

Praise for *Be the Best Mom You Can Be*

“Marina and Gregory Slayton have written a great book for moms. *Be the Best Mom You Can Be* will help mothers of all types to raise up their families in healthy and positive ways despite all the craziness in the world around us. I heartily recommend this book for moms and even for dads who want to help their wives to be the best moms they can be.”

— Eric Metaxas, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Miracles* and *Bonhoeffer*

“The challenges facing today’s families are substantial. We moms must face those challenges head on with wisdom, love, and joy. Marina and Gregory Slayton bring more than twenty-five years of wisdom, love, and joy to this great book, which will be a blessing to every mom who reads it. Building on Gregory’s international bestseller *Be a Better Dad Today*, *Be the Best Mom You Can Be* is a wonderful book for all of us twenty-first century moms.”

— US Senator Kelly Ayotte
(R-NH)

“My dear friends Marina and Gregory Slayton have written an international bestseller for dads; *Be a Better Dad Today* has sold more than 150,000 copies worldwide in just three years. But this next book for moms may be even better. Written primarily by Marina who has both researched the subject carefully and has more than twenty-five years as a mother of four great kids, this is a wonderful book for all moms who are looking for the wisdom, the faith, and the strength they need to be the best moms they can be.

This is a beautiful book written from the heart, showing moms how a life lived in Christ can heal and transform all that goes before it. This book will help moms and dads to raise stronger, wiser, and more virtuous children. I highly recommend this great work.”

— Fr. Jonathan Kalisch, OP
Priest in Residence, Saint
John Paul II National
Shrine, Washington, DC

“I love this book! It is exactly what today’s moms need to tackle the real issues we face. Marina and Gregory help us apply biblical wisdom to specific, real-life situations. An excellent, timely book. Highly needed and strongly recommended.”

— Dr. Leslie Parrott, author of
*You Matter More Than You
Think*

BE THE BEST MOM YOU CAN BE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO RAISING WHOLE
CHILDREN IN A BROKEN GENERATION

MARINA SLAYTON
AND GREGORY W. SLAYTON



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BOOKS

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*For Gregory, Sasha, Christian, Daniel,
and Nicholas . . . always*

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Foreword

by Cathy McMorris Rodgers

I love being a wife and mother. I also love the honor of serving as an elected official; it is a great joy and a true privilege. And being a senior member of House leadership is something I never dreamed of happening to me. I know in my heart that both those public roles will eventually come to an end, but my role as mother in my loving and caring family will never come to an end. It is my greatest joy, my most important role, and the greatest gift that God has given to me.

But these days it is tougher and tougher for moms and dads to build strong and loving families. We live in difficult times, in a broken culture. Many of us come from fractured homes. The path to happy families is not easy to find. That's why I love this book.

Today too many moms feel stressed and inadequate facing the challenges of motherhood in the twenty-first century. We can be so overwhelmed by juggling the “tyranny of the trivial”—work in or out of the house, meals, cleaning, bills, carpooling,

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soccer practices, SATs, shopping, renovations, homework, and so much more—that we can forget to build a family on the foundations of love and faith.

The sad reality is that in today's society motherhood is much less valued than it was just two generations ago. These challenges can quickly drown out what is most important: nurturing, enjoying, and building our families. For many of us the biggest question is how to remain joyful in the face of these challenges. How do we remain focused on what is truly important in our lives and the lives of our families? And how do we build our families to be bastions of love, wisdom, and strength for all family members? This book helps us moms do just that.

All moms need help to be the best mothers they can be. Marina Slayton, along with her husband Gregory, has written that kind of book. *Be the Best Mom You Can Be* is a truly helpful, deeply practical book for moms everywhere. Many years of research and more than twenty-five years of parenting four wonderful children have inspired this book. Through reading it, we moms will be better equipped to handle the great challenges we all face.

Marina learned how to be a good mom without her own mom's help. This is the case for many who learn how to be good moms without good examples. This inspirational and highly personal book is a resource for us as we help our families navigate through the brokenness around us. The outside world pushes onto us questions of sex, drugs, and societal expectations. Inside, we must fight insecurity and even our own aspirations for our children. Marina speaks to these challenges in a clear, step-by-step fashion.

The greatest gift we can give our children is a sense of

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belonging, a place in the family and from there a place in the world. Marina and Gregory provide clear wisdom in how to build this wholeness from the brokenness surrounding us. They have raised their kids not to be overwhelmed by the challenges all around us. This book will help all us moms to raise our children with wisdom, joy, and love. I thank my friends Gregory and Marina for writing this book. And I hope it will be a true blessing to you and yours as it has been to ours.

