



A Leader's Relationship with Her Children

“Children [are] a reward from Him....” (Psalm 127:3)

By Sheri Hawley

Unit Notes

► Introduction

The heart cry of every Christian woman is that her faith may be reproduced, especially in those nearest to her. And if she is blessed to be a mother, she desperately longs for her children to have their own genuine, lifelong experience with the Savior.

The most precious part of my life is my relationship with Christ. I want to honor His sacrifice by making disciples. Undoubtedly, a leader's greatest impact is within her own family. Here our true level of “Christ-likeness” is seen. We may be able to fool others, but children see right to the heart of who we are!

Moms almost always talk about their children in conversation with other moms. Is it possible to raise healthy, well-balanced children who move from being kids to being comrades in the faith? Yes, it is entirely possible! In this study we will examine several key issues for successfully winning converts in the most precious field of calling—our own home.

Together, we will discuss these important topics:

- Modeling the life we want to see reproduced
- Making memories in a hurried world
- Creating an atmosphere of connectedness within the family
- Establishing boundaries and recognizing seasons for women leaders

► Modeling the life we want to see reproduced.

It is imperative that I model the Christianity I want my children to live. The Apostle Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 1:11 should be the life Scripture for every mom: “Follow me as I follow Christ.” Tough standards are OK as long as you are living by them as well.

For many years, I kept a small scrap of paper on my mirror with this statement torn from a magazine: “More is caught than taught!” It served as a daily reminder that no matter how many people listen to me teach, no matter how many I lead to the Lord, no matter who benefits from my leadership, the most important lessons I share have no words. Children model what they have experienced.

- Want to see self-discipline in your child? Then exercise it, and don't be afraid to express moments when you miss it yourself. Our children learn to turn to God for help when they watch us turn to Him.
- Be confident in setting firm behavioral boundaries for your children. This doesn't make them resentful, it makes them feel safe and actually creates an arena of freedom for growth. Caution! Remember that there are no perfect human beings.
- When the fruit of the Spirit is operating in our lives it makes life better. Express appreciation for the congregation you are a part of and the people with which you work. Be positive at your own dinner table. Demonstrate the strength of forgiveness, choose joy instead of bitterness, and create a peaceful atmosphere.

The purpose of boundaries should be to honor Christ, and not just because of a leadership role Mom or Dad holds. Help your children understand that every person following Christ is called to minister to the people in their lives. Even if they never hold a leadership role, the rules and patterns of the household would remain the same.

Do you struggle with guilt/condemnation in this area of life?

How do you distinguish between Holy Spirit conviction and Satan's condemnation?

Are the expectations you have biblical or imposed by others? Explain.

► Making Memories in a Hurried World

"Go ahead and scream, Mom! It's OK, we're making a memory!"

We were at an amusement park just outside Houston, Texas, and the entire family had chosen to ride "The Swinging Egyptian Mummy Ship." The ride looked safe enough—from the ground. But within seconds, I knew death was imminent! I endured the terrifying, gut-churning ride for what felt like an eternity and was finally allowed to exit the ride, trembling from head to toe.

But the memory was made and our family laughs about it still all these years later!

All of life passes in a flash. It is our responsibility to intentionally create and rehearse memories that mark the passing of time. Traditions offer a stabilizing effect and give children a sense of belonging. Start while they are young and eager to participate. Teenagers tend to sigh loudly and roll their eyes a lot which discourages parents from trying *anything* new. Don't feel it is necessary to be original. Some of our favorite memory-makers were ideas borrowed from other families we admire.

- **Practice counting blessings.** When discouragements come, go all the way around your family circle each taking a turn at rehearsing what you count as a blessing. Each family member thinks of something that hasn't yet been listed (no repeating). Disappointment is quickly dispelled! This can become a tradition of encouragement that will last for many years.
- **Keep promises.** If you aren't sure you'll be able to attend a game or make a special event happen, don't promise. Be honest and tell your child that you will do your very best. Better a surprise appearance than a disappointing no-show.
- **Replace what is taken away.** Friendships, music choices, TV favorites even video games should all be subject to mom and dad's approval. If you have to say "no" to something they have chosen, make every effort to substitute a better alternative. Leaving a void creates an open doorway for the enemy. (Note: Try to say "yes" as often as possible so that your "no" will have more impact.)
- **Laugh! Laugh! Laugh!** Laughter is not only good for us physically, it is also emotionally healing. Be sure to set a standard of laughing *with* one another, never *at* anyone. Then tell the funny stories again and again, rent comedy videos to watch as a family, or buy a joke book and let the children read them to you. The knock-knock joke may be stale, but your laughter is affirming and warms the heart of your child. It tells them that you are their biggest fan.

