

INTRODUCTION: High Hopes

I had high hopes for the mom I thought I'd be.

For starters, I had a happy childhood, with parents who loved me and led me well. My dad was a pastor, and my mom had a vibrant relationship with God, and together they faithfully taught me—in word and deed—about the love of God in a way that I was eager to emulate in my own parenting. Then, when Mike and I discovered I was pregnant, I quickly bought several parenting books and did my fair share of highlighting and under-lining within them. Combining my upbringing and my reading, and a fair dose of determination, I entered parenthood feeling sufficiently equipped to train and discipline and disciple my children, because I've (mostly) been able to accomplish whatever I've set my mind to. Parenting shouldn't be any different, I figured. I mean, how hard can this be?

But then I had children. Three boys in five years, to be exact. Real, moving, breathing, human beings. People who needed me, all of me, all of the time. They needed me to be selfless and kind and patient. They needed me to be all-knowing and awesome. They needed me to be flawless. And they needed all of this while affording me no sleep. Why didn't they care that I needed sleep? I couldn't be awesome when I was exhausted.

It didn't take long for me to discover that the mom I thought I'd be was not the mom I was. This parenting thing was no joke. The formula I applied to the three very unique boys I was desperate to do well by was failing miserably.

While my kids ran circles around me, self-condemning thoughts ran through my mind, convincing me that my weaknesses made me unqualified to raise the children God had entrusted to me, and my failures made me unworthy of God's pleasure in me.

I wouldn't dare share my struggles with any of the moms around me who seemed to have the whole parenting thing mastered. All the while, shame seeped deeper into the crevices of my heart. And the joy with which I always thought I'd parent was mostly displaced by worry and fear.

I couldn't see then what God is helping me see now—how it is actually our awareness of our weaknesses that qualifies us for motherhood and keeps us fit for the children God has given us to love and nurture. How our shortcomings remind us to keep our children's eyes fixed on God, not on ourselves. How our struggles are a glorious display of God's greatness, not our own. No, I didn't understand any of that when I first became a mom.

Instead, the pressure to achieve unachievable perfection was on, and I was cracking underneath it. And I know I'm not the only one.

My fellow mom, we are under so much pressure. We feel the *pressure to be perfect* for our kids, the *pressure to perform* for the approval of God, and the *pressure to pretend* we have it all together with other moms. And this pressure leaves us stuck in some pretty awful places and patterns.

But here's the Good News. I believe we can walk in freedom and find relief from the pressure. In fact, I *know* we can! Relief from the pressure that seeks to weigh us down and wipe us out has been freely and generously given to us in the Good News of God's grace. God is inviting us to lay all that pressure down and thrive in what He has actually entrusted to us. He is inviting us to focus on *who He is* rather than *what we aren't!*

He is inviting us to live in freedom *so we can* parent in freedom.

In my previous book, *Parenting the Wholehearted Child*, I wrote about how we can raise children who live in the freedom of being wholeheartedly loved (and liked!) by God in Jesus Christ. It's a very practical book about how to parent with grace.

But after traveling the country to speak at parenting conferences and women's retreats over the last several years since this book was published, I discovered I wasn't the only mom who'd been trying to parent *with* grace without living *in* grace—without first accepting the grace of God for me, in all of my weakness, sin, and shortcomings. And I discovered I wasn't the only one who struggled to believe God wasn't disappointed in me when I failed to reflect His heart to my children.

It was that discovery that inspired me to write this book.

Friend, to give our kids grace we have to believe and accept God's grace for us! Because we can't give what we haven't received.

Becoming the mom we want to be doesn't happen by trying harder to be better tomorrow. Becoming the mom we want to be for our children happens as we remember and rest in who Jesus has already been for us! It happens by more deeply believing that the Gospel is for *us*.

Freedom is for *each and every one of us*. God's grace— His unwavering love, unrestrained affection, unconditional acceptance, and unending forgiveness—is given freely and generously in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23–24).