—The Honorable C. M. R.

Introduction

If you are like most moms (including me!) you probably feel stress and insecurity facing the challenges of being a mom in the twenty-first century. We want to raise kids who will go on to live loving, productive lives. And we would like to feel content and hopeful while we build into our families. But our desires are often complicated by busy lives, little or no support from our extended families, and our increasingly dysfunctional culture.

Wherever you are in your life, there is no person or family beyond God's ability to redeem. If there were, I would not be writing these words. I could be dead because my mother took drugs to abort me. I could be divorced because I bailed out on all my relationships before Gregory. I could have a terrible relationship with my four children because of my own upbringing. The fact that none of these has happened is proof of the redeeming

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power of Jesus—not because I have the ability to create life from death. None of us does.

Instead of feeling stressed and insecure about our families, God has created us to be hopeful, joyful, and peaceful as moms. So how do we face the challenges of modern-day motherhood with joy, hope, and peace? How do we raise our kids not to break in the face of the brokenness around us? I have wrestled with these questions for more than twenty-five years.

Moms matter. What we do will be remembered long after we are gone. Our lives are our greatest legacy to our children and their children's children. The world wants to label us and establish our identity by using those labels. But God wants us to know and be confident of our identity in Him. God knows each and every one of us by name. We are not alone in our motherhood journey. Jesus is with us each and every step of the way.

The intent of this book is to help us build our families on His strong foundations of faith, wisdom, and love. There are no pony tricks to being a good mom, no “one-size-fits-all” rules that work for every family. This reality makes it imperative for moms to process our specific situations in life by asking the right questions and seeking meaningful answers. By highlighting the most pressing questions facing moms today, I want to help you discern how you can raise your kids well in a broken world. We cannot shy away from these issues because the world does not shy away from them. At the end of each chapter, I have designed a series of purposeful questions in order to help you process your unique situation wisely. With wisdom and grace we can raise whole kids even in our broken culture—all while living in hope, joy, and peace.

ELUSIVE PERFECTION

I was raised by a broken mother, but I did not become a broken mom to my children. Perfection has eluded me, but love has not. Gregory and I have four children, ages twenty-five to fourteen. Like most families, we have lived through the best of times and the worst of times. I would count this season of my life as inhabiting both those realities. In 2012 my husband and I traveled to China on business, and I came down with a devastating virus that has not left my system. While battling exhaustion caused by the virus, I've also had to deal with what my physician says is permanent facial nerve damage. I usually brush my teeth with my back to the mirror so I don't feel discouraged at the beginning of the day. The love that Gregory and our four children—Sasha, Christian, Daniel, and Nicholas—have shown me through this challenging season is a tangible reflection that God is love no matter our circumstances, no matter our brokenness.

I am convinced that today, more than ever, moms require deep wisdom to deal with the brokenness all around us and within us. I discovered that I would have to seek healing for my own brokenness so I could raise children who are capable of leading whole lives. We all desire to be moms who thrive and not just survive. And we want the same for our children. We do this by acquiring both wholeness and wisdom so we are victors instead of victims. Our heavenly Father lovingly provides this healing wisdom over time to all who are willing to hear Him.

Motherhood is a humbling journey. Through being moms (and wives—but that is discussion for a different book) we learn about ourselves and who we truly are—and not how we hope the outside world sees us. We cannot hide from our true selves

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among our family members. Frankly, it has been in my family life that I discovered all the areas of my life that need God's healing touch. Being a single, professional woman through most of my twenties meant I focused mostly on developing my life. Not a bad thing, but I simply did not understand the process of the "iron sharpening iron" metaphor until I married. It has been in partnership with my wonderful husband and terrific kids that who I am at my very core has been revealed to me.

I thought I would take to motherhood as a duck takes to water, so the challenges that naturally come with motherhood were somewhat of a shock to me. I guess I thought it would be about baking cookies, reading books, and going on picnics and trips. Everything I love with everyone I love. But the reality of motherhood is that it brings all of a mom's experiences and feelings to the fore, and if those experiences and feelings have been wounded, inner healing becomes mandatory if we don't want to repeat going down that same path of hurt and pain.

It is God's desire to bring wholeness not only to us as moms but also to our children. Wholeness arising from brokenness is the story of many moms I know, and it is my own story. I had to learn how to be an emotionally and spiritually healthy mom to my children. I have worked hard to equip my kids with the wisdom and discernment to stand up to the tough moral and ethical situations that all our children now face in our twenty-first-century culture.

