ones (you'll find that in **Titus 2**). Third, we saw the same doubt and feelings of being overwhelmed on the faces of many of you. But through these three and a half years this group has grown into something I absolutely love—something more than a place to talk about raising children, though it is certainly that. As I have watched you and listened to you interact with one another, sharing your frustrations, sorrows, wonderings, pleadings and prayer requests (I can only speak for myself, though I'm pretty sure Dawn would agree) I have been so grateful that for many of you this has become a “safe place,” and hopefully a true encouragement to keep on keeping on. This is *exactly* what we were hoping for those many months ago when we began. I hope you will always feel this way and help to make others who newly come feel this way too.

That said I want to say a word about mothers. We can often feel a lot of pressure from our mothers—I know that some of you do. I certainly did! Both my mother and my mother-in-law put pressure on me, and on our children, in different ways. It is almost inevitable when there is first conviction in the heart and a concern for the one(s) you are anxious to pass that conviction on to. Some mothers can see themselves the way their grown children see them and try to sweeten their interactions with them and with grandchildren but most of us, sadly, do not see ourselves the way others see us and often say and do hurtful things, or refrain from doing loving things, not realizing we are actually hurting the cause we are trying to help. Both my mothers were in that last category and even though I knew each was motivated by love (my own mother's love was of the most intense kind!) it was often hard to love them back and to benefit from the real wisdom each one had. Remembering that *we are all sinners AND saved will help us here* as we try to find godly responses to these who are the dearest and closest to us.

We were in the middle of preparing for Rob's mother's funeral when I first put these words on paper and I remember wanting to pay tribute to her life. Mothers—often especially the virtuous ones—can be hard on their daughters, but if we can be in our right minds about them, seeing them for the ordinary Christians, like you and like I, that they were, with the same struggles with sin and sins that you and I face, then we should be able to see the good, positive and loving things that were lived out in their own lives and to benefit from their examples. Rob's mother lived life on behalf of her family. Her work and her ministry were both in and from her home. She was home all the time! She bent her intelligence and her creativity to making a home for her husband and children that was comfortable, nourishing and beautiful. Several remembered that she would even iron the sheets that went on her beds! She ministered to probably hundreds of people in her lifetime but it was nearly always because they were in her

home and she made them feel welcomed and cared for. My mother did the same in her own way. Her life was smaller (my father didn't travel as much or meet as many people as Rob's dad did) but it was not for that reason less important or less of a ministry in and from her home. This art is disappearing in our culture—the art of making a home comfortable, beautiful and a place of ministry to one's family and to others that the Lord may bring our way. It behooves us as Christian women to remember and to implement as best we can those things the Lord made us for, those things that our mothers, both physical and spiritual, have exemplified for us in the midst of all their sin.

Hear me now: I do not want you to feel criticism or the wrong kind of pressure from me! else this would cease to be the “safe place” it has become for some of you. As we said the last time we were together, before Christmas, there is no one whose life is not a mess in one way or another: we are ALL of us sinners AND we are all of us saved—and being saved—from our sin and its consequences. But if a choir director did not put pressure on his singers to sing the right notes at the right time and in the right way there would not be beautiful music coming out of that choir. Think of me as I am to some of you: your old choir director! What we are trying to do in this room is to “hear what God the Lord has spoken” about ourselves and about our children, to talk about ways of understanding and implementing those things that we have heard from His word.

Some of you will remember the list of things I put together that makes mothering little ones (and bigger ones too) so hard. You will hardly need to hear this list since these are things you live with all the time but sometimes—not always—just naming these things can make them shrink in their power over us and sometimes—not always—remembering that this is a stage of life that will not last forever can make them easier to bear. My grandmother often said, “this, too, shall pass” and often that became a comfort to me, though certainly not always. Also, by talking about the goals we are trying to achieve in the lives of our children I hope we can inspire and encourage each other to carry on, making the hard things seem less and less significant.

1) Physical exhaustion because of interrupted and shortened nights and the knowledge that the relief that comes when the children are in bed for the night is short-lived even if they sleep the whole 12 hours: it's going to start all over again in the morning!