So, *together* we will dive into the bottomless well of God's love for us, we will silence our inner merciless critic, and we will anchor our identities in Christ. We will be set free to live—and parent—in the fullness and abundance of His grace.

Together, we will explore scriptures that reveal how so many of the things we are trying to control are ultimately God's work in our child's life. We will see that we have the privilege of

being an instrument of God in that work rather than carrying the responsibility to accomplish that work. We will see that it's ultimately the Holy Spirit's *heart work* not a parent's *hard work* that produces the fruit of the Spirit in our children's lives. And we will see that our job is not to *be* God; it's to point our children *to* God.

We can stop striving and start thriving in God's grace.

How does God's grace impact our parenting? God's grace frees us *from*:

- shame over our parenting mistakes
- unrealistic expectations of ourselves and our kids
- trying to transform our children's hearts
- manufacturing godly character in our children's lives
- anxiety over whether our children will put their faith in Christ
- feeling like we're not enough
- being defined by our children's success or failure
- using anger or fear to force our children to obey
- fearing that God is disappointed with us when we fail
- worrying that our children will take advantage of grace
- striving to be our children's perfect example and savior

God's grace frees us *to*:

- give our kids the same extravagant grace that Jesus gives us
- be honest about our weaknesses and our need for Christ
- rely on God to melt and mold our children's hearts
- trust the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit in our children's lives

- plant our hope in Christ as the “Author and Perfecter” of our children’s faith
- rest in the confidence that Christ *in us* is enough
- anchor our, and our children’s, identity in the work of Christ
- weave unconditional love into how we instruct and discipline our kids
- receive the forgiveness of Christ and generously extend it to our kids
- trust that God is sovereign and faithful to His promises
- point our kids to Christ as their perfect example and Savior

All of this is available to each of us, and you, dear mom, are not the exception.

This is an invitation to receive grace, enjoy grace, and soak in grace—because the grace we soak in is the grace that seeps out.

My sincere hope and belief is that this will be a transformative journey that will empower us all to breathe more deeply, walk more lightly, and discover fresh joy in our parenting. Because, on this journey, we will discover that parenting isn’t “Do your best, and God will do the rest.” God already gave us His best in the person and work of Jesus. We get to rest in *that!* “He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making” (Ephesians 1:7 MSG).

Eugene Peterson writes this about his Christian faith: “It looks like I’m going to need to let go of what I expected and enter a mystery.” I think the same can be said about our parenting. If we want to enjoy the journey, we’ll need to let go of those unrealistic expectations we had of ourselves and our kids, and dive into the deep mystery of parenting with open hands and trusting hearts.

So let's not wait another second! And what better place to begin our journey together than in prayer:

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 your 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. Now all glory to God, who is able, through His mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to Him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

—Ephesians 3:16–21 NLT

Chapter 1: The Pressure to Be Enough

The Freedom to Rely on the “Enough-ness” of Christ

During my first pregnancy, I can clearly remember people—friends and strangers alike—telling me how much I would love being a mom. How I would love my son *so much* that I would feel like my heart would burst. And they were right. The moment the nurse laid my newborn son’s bare body on my chest and I felt his heart beat against mine, I knew there was nothing in this world I wouldn’t do for him. My instantaneous love for him overwhelmed me.

That newborn baby is now a teenager, and I am *still* caught off guard by how the very sight of him, along with his three younger brothers, slays me.

However, what I *don’t* remember anyone telling me before my first son was born is that motherhood would not only enlarge my heart but it would also expose all my weaknesses and inadequacies, and that there would be days when I’d feel so desperate that I wouldn’t even recognize myself. I didn’t see *that* coming. I didn’t expect that motherhood would reveal both the beautiful and the not-so-beautiful parts of my heart.

What I Wish I’d Known

I recently attended a baby shower for a young woman named Nicole. She was a soon-to-be first-time mom and a woman I very much admire and adore. To call her wise beyond her years would be an understatement.