Mothers require courage, wisdom, and spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10–17). Even if our families are whole, we have to deal with the extensive spiritual and emotional brokenness of this day and age. The cultural pressures our children face and the foolishness they see all around them are far beyond anything

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most of us experienced in our own youth. We must help our children deal with this cultural tsunami. We must prepare them to deal with the rising trend in our culture of calling foolish or even dangerous behavior wise or appropriate. Moms have the full resource and spiritual armor of God as we build into our families. Truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the sword of the Spirit have all been made available to us to counteract the prevailing cultural winds.

PARENTAL INSECURITY

Like many in our generation, I have experienced deep insecurity in my “performance” as a mom. Parental anxiety is an ever-present reality for many moms, and it is leading many to become so-called helicopter parents. These moms hover over and protect their children to such an extent that the children frequently grow up to be helpless and narcissistic. We have to ask what our insecurity is doing to our children.

Many moms are anxious, and their children, in turn, are filled with anxiety. Our own ambitions and the fear of not measuring up to impossible societal standards are feeding this anxiety. The tendency to focus on ourselves to the detriment of our families and communities has been percolating for decades. It arises because we desire worldly accomplishments above all else; this is how our society validates us as good moms. Therefore we are raising our kids to want to be famous, to have a lot of material goods, and to be the envy of their generation. This is the opposite of what God wants for our kids. Our heavenly Father wants our children to be people of character, competence, and commitment. Proverbs 16:16 instructs us that wisdom is to

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be desired above gold—that is to say, your character (who you are) is more important than worldly success (what you do). Yes, we all want kids who succeed in life, but ultimately we have to surrender our definition of *success* to the Lord. Our legacy to our children must focus on helping them develop wisdom and wholeness so that they can deal with the pain, the joy, and the messiness of life.

In the Old Testament there is a saying in Ezekiel 16:44: “Like mother, like daughter.” It is imperative for us moms to work through our own personal issues, not only for ourselves but also for our spouses and children. We don’t want our kids to fall into broken behavior, so it is imperative that we are honest about our own brokenness and the brokenness of our culture and that we equip ourselves with the wisdom to effectively deal with these issues.

INSPIRATION FOR MOMS

Every day I ask our heavenly Father to help me love my family, to give me the wisdom to be a good mom, and to fill my heart with prayer. Family life can be challenging because we are dealing with the realities of human nature, both our own and our family members’. There are days, and even entire seasons, when I struggle to be the best mom I can be. No matter the circumstances or my mood, through seeking God in His Word and in prayer I try to put myself in a position where the Holy Spirit can encourage me and inspire me to press on. And that can make all the difference.

Through faith, I have come to believe that the Bible holds the wisdom we need to raise wise, virtuous children in a fractured

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generation. God can truly speak to us through His Word. Careful, daily study of the Bible has supported me through some of the most challenging seasons of life. I have learned that we as moms can greatly benefit from the apostle Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17 NKJV). Prayer is the single greatest spiritual weapon we have as mothers. Continual prayer helps us deal not only with the challenges of our children but also with our own angst, wondering, *Am I doing this right?* To help us grow in the area of prayer, we will look much more at the power and purpose of prayer in the final chapter.

There are no quick tricks to mothering; there is only a daily resolution to commit yourself to the Lord and to your family, always asking for His grace. Our commitment to unconditional love is the basis of all good mothering. We all long for life's difficulties to be wrapped up in a pretty bow at the end; we all want to experience closure in our lives. But life is not a romantic novel, nor is it an hour-long television drama. On this side of heaven we will not always have the benefit of a happy ending. Yet children who witness their mom (and hopefully their dad) practicing biblical wisdom will be able to embrace life in all its complexity and grow to a mature understanding of reality—two of the greatest gifts we can give our kids.

GENERATIONAL BROKENNESS

I was born in New York City. My father, Sergei, was born in St. Petersburg in 1913 as part of the intelligentsia, the highly educated class of prerevolutionary Russia. He was an older man by the time my brother, Alex, and I were born. We called him Papa. My Polish-born mother, a much younger woman, had the

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unusual name of Bozena. She also came from an aristocratic background, and like my father, she was a victim of the turbulent and terrible events of the twentieth century. Separately they sought sanctuary on the shores of the United States as refugees from World War II Europe and the advent of Communism. They both came through Ellis Island and met in New York City. They were married in Manhattan in 1956.