2) Mental fatigue because of the childrens' constant and varying needs: clothes, cleanliness, comfort and hunger, both real and imagined.

3) Spiritual fatigue because of constant watchfulness: the need to make them obey; to teach them how to live, being cheerful, truthful and unselfish.

4) Nagging self-doubt, wondering whether the techniques being used are the best for accomplishing these purposes in each child's life.

5) Very little, if any, personal time: this job is 24-7!

6) Strain on the marriage: there is less time for intimacy; there may be conflict of opinion on parenting issues since mom and dad come from two different parenting traditions and styles and joining them may be difficult. The financial sacrifice of providing for what the household needs can often bring pressure to the marriage since husbands (and sometimes wives) are away doing that providing. (Be careful not to make your husband into your savior so as to replace your Savior. He cannot hope to hold up under the pressure of the comparison!)

7) Loneliness: this is a job done by yourself (often and typically, dad is not there) in the privacy of your home when no one is watching, so the motivation to do it must come from your own mind. There is very little public recognition and praise for what you do; in fact, folk are more likely to criticize than compliment.

8) Discouragement while signs of learning and spiritual growth in the children are slow to appear. The children often get up in the morning and seem to wonder, “Are the rules still the same today? I think I need to find out!”

9) The feeling that you are at cross purposes with your children as you seek to keep order and create beauty in the home and they seem only interested in destroying it. This may be especially true for mothers of boys.

10) The feeling that life is passing you by: all the education and development you’ve struggled to achieve in your own life and heart and person is hidden away in your home while your husband gets to be out in the world using his gifts on behalf of others and enjoying the kudos and compliments of those he serves.

11) May I add one more to this list: our raging hormones and mysterious chemical changes in our bodies that we have absolutely no control over whatsoever! We can feel sabotaged by our own selves before we step out of bed in the morning. Truly this is a job we cannot do without the help of our ever loving and completely powerful Savior.

Have I left anything out?

Our Motto with our children: Love Them Into Heaven!

We take our cue from the Lord: we love because He loves. He loved us first, made us like Himself and so we love the ones He has given to us. Our parenting style should mimic His. Everything that happens in our children’s lives, happy things and hard things (maybe especially the hard things) and everything we talk to them about, is a vehicle for loving them, drawing them to ourselves and so to God and to godly behavior. **Psalm 136** illustrates that the Lord loved Israel through thick and thin: “...for His steadfast love endures forever” is the phrase repeated over and over. The Bible is nothing if it is not full God’s love for His people.

Our First Principle:

The Lord has suited us, more than He has our husbands, for the task of caring for, teaching, nurturing, raising our children.

Really? So when I first presented this principle my daughters argued with me; their husbands, they said, were much more patient and understanding with their children than they, much more perceptive about their issues and more objectively able to make the demand for obedience stick. What do you say?

Two of my sons-in-law are cousins and products of a Kindergarten that their grandmother started in Las Cruces, New Mexico. It was there that they learned how to be patient with children, what makes children happy, trusting and willing to learn. Both of them do have amazing skill with little children. (Josh's mom still runs the place.) Last summer, when for a couple of days we had ten children five and under in our little cabin, these two men played with them many times and in many different ways, using music and dancing if it was raining or balls and bats if the weather was fair. I was in awe of their skill and patience in keeping them happy while we hurried to get dinner on for 18 hungry mouths. But may I say first that these men learned their skill from women—their two mothers and their grandmother! Secondly, neither one of them would want their whole life to be taken up with child care! They can do it well when it is needed but neither of them feels it to be his calling to give up the work the Lord gave them in order to be at home with the children.