Joshua 4 points out the value of creating memories. God instructed the children of Israel to take twelve stones from the bottom of the Jordan River and build an altar specifically for the purpose of reminding future generations of the miracle crossing. With some purposeful planning, you too can create positive remembrances for your children that will stay with them for years to come.

What are two traditions your family has developed? (These may be attached to Christmas, Easter, birthdays or any special day.)

Tell of a time when God "showed up" with a miracle for your family.

What is a favorite memory moment that your children enjoy telling?

► Create an atmosphere of connectedness!

The heart of every human being desires to be a part of something bigger and more important than themselves. There is no higher calling than that of winning and discipling those who were once far from God. If we see Christian leadership as a great privilege, then it is much easier to express and pass it on to our children.

Dr. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, beautifully expresses the importance of understanding the difference between a “farming” society and a “consumer” society. Years ago, most families were agrarian; nearly everyone worked on a family farm. Having many children in one family was seen as a blessing because each child was assigned a particular task which had to be done if the farm was to succeed.

Everyone contributed to the success of the family, which gave even young children a sense of purpose, belonging and importance. The youngest cared for chickens and brought in the eggs, older ones helped with meals, some assisted with planting or harvesting. Along the way, skills were learned, relationships were nurtured, and character was forged. Man is created to do valued work.

Most families today are part of a consumer society which is totally different. Children are viewed as either a decoration or even a detriment. They are very smart and quickly adapt to the notion that life is all about them. They seldom are able to articulate what they feel, but it becomes abundantly clear that they are not here to contribute, they are here to consume. Dance classes, year-round sports events, piano lessons, tennis lessons, tutoring; all are seen as draining to the family budget and energies. There is seldom ever time for a family meal together because of the frenzied activities. And we as parents are the ones responsible for creating that insatiable thirst for constant entertainment. Of course we want every advantage and opportunity for our children but there is wisdom in the discipline of balance—not to mention peace.

A chicken in the back yard is not an option with our homeowners association. But it is still possible to creatively provide children with tasks that give them value and demonstrate their contribution to the family unit. These “jobs” should be genuine and should increase in responsibility as the child matures, thus marking the child’s increasing abilities. Bottom line? Contributing children complain less.

- **Reinstate family meals;** even if only a couple of times per week. Studies show that children who sit down and eat with their parents do significantly better in school (chicken fingers and mac-n-cheese qualify). An online resource, like e-mealz.com, is a helpful tool for meal planning on a budget.
- **Identify tasks that genuinely help,** and then expect them to be completed. Some should be marked with verbal praise; others with a more tangible reward. Provide your child with the opportunity to *earn* those lessons or special privileges. You may be pleasantly surprised.
- **Pray together as a family** over age-appropriate needs, then record the answers. If we teach them to talk to God about boo-boos and pets, they will continue talking to God when the stakes are higher.
- **Give your children opportunity to be part of local church life.** Again, this must be graduated and age-appropriate, but ministry “helpers” become exceptional leaders in later life.

Finally, work through the issue of change. If transition is coming, don't allow your children to be the last to know. Change is usually unsettling for children. They need the assurance that you are in this together. If they are old enough to hold a confidence, entrust them with the information before announcements are made and process it with them. If not, make sure that they hear it from you first, not someone else.

Connectedness and trust are building blocks that make families strong.

Give one activity or habit you share that is unique to your family.

How have you handled transition?

What says to your children that you are a solid, connected unit? (This may be a good question to ask them directly.)

► Expectations, Seasons and Boundaries! Oh My!

Many current leaders grew up as the proverbial “p.k.” or “d.k.” (preacher’s or deacon’s kid). There once was an era when proving a leader’s calling lay in their willingness to sacrifice all—especially family—in order to fulfill or prove the call. It was also commonly accepted knowledge that p.k.’s or d.k.’s were the worst behaved children in the church. Sons and daughters were regularly reminded that it was their job to **not** bring a bad light on their parents’ ministry. Pleasing Dad and pleasing the congregation were often equated with pleasing God. That is an explosive recipe!