Like many middle-class parents, my parents moved to the suburbs of New Jersey because they were unable to afford private schools for my brother and me in New York City. They commuted into the city for their jobs. My mom had defected from Communist Poland without receiving her university degree, so she cobbled a career in fashion that gave her both a commission and a pension. While she enjoyed fashion, she did not earn much. Her experience made her determined that I would have professional skills that would not leave me dependent on a husband for finances. My father had been a lawyer in Europe but became a structural engineer in New York because he lacked proficient English to pursue law in America. I think he was wistful of what might have been, but in the wake of the destruction of World War II he was grateful to start fresh in America and establish a stable foundation for his children. My parents labored without complaint to pay the mortgage and the hospital bills for my sick grandmother until she passed away. Ours was a fairly typical immigrant story.

My parents survived the horrors of war and did not emerge from those traumas unscathed. Their experiences did not lead them to faith; they could best be described as agnostic. At the same time, my parents used religion as one way of maintaining their disparate cultural traditions. I was raised as a Roman

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Catholic, following my mother's tradition. I remember the pretty white lace dress and the beautiful gold cross I received for communion. My father was Russian Orthodox, so my brother was confirmed in that tradition. We did not consistently go to either church as we grew up.

My mother was a wonderful hostess, one of the most charming I have ever known. Both of my parents were talented linguists; my mother spoke four languages and my father had command of six. They came from similar cultures that highly valued education and cultural pursuits. Even though they shared much in common, including tremendous personal suffering, my parents had a destructive marriage.

My mom grew up with a gambling father whose spendthrift ways forced her mother to pawn jewelry to buy milk for her. Stranded without money, my grandmother sent a telegram to her father for train fare home. My great-grandfather, a nobleman with a large estate outside Cracow, Poland, had pleaded with my grandmother not to marry the wastrel. But in a scene worthy of a Russian novel, my grandfather-to-be had whipped out a pistol and threatened to commit suicide if my beautiful grandmother did not consent to marriage. My gentle grandmother gave in, and the disaster prophesied by her father indeed came to pass. Deeply humbled, my grandmother returned with my mom to her family's estate—only to see her father die of pneumonia six months later.

My grandmother and my mother witnessed the catastrophic events of World War II from the city of Warsaw. My mom even participated in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 as a teenage courier. As a result, they were marched off by the Nazis to concentration camps prepared for the Polish Underground Army. These camps

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were adjacent to Auschwitz. Mom went through unimaginable horrors that broke her spirit in many ways.

My father was abandoned by his parents to an orphanage during the Russian Revolution. There he experienced things no child should. He ran in packs of children who hunted for cats and dogs to eat. He eventually rejoined his parents in Poland, where they had settled, only to live through World War II. My father lived in seven different countries before making his way to Ellis Island. Once there he had to start from scratch yet again.

My father eventually recovered because he knew how to forgive. My mother, on the other hand, never forgave. Her lack of forgiveness eventually destroyed her. She became an alcoholic, an adulteress, and an addict of tranquilizers. She simply could not overcome the traumas of her past. She did not know how to be a stable mom because she lacked any stability herself. But my mother did understand, thankfully, that family is essential and that sacrifice is part of life. So I was handed a mixed bag in terms of role models. Because of my parents' strong cultural traditions, I understood that building a family requires nurturing, support, and sacrifice. I knew that families are not built on dreams but through daily hard work. But I didn't understand how to build a happy and harmonious family because I did not have that experience growing up.

Being raised in a home filled with bitterness was deeply painful. My father retreated into the den to sleep and do his own thing. My mom threatened divorce with sad regularity. When I was twelve she told me that she had taken drugs to induce an abortion while she was carrying me. This was one of many deeply scarring memories I still carry from my childhood.

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As a result, I carried deep emotional wounds into my teenage years—wounds that I had no way to deal with. I became anorexic before anyone understood what it meant. I had quite a few boyfriends, always looking for love. I turned to school for validation and did well academically. I saved my money and traveled whenever I could; in fact, the happiest times I had with my parents were spent traveling, enjoying different cultures, expanding my knowledge of history, and eating terrific food. Not coincidentally, I now travel with my husband and children all the time, replicating the happiest moments of my childhood.

BECOMING A BELIEVER

I was not a Christian when I entered Amherst College, but I left a believer. These were the years when I was asking big philosophical questions about life, unencumbered by material concerns. This was also the late 1970s when feminism was in full swing. My female classmates were diverse and energetic. I enjoyed being around passionate women who were also asking big questions. They were committed to a cause beyond themselves.