The Bible does have a few things to say on this subject!

a) Obviously, our bodies were made for the bearing, feeding and comforting of babies. (I distinctly remember thinking after our first baby was born, “Oh, *that's* what these are for!”) A woman's body secretes a hormone (talk about raging!) when she hears her baby cry; this does not happen to men (duh!). Our hearts were made for it too: why is it that, after we have been through the discomfort and difficulty of a first pregnancy and the sleeplessness of caring for that first baby that we want to do it again? Why was Hannah so depressed because of her childlessness? Her husband couldn't understand it. “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” Women were made by God for this work; already in Genesis Eve's part of the curse had to do with her relationships—to her children and her husband. These are the things God made her to care about most in life. Paul said to Timothy that **“Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” I Timothy 2:13-15** In other words, it is in the raising of her children that a woman works out her own salvation and learns necessary progress in sanctification. Look at the verses Dawn and I began with when we decided to begin meeting with this group: **Titus 2:3ff “Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands....”** We have a theme. Fact is, the world does not have an “unwed father” problem—I'm not saying this doesn't exist but it is certainly not the norm—there are unwed mothers everywhere. That is certainly what is all over our

neighborhood: women alone with several children while men come and go, visiting this one and that one.

b) The Lord has made us weaker (physically) and dependent on our husbands which gives us a more patient, trusting nature: we must trust because we cannot do. (We know a woman, bigger and stronger than her husband, who might take exception to this one! But her strong body does not change her tender heart.) So, we can have a sympathetic heart with our children who are weaker than all: we understand what it is to be weak and our hearts understand what it is to need the love and care of someone else—our husbands.

c) We have, then, everything we need to do this job and since we are, ideally, with the children all day, every day, we are the ones who can best fulfill the mandate God has given us in **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**: **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”**

My mother-in-law, as I said earlier, was **always** home, as was my own mother: they were, both of them, usually up before the family preparing breakfast—Nanny’s breakfasts were always cooked. (Rob used to tease me about this from time to time when our children mostly had cold cereal for breakfast and, when they were able, had to get it themselves!) She would always prepare lunch for his Dad and whatever guest Dad would bring home from the campus of the seminary where they lived. She was always there when the children came home from school and often had cookies for them she had baked herself (talk about pressure for a daughter-in-law who was into music, not cooking!). But the point is if you’re not there with your children, that is, if they are cared for by someone else, you can’t do the work in their lives that the Lord wants you to do.

Remember now, I am not saying this is easy—in fact, the Lord, as a result of the Fall and the consequent entrance of sin into the world, has promised that it will be hard and difficult—but that does not change the fact that we must do it, that He wants us to do it and that He has suited us to do it. But, in our seeking to obey the Lord’s command, He has also promised to help us do it and to bless the work that we do with the fruit we so much want to see.

You all know what a big a part music plays in my life and how convicted I am that music should be important in every Christian’s life no matter how small or big your skill is so I thought that each time we would sing something that you could teach your children to sing. When I was a child my mother sang a lot to me, especially out of a little red Sunday School hymn book that we used at the small OPC in Waterloo, Iowa in which I grew up. I still remember the impression these little songs had on my mind and on my soul, forming my impression of and relationship with God. Some years ago I took this book with me when I visited my 90 year old mother who

was then in a nursing home and suffering from dementia. I climbed on the bed with her and started to sing the songs she had taught me as a child. I was amazed to find that she still knew most of the words to every song and could even sing the melody with me, though an octave lower. So much truth can be taught “through the back door” as it were, through the fun of singing little ditties—and they often stay with you for the rest of your life.

But, Girls, this first one is for you, to strengthen you and nerve you for the tasks at hand that come all the time, every day, without variation: *Father, I Know That All My Life*. Here is a reminder that God is our Father, our parent. The poem expresses the childlike attitude we need to have towards God and that we want our children to have towards us. I love this theme: “a mind to blend with outward life, while keeping at Thy side.”

Father, I Know That All My Life

Anna Waring, 1850

Father, I know that all my life is portioned out for me;
The changes that are sure to come, I do not fear to see:
I ask thee for a present mind, intent on pleasing thee.

I would not have the restless will that hurries to and fro,
Seeking for some great thing to do, or secret thing to know;
I would be treated as a child, and guided where I go.

I ask thee for the daily strength, to none that ask denied,
A mind to blend with outward life, while keeping at thy side.
Content to fill a little space, if thou be glorified.

In service which thy will appoints there are no bonds for me;
My secret heart is taught the truth that makes thy children free;
A life of self-renouncing love is one of liberty.