The shower was a joyous occasion, as all baby showers are, but the joy at this shower was palpable. Nicole and her husband, Jimmy, had long prayed and hoped for this “miracle baby” whom we were all eager to embrace and celebrate.

However, just about halfway through the celebration, I felt a strong inclination to pull my friend aside and warn her that parenting isn't all petits fours, pink lemonade, and filtered Instagram photos. Perhaps it was because I was on the tail end of a very defeating week of parenting. The kind where my joy was lost in the battles. Failures outweighed victories. Fighting trumped kindness. All my intentionality felt worthless. And I was mentally and physically wiped out.

You'll be happy to know I didn't ruin the shower. I focused on the gift this child will be to Nicole and Jimmy. But soon thereafter, Nicole and I grabbed coffee and, because I love her, I shared with her some of the things I wish I'd known as a new mom.

I said things like:

This parenting thing is hard. Really hard. And there will be a lot of mornings when you want to pull the covers over your head and stay in bed because you don't have the mental, physical, or emotional strength to meet the demands of the day and be the mom you want to be.

And when you do muster up the strength to put your feet on the floor and take that one next step, you will want to say, with the little energy you can summon, "Who wants to play hide and seek? Doesn't that sound like fun! Okay, so you go hide, and be sure to find a really great spot where I've never found you before, and Mommy will come look for you after I count to five hundred." Yes, you will do this because you are falling apart. It won't mean you don't love your children with all you have. It just means you're human. And that's okay.

And you will make mistakes. Lots of them. And you will have regrets. Big ones.
And you will need Jesus like you've never needed Him before!

But, girlfriend, what I most want to tell you is this: On the days when you feel like you're *not enough*, hold on tight to the truth that you have a Savior who *is enough*. And what is hard for you is not hard for Him! So run to Him. Rely on Him. Depend on Him.

Isn't *that* what we most want to hear?

We all need another mom to affirm the “crazy” we feel. We need to know that we're not the only one whose fierce love for our children coexists with feelings of failure and desperation.

We all need another mom to remind us—over and over again—that we have a powerful God who has given us His perfect son, Jesus Christ. And He is our enough.

The Relief God Promises

When we're feeling pushed far beyond our human limitations, and we look in the mirror only to find our face worn and weary with the day's demands, we can turn to God's Word and read the relief God promises.

O Jacob, how can you say the Lord does not see your troubles?

O Israel, how can you say God ignores your rights?

Have you never heard?

Have you never understood?

The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of all the earth.

He never grows weak or weary.

No one can measure the depths of his understanding. He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion.

But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.

They will soar high on wings like eagles.

They will run and not grow weary.

They will walk and not faint.

(40: 27–31 NLT)

Did you get all that? There's a lot of *relief* packed into this passage:

- God does not lose track of us.
- God very much cares what happens to us.
- God's knowledge and understanding cannot be measured.
- God never grows weak or weary.
- He knows everything. Every. Single. Thing.
- He gives power to the weak.
- He gives strength to the powerless.

What we learn through the words of Isaiah is that *who God is*, which is sovereign, and *what He gives us*, which is grace, is enough. And He wants us to trust Him. When we're exhausted—both mentally *and* physically—He wants us to rely on Him to be all that we need.

He wants us to recognize that parenting is actually meant to—*designed to*—deepen our dependence on Him. He is wooing our hearts closer and closer to His in and through our kids.

God actually has a simple but profound message for us regarding our quest to be *enough*. In Psalms 46:10, His voice breaks through and proclaims, “Be still and know that I am God.”