Eventually I found the answers to my questions not in philosophy or religion but in a relationship with Jesus Christ. I was particularly influenced by a woman at college who was blind and suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. Her patience and peace in the face of suffering was inspiring. Her example stirred a desire in me to pursue a spiritual line of inquiry. I wanted to experience the same joy my friend had through various Bible studies on campus and spiritual retreats. Through her example and that of other dear friends whom I deeply respected, I became a Christian.

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After graduating from Amherst College, I went to Columbia University where I received two master's degrees. I went on to teach college-level English. After several years working in New York, I ended up in Boston running an adult literacy center and sitting on the Massachusetts Governor's Task Force for the Working Poor. I began to specialize in adult literacy, a work I found rewarding. Like the rest of my generation, I was pulled and pushed by the rapidly changing morality of our times. However, one great truth I realized early on: I believe in a relationship and not a religion. I have a personal relationship with Jesus. Without His help, I could not have survived, let alone thrived, in my life.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

I married my husband, Gregory, in 1989. We had been good friends since college. We met through an intercollegiate faith group while I was at Amherst College and he was at Dartmouth College. Gregory is a dynamic husband and father. Our three older children are beginning their adult lives. The oldest two have graduated from Ivy League schools, and our third is at SMU in Dallas. Our eldest daughter is a lieutenant in the US Army in South Korea. Our youngest son is a joy. I marvel that my husband and I have been able to build such a loving family life. We see this as a miraculous answer to prayer and a product of faith. The brokenness in my own life, and in my husband's life, has become an opportunity for grace and redemption.

Gregory is passionate about being a husband and father, and he is committed to mentoring the next generation through the ministry of fatherhood, family, and faith. He wrote the international bestseller *Be a Better Dad Today: Ten Tools Every Father*

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*Needs*¹ because we believe that families are worth fighting for. We cannot take the incredibly important ministry for granted, for it is written that before the great day of the Lord “He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents” (Mal. 4:6).

All of us go through struggles in life. But as Christians, we can be confident that Jesus Himself will be walking with us, guiding and loving us. In Christ we can trust that the end will be good, wherever we are on the journey today. Whether you are on your first step or near your last, we are created to walk with purpose and passion. With Christ’s help on the journey, we can become moms who have the wisdom to help our kids thrive despite the pervasive brokenness of this generation.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Ponder

God's Word

[To] all who mourn . . .
[he will] bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.
(Isa. 61:2–3)

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12–14)

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
(Prov. 31:30)

The Authors' Words

“Perfection has eluded me, but love has not.”

Assess

Honestly reflect on your own journey as a girl, a woman, and now a mother. Assess your own strengths and weaknesses in light of the Scriptures.

1. What do you want, both for yourself and your family?
2. What hindrances do you need to leave behind from your childhood?
3. What have you achieved thus far in your life?
4. In what ways do you feel that you are in a conversation with God?
5. What specific goals are you pressing on toward?
6. Have you taken the time to write your life story? How does your life story so far impact you as a wife and mother today?

Sum Up

Our legacy to our children will impact generations to come. Moms require the wisdom to raise kids who have character and a strong moral center. We begin this process by being confident of our identity in Christ and knowing that our lives have purpose and meaning.

One

A Wise Mom: Love Is the Foundation

Why start with love? Because we know that our children are growing up in a world that is increasingly devoid of affirming, life-giving love. After more than thirty-five years of walking in faith, I appreciate ever more deeply how profoundly rich are the tenets of our faith. We need to draw from these bed-rock truths as we confront the challenges facing families today. Let us begin by reminding ourselves what the apostle John wrote to a mother almost two thousand years ago: “I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love” (2 John 1:5–6). How wonderful it is to be ministers of love to our children, just as He ministers to us in love. The more I go on in faith, the more I realize the beautiful simplicity of our walk with Jesus.

However, there is a crisis of love in this generation. We all

recognize what has become a sadly pervasive truth: many parents don't feel love themselves and many families today are not able to show their own kids the love and guidance they so desperately need. As Leo Tolstoy wrote in his famous opening line in *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." This holds true today: love is the basis of every happy family. Obviously, expressions of love run the gamut, but in a happy family each family member knows that through the dramas and joys of life, he or she is loved.