Fortunately, most church members today do not have those same expectations. And grace has come to even the Pentecostal leader’s home, praise God! But effects are lingering for this line of thinking, and many unspoken expectations exist for the woman minister which cannot be ignored.

Mothers in today’s world deal with copious amounts of guilt and uncertainty. No matter how much we try to do for our family, there is always something more that was left undone; that is a *universal* truth. The life journey of most women is littered with examples of broken relationships, unreliable role models, and shattered trust.

Now add to all that a sense of calling on one’s life to win the lost and it is no wonder so few women take on leadership roles in ministry. What woman in her right mind would willingly subject herself to an even higher standard of responsibility?

But God’s promises are true:

“My grace is sufficient for you. . .” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

“. . . my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9b).
“My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).

Our first job is to set things in proper order:

1. Our personal relationship with God
2. Our marriage
3. Our children
4. Our ministry or work.

When these priorities are clearly established in our thinking and articulated for the people we serve, we can make decisions more easily and peace rules instead of fear. Not only does this make living to minister possible, it also models for others a feasible plan of service to God for their family as well.

In their excellent book, *Boundaries*, authors Henry Cloud and John Townsend provide practical guidelines for developing a balanced way of living. They teach the reader that it is appropriate to answer, “No” when over-commitment threatens or when the expectations of others are unrealistic.

We are not called to single-handedly win the entire world to Christ. When Jesus ascended into heaven, many still needed healing, and most of the world knew nothing of Him. Yet, He clearly stated that His work was complete and He returned to the Father without guilt. This matter of sharing the gospel is a team effort! That has been God’s plan from the beginning of time.

It is important for a woman to understand the unique role of “seasons” in her life. Choosing to devote a year focusing on small children or reducing one’s hours for a semester of tutoring a middle school child does not diminish a woman’s role as leader. It is simply a season of her overall life which will pass all too quickly.

There is a great piece of home-spun advice: “Pay now—Play later. Play now—Pay later. If you choose the latter, it is always more expensive.”

Women in leadership should never feel guilty about putting the interest of their children ahead of their leadership role. If we pay the price of investing heavily during their formative years, we will undoubtedly reap a great harvest in later years. Children of Christians do not become Christians themselves by default. That life must be intentionally cultivated.

What was a situation in your childhood that made you feel like a priority to your parents?

What realistic boundaries have you established for your ministry?

How does your church leadership express their understanding of your dual role as mother/leader?

► Conclusion

Rearing godly children is not only possible, it can be enjoyable! It is vitally important that we help children see the blessings and benefits of growing up in a Christian home. Sons and daughters should never be made to feel that they must *compete* with God for the attention of their parents. Instead, we help them to see how their lives have profited from this distinctive existence. Everything from missions trips to shared meals should be marked with joy and celebration.

Dr. James Dobbins, founder of Emerge Ministries, teaches a sobering concept. He believes it is the responsibility of every true Christian to reproduce themselves at least once. We are entrusted with the dual task of *telling* the good news and *living* like Christ in this world. If we do not raise at least one voice to replace our own, then eventually the message of Christ will be silenced with us. What a powerful thought!

We have all heard stories of parents inadvertently leaving a child asleep on the front pew in the church while they started home. Most of those stories end with one terribly frightened and embarrassed parent and lots of laughter at their expense. But this matter of bringing our children with us on the Christian journey is a serious matter. We don't want to ever "leave them behind" in this most important aspect of life.

Perhaps the best advice for us all is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-7: "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 upon 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."

Can it be any simpler than that? We love the Lord with all our hearts, we make Him the central part of our family's everyday lives in a natural way and then we trust Him to draw our children to himself. Now **that** is a parenting plan we can all employ!

How can we help our children to know they have our attention and do not have to compete?

What are some small ways we can bring our children with us on the Christian journey—ensuring they are never left behind?

The Lord asks us to let His commandment to love Him and love each other be upon our hearts and in our lives (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). What does this look like in the daily life of your house?

Recommended Resources

Cloud, Henry and Townsend, John. *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992.

About the Author



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