I have clung to this verse for years. In fact, I most love the New American Standard translation that says, “Cease striving and know that I am God.” I’ve recently discovered something that makes this verse even more meaningful to me. The Hebrew meaning for “be still” is “*enough*.” Oh, how profound this is for our lives and for our parenting. He is saying, *Enough of trying to be enough!*

The Squeeze of Vertical and Horizontal Pressure

Whether you’re in the middle of raising tiny babies, tantruming toddlers, tenacious teenagers, or adult kids, you’re likely well acquainted with the hopeless feeling of being “not enough” for your children. But here’s the thing. As we seek to overcome the pressure we feel to be enough for our kids, we also have to take an honest look at the pressure we feel to be enough for God. See, most of us aren’t just trying to be enough for our kids, which is the horizontal pressure we feel. We’re also trying to be enough for God, and that’s the vertical pressure I want us to talk about honestly on this journey together.

Do you ever fear (or maybe the better question is, how *often* do you fear?) that you are disappointing God with your personal failures and your parenting mistakes? That pressure usually leads us to do one of two things. With clenched fists and gritted teeth, we *try harder* to keep God happy and not lose His love and acceptance. Or, we *give up* because we assume God

has given up on us. Neither of which draws us closer to His heart, where He wants us to hear Him saying, “I don’t need you to impress me. I want you to rely on me.”

And when it comes to parenting—where we experience the horizontal pressure to prove we’re enough—we just keep searching for newer and better ways to control our child’s behavior, secure our child’s success, or change our child’s heart. And none of it works—at least, not for long.

Is it any wonder that under all this pressure we *crack*?

Are you tired of being the mom who is barely stumbling along, crushed under the pressure to be “enough”? Are you tired of feeling that you can’t catch your breath, can’t keep up, and can’t be all that your children need you to be? *Are you tired of being tired?*

I get it.

The Enough-ness of Christ

I spent entirely too long trying to prove to myself, to God, and to everybody around me that I was enough. Only in recent years have I begun to understand what Paul meant when he said that in our pursuit to be enough, we deny and reject the work of Christ—it’s as if “Christ died for nothing” (Galatians 2:21 NIV). In other words, if we ever had a *shot* at being enough, then everything Jesus endured on our behalf to reconcile us to God was pointless. God never called us to be enough. Not for Him and not for our kids. Not for our spouse and not for our church. He calls us to be loved. To be His beloved. This title has been gifted to us and can never be taken away from us. All because of Jesus. So we can stop trying to be enough because Jesus was, and is, our more than enough.

So the next time we wrestle with the question “Am I enough?” rather than try to justify our enough-ness, let’s see our question as a cue to re-call the preeminence of Christ in our lives and our daily mothering. We can unashamedly proclaim, as Charles Spurgeon once said, “*I have a great need for Christ. I have a great Christ for my need.*” It is only in this confession—“I have a great need for Christ”—that we are relieved from the guilt of not being all we desire to be for our kids. It is then that we become grateful for all that Christ already is for them.

Jesus freed us from trying to prove that we are enough. He lived a sinless life, died a sinless death, conquered the grave, and has freely given us His perfect record (Romans 3:23–25 NIV). When we are in Christ, there is nothing to prove. Let *that* sink into your weary and worn-out soul.

We get to rest in the assurance of God’s grace and His sov-ereignty over us and over the kids we long to love and lead well. We are free!

An Invitation

Rest assured, when I say “We are free” I don’t mean we’ve been given an excuse to be a lazy or lousy parent. This is not a permission slip to give up. This is not an *out*. This is an *in*.

An invitation to:

- lay down what God has not asked us to carry so we thrive in what He has
- embrace our significance in light of God’s sovereignty
- discover God’s acceptance of us and affection for us, just as we are
- receive God’s grace so we can reflect God’s heart to our kids
- stop trying so hard and start enjoying our kids more
- weave grace into how we discipline our kids

- trust God with the kids He has entrusted to us
- become more of the mom we long to be for our kids

An invitation to trust that “everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received!” (2 Peter 1:3–4 MSG).

We have been personally invited—by name—to walk in freedom from the pressure to be “enough”—for our children *and* for God.

Let’s turn now to see how this freedom applies to some of the immense pressure we face in our daily mothering!