My mom saw her life in the context of her own pain and suffering. A survivor of World War II and German concentration camps, she carried even deeper emotional wounds of rejection from when her father abandoned her mother and herself for a life of amusement and pleasure. My husband's family background was similarly complicated.

The Lord, in bringing Gregory and me together, demonstrated that He is more than able to build strong families even when we carry heavy burdens of family brokenness. We are examples that our heavenly Father can make families and marriages whole no matter what. God took a real risk in bringing the two of us together. On paper, we seemed a perfect match, with similar educational backgrounds. But internally we are both extremely sensitive to rejection and hurt. The fact that the Lord has worked in us to create a strong and happy family is a testimony to the fact that He is able to redeem anyone.

God's call to us is this: *Let Me minister to you My love*. This is where we find wholeness and peace. Stop looking to the world for validation because ultimately it is transitory and dissatisfying. The Lord taught me that we can all be freed from past broken behavior. We can gain the strength to create healthy, happy

families. We do not have to cave into the cultural pressures of our age. We do not have to fear making a decision because we are not sure of what to do next. Our journey begins by looking to God to guide us to the healing answers that give our lives meaning, love, and belonging. These, in turn, give us purpose and vision.

LOVE AS THE FOUNDATION

Before I became a Christian, I used the word *love* to justify relationships that were not healthy. I looked for love in places I should not, and I see now that I was looking for ways to satisfy the emptiness in me. I wanted to move from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and love gave me a feeling of transcendence that I so desired in a temporal world. And because I had not felt loved and protected in my childhood, I searched for love and made it my idol. I did not even understand what I meant by love because of my brokenness.

In my relationships prior to my marriage, I kept looking for validation through love. I eventually realized that while love may feel like sweetness and light at the start, over time it becomes a matter of discipline in the face of the difficult and the mundane. Like many in our culture, I idolized love in a dangerous way. I aspired to a Hollywood-type romantic love, not realizing the unrealistic promises of this media-inspired goal. Worshipping love is a cruel taskmaster because love becomes disposable when it no longer satisfies. I wanted a dream, but every time I entered a relationship I ended up with a human being.

This is not the biblical understanding of love at all. Before Gregory, none of my romantic relationships could withstand the

impact of reality. Fortunately God showed me compassion, and through the work of the Holy Spirit I learned to practice love even when my feelings were not falling into line. True love, I came to realize, has to be tied to a worldview higher than myself. It must be cultivated and outwardly practiced so that it survives even when immediate satisfaction is not evident. I also realized that my heart was not the unending source of love I needed it to be. It became clear that I required a source for the love I could not supply from within.

Just as with a lack of oxygen, we cannot survive without love. But oxygen has a source, as does love. Do you have a source of love that you can go to and draw from on a regular basis? Moms have at the ready an eternal and unlimited source of love that we can draw on whenever we need more in our own lives. This love in turn can flow to those who depend on us. This is where our faith as Christians is so valuable. Ultimately we can love others because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Do you know that you are loved and cherished? The strength and knowledge that this brings will give us the ability to weather the struggles of mothering. When I glimpsed the depth of Jesus' love for me, my brokenness was shattered and He could begin the redeeming healing so necessary in my life. His love supplies and feeds my great love for my family.

LOVE AS REDEEMER

As moms, love is something that is in our power to give, and it is what our children yearn for every day. The single greatest gift that you give your children is to love them; they will continuously draw from this well as they grow and mature. If

you poison this well with anger, bitterness, manipulation, or any number of toxins arising from your own brokenness, you will only perpetuate that same brokenness in their lives. But our God is the Redeemer whose heart is to save and heal all those who come to Him.

Our heavenly Father wants His people to experience redemption through healing and wholeness. That is possible for us all because of His love.

The basis of the Christian faith is that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Man and woman in the Garden of Eden were expressions of His love. But through disobedience, humanity went into exile from the loving and holy presence of God. Sin cannot exist in the presence of a holy God. We cannot relate to God on our own terms. Ultimately, it is only through the loving atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ, who bore our transgressions on the Cross at Calvary, that we can be reconciled to our eternal Father and brought into His eternal family: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

I had no problems recognizing I was a sinner. I know some struggle over the issue of sin but perhaps being raised by perfectionist parents ironically served a higher purpose in my life. What I could not envision was how to get from who I was to who I wanted to be. But God could, and He has done a great work in me and in my family. He can do that for you as well.

Whether you are in a family filled with faith, or quite the opposite, it is essential that you practice the discipline of love. A mom gets up at night to feed a crying baby, brushes her child’s teeth before her own, spends years being a taxi driver (without tips), and becomes an academic tutor for decades. A wife and

mom must take care of the home, cultivate her relationship with her husband, and then work on her own life. That's the core of motherhood: sacrificial love. It is beautiful and powerful. But it is not easy.

A WELL OF FORGIVENESS

Love is an invaluable source of forgiveness: "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). Our love for our families is a well of forgiveness. We are called to forgive regardless, but if we cultivate love we will forgive with freedom. Loving fully means that we give our children the sense of belonging and security they crave no matter their response. Love takes the shortcomings of others and releases God's power within us to forgive and even to bless. Love is the bedrock of all happy families.

Gloriously, Jesus tells us that our heavenly Father is Love. This is hard to fully fathom, but it's not just that our Father loves us; He is Love. All of us who need a fresh touch of love can meditate on the truth that our God is Love. So if you need more love in your life, ask Him to give you more. He appreciates it when His children ask for good gifts to be used to bless others.

What happens when we as parents choose not to follow the challenging but eternally rewarding path of love? The following poignant story will serve to illustrate the destruction that comes to a family that allows selfish tendencies to supplant sacrifice and love.

Our daughter attended a very competitive private school. Every year this school sent an incredible number of its students to all the best colleges. Yet my husband and I found that for all the great academics, the prevailing atmosphere of materialistic

consumption was difficult to deal with. As parents we tried hard to help our kids understand that life is not about having things but about faith.

Extreme affluence, however, was not the most challenging aspect of life in this school; rather, it was the rampant self-centeredness of many busy parents that led them to effectively abandon their kids. This is especially painful for teenagers, as they are highly unlikely to make a fuss or ask directly for help. That makes it easy for overly busy parents to emotionally abandon their teens. But parents are very much needed in the challenging teen years. It was so sad to see bright and talented ten-year-olds become surly, seen-it-all, dispirited sixteen-year-olds. Drug abuse and depression, even suicides, were far too common.

Kyra was my daughter Sasha's best friend from grades six through eight. Kyra entered sixth grade with a cheerful demeanor and beautiful long blonde hair. Her father was rarely around, but her mother was a stunning woman who seemed to have a perpetual smile. After several years in Palo Alto, we moved back to the East Coast in order to reverse certain negative patterns we had noted in our daughter. As we will discuss later in the book, changing your family's setting and subculture can be a wise parental strategy if your children are being overwhelmed by a negative or self-destructive situation.

In any event, Sasha was very lonely at our new home in Virginia, and she wanted to invite Kyra to visit for Christmas. We acceded to her wishes, confident that no mom would allow her only daughter of fourteen to be away for all of the Christmas holiday. Imagine our surprise when I spoke with Kyra's mom and found she was not only willing but enthusiastic about Kyra coming to stay with us for the entire Christmas holiday. Kyra stepped

off the plane having chopped off her glorious butter-colored hair and dyed it black. Kyra suddenly appeared hard and much older.

It was not a successful visit because Sasha, under the influence of her sad and angry friend, grew whiny and bitter. I am ashamed to say it, but I was relieved when Kyra flew home. Several months later Sasha came into our kitchen crying. Kyra's parents had called a family meeting. They sat Kyra and her older brother on the sofa and said, "Kids, we have a problem. We are getting a divorce and neither one of us wants to take either one of you." Gregory and I had long sensed all was not right in Kyra's family but their blatant disregard of the kids' needs and feelings shocked us to the core. We could only imagine the devastating impact it must have had on Kyra and her brother.

Sasha wanted to know if we could take Kyra. Of course we said yes, but we felt real internal tension. While we wanted to be loving and kind to our daughter's friend, we also wanted to be wise for our entire family. Ultimately we were responsible for Sasha and her brothers first and foremost. We believe 1 Corinthians 15:33: "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" Kyra's negative influence on my daughter was sadly evident, and we would not be able to protect Sasha if Kyra lived with us. But how could we reject a rejected child?

Ultimately, Kyra went to live with her grandmother. Today she is knocking around various cities, never having finished college, still looking for a place to belong.

Every child wants to know that he or she belongs. The root in *belongs* is *longs*; every child longs to be at the center of his or her mom's and dad's hearts. This is key to every child. But Kyra, like many children today, was not given a sense of belonging.

Instead, she was given a sense of rejection. This is a burden that no human being should have to bear.

We did take active steps to respond to Sasha's sense of isolation in Virginia. We developed a riding program through a local show barn. Sasha started to take weekly singing lessons with a fabulous teacher. Most importantly, Sasha and I spent a lot of time together. We shopped in old-town Alexandria, went to wonderful restaurants, and took long walks together. I had quite a bit to do that year: relocate our family of six, finish a major renovation in our new home, and then organize our family's move to Bermuda. All this with a three-year-old joined at the hip. But it was a joy to be my daughter's best friend that year—when she needed it most.

FOCUSING ON LOVE

Love kept me focused on the most important element of our lives: our family. As moms, we must never forget that our kids are given to us for a finite period of time. While we can, we need to nurture and love them as much as possible. In doing so, we give our children the gift of knowing they are truly and richly loved. The days of childhood will come to an end before we know it.

There is no substitute for time; we all know this. But the tyranny of the trivial can drown out what we most need to do. It is not easy, but it is necessary to sacrifice the busy for the important. I have needed lots of discernment in this area of life, but I have never regretted that I gave up many personal pursuits for an extended period of my life. This has been for the greater good of my family. Now that my children no longer require the same level of custodial care, my life is establishing an entirely different rhythm.

Children are born with an innate ability to look for love in the right place: their parents. But if we reject our own children, what will they do as teens and adults? They will seek love in all the wrong places. Kids are not fooled. They can discern when the people who are supposed to love them most do not.

Second Timothy 3:1–2 reflects the prevailing culture in America: “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self” (ESV). Parents who cannot keep their own selfish interests in check make family life very painful. Sadly, my family saw this same pattern repeated multiple times in Silicon Valley, in Bermuda, and in Hanover, New Hampshire, where our middle son went to a well-regarded and competitive high school. The rising tide of parental neglect and abandonment contributed to suicides and attempted suicides in all three localities.

In the early 1990s, I cofounded with Rebecca White the first Mothers’ Group for Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City. Rebecca and I were enthusiastic young moms with very young children. We decided to bring together like-minded young moms in order to build community in highly fragmented Manhattan. Besides holding weekly meetings, we hosted monthly talks given by respected, experienced moms with older children. These talks provided our group with much needed advice and counsel. Kathy Keller, the wife of Tim Keller, the head pastor of Redeemer, graciously came to speak to us one Tuesday morning in May. Kathy and Tim actually lived a few floors above us in our apartment building on Roosevelt Island—a divine coincidence for Gregory and me in many ways.

As we drove from our apartment building to the Upper West Side church where our group met, Kathy and I got into

an interesting conversation about children. Kathy has three sons and is deeply committed to her family. At the time, my daughter Sasha was only six months old and I was quite an anxious mother. Kathy mentioned that Tim still mentored doctoral students at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Tim was working with one PhD student who wanted to answer the critical question of why children of Christian parents choose to embrace or reject Christianity as adults. After years of research, the doctoral student came to the conclusion that there was one overwhelming factor in why children decide to become and stay Christians: they feel loved by their parents. This insight has had a truly profound impact on my parenting. Love makes the biggest impact on our children's lives.

As moms, I believe we should all memorize the powerful verses of 1 Corinthians 13 because they not only describe love but also illustrate its actions:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. . . . And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;

does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. . . .

BE THE BEST MOM YOU CAN BE

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly. . . . Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (NKJV)

My mother's last words to me in the hospital as she lay dying were, "I am so disappointed." Jesus does not want any mom to have this as her epitaph. What we do in love will endure. Jesus helped me to bear the burdens of life and taught me to not give up on loving my husband and my children. I can only see my own future dimly, but I can see God's love clearly. We belong to a Father who never gives up loving us.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Ponder

God's Word

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)

Love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God. (1 John 4:7–10 MSG)

Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. . . . The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. (Ps. 111:2, 10)

The Authors' Words

“The root in *belongs* is *longs*; every child longs to be at the center of his or her mom's and dad's hearts.”

Assess

1. Are you confident of the Father's love for you?
2. How successful have you been in communicating a sense of love to your children's hearts? What can you do to improve in this area?
3. In what ways is God challenging you to love your children at the expense of yourself? Why is that difficult?
4. How deeply are you involved in your children's lives? Would any of your neighbors or friends describe you as uninvolved? Why or why not?
5. Would you say that love is the strongest or at least one of the strongest dynamics in your home? Would your husband? Would your children? Why or why not?

Sum Up

As Sigmund Freud argued, it is not attention that a child is seeking but love. Our children won't remember us as perfect; they will remember that we loved them.