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Mother's Day

The Biblical Role of the Mother

Pastor Bryan Clark

You're well aware of the fact that this is Mother's Day. Every two or three years I like to go back to the basics and talk about what I believe to be the biblical role of the mother, and on Father's Day the biblical role of the father. For some of you this will be review, but I don't think that's really a problem. For some of you, it may be new.

But I think it also goes beyond just mothers. There are many of you here this morning that say, "Well, I'm not a mother; I'm going to take a little nap here." But we're not just talking about the role of the mother. Part of what we're talking about is that the role of the mother teaches us, communicates to us, something about the character of God. So every time on Father's Day and Mother's Day that we go back through this, what we're learning is about the character of God and who He is and how we need to respond to that. It is a true statement that every single person in this auditorium and every single person in the upper room has a view of God. For some of you, your view of God is very accurate. For some of you, your view of God is a mess. The reality is every one of us has had a mother. And those two things go together. I believe how you were parented, how you were mothered, does have a dramatic effect on your view of God.

So this morning as we talk about this, you really need to listen to how God wanted you to be parented, how He wanted you to be mothered—and then think about what you really did experience—and you get some idea of whether or not your view of God is accurate, or whether or not your view of God may be a little bit messed up and has to have some correction.

Normally when I preach I like to go to one passage and stay there the entire hour; however, in order to communicate this message this morning, we will be look at multiple passages.

I think all of us understand that parenting is a very complicated calling—because what we're called to do is very, very difficult. If I were to use a metaphor, I would say that the world around us is littered with landmines, and my job as a parent is to try to teach my children how to navigate through those landmines without getting blown up.

Now in the early days of parenting, I'd just simply pick up my children and I'd carry them—and *I'd* navigate through the landmines. I know a lot of parents who have very young children tend to get a little bit stressed out, but you parents need to understand that is as easy as it gets. It only gets harder—because the reality is we move from carrying our children through those landmines, to taking them by the hand and they have to walk themselves—but we still hold their hands and we help them and we teach them. But the ultimate end of parenting is being able to send my children out into that minefield and they're going to have to navigate themselves. And when it's all said and done, what I'm trying to teach my children, as a parent, is how to do that.

We also understand that there are many more mines in the minefield today than there were 10 years ago, 20 years ago and 50 years ago. So it's a very difficult calling, a very important calling. When Patti and I first had our girls and we began to talk about parenting and the realities of all of that, one of the things that I became very curious about is understanding my biblical role as a father. I was familiar with my role as a husband and Patti's role as a wife, but I began to think about what specifically my role as a father is—and I was very unfamiliar with that. I was very unfamiliar with the biblical role of the mother.

So I started to pull off all the books on my shelves about the family. What I found interesting was, while I found a lot of good fathering advice and parenting advice, I didn't find anybody that was defining for me the biblical role of the mother and the biblical role of the father—which really set me on my own personal search of trying to figure that out. In doing so, I would have to say that this has been a significant help in Patti's and my relationship of really understanding what primarily is her calling and what primarily is my calling. How are they different? And how do we work together as a team? That's what I want to share with you this morning.

I think the best place to start is in Psalm 131. Psalm 131 is one of my favorite psalms. The psalmist says, "O LORD, my heart is not proud, or my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me. Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever." (NASB)

Psalm 131 is written by David, and David is talking about what he does when life gets overwhelming. What does he do when life just seems to be too hard? What does he do when he does not have answers to those questions that plague him? His answer: He becomes like a weaned child that crawls up into the lap of his mother. There he finds a place of refuge; there he finds a place of safety. There he gets the feeling everything is going to be okay.

It's a weaned child because the message is this child isn't looking for food; rather, this child is looking for refuge. This child is looking for safety. Now we understand this when on a spring night, suddenly a storm blows in and the thunder starts crashing and the lightning starts flashing, and young children become frightened. What do they do? They go and find Mom. And as long as they can sit on Mommy's lap, they have this feeling that everything is going to be okay.

One of the things I find interesting is, even though the thunder keeps crashing and even though the lightning keeps flashing, the child immediately goes to sleep—because there is this feeling that as long as I'm in Mommy's lap everything is going to be okay. Now realistically, if a tornado comes down the pike, Mom can't do much about that. But that child doesn't know that! That child just feels like everything is going to be okay.

The reality is that over time we have to begin to transition that place of refuge from our *earthly mother* to our *heavenly Father*. In Psalm 91:1-2 God identifies Himself as a place of refuge, a place of safety. He says, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust!' " (NASB)

There are many Scriptures where God identifies Himself as a fortress, a safe place, a place of refuge. Now when the psalmist wrote this, he was assuming that his readers had experienced a fortress; they had experienced a refuge. They understand that. Therefore, they can understand what that means with God.

When I was growing up in my home, I very much experienced my mom as a place of refuge. No matter what life could throw my way, I knew I always had a place of safety. I always had a place of security. I had a place I could go where it seemed like everything was going to be okay. Because of that, I had the courage to go out into the world and to try, to go out and take risks, to go out and grow.

But as I began to get older, I realized not only could my mom not protect me from *everything*, she really couldn't protect me from *anything*. And I began to realize I have to

transition what I've experienced with my earthly mother to my heavenly Father and realize, ultimately, God has to be my refuge; God has to be my safe place; God has to be my fortress.

I would say over the years in my Christian walk, this has become one of the most meaningful concepts about God—because I realize I do not live out my Christian faith on a playground. I live out my Christian faith on a battleground. And in order to survive in the battle, I have to have a fortress; I have to have a refuge. I have to have someplace that I can pull back into and experience a level of safety and security and know that Somebody is in control. And that is the relationship that we have with God!

Let me give you another passage. In Isaiah chapter 49 the Israelites are becoming a little insecure with God and they're starting to fear that God is going to forsake them. Verse 14, "Zion [*which is Israel*] said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me.'" (NASB)

How does God respond to that? Verse 15, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you." (NASB) When God wanted to communicate that commitment that He has to His people, He used the metaphor of a mother for a child. I think what God was doing was reaching into His bag and saying, *There is one relationship that has a bond that is different—that is stronger than any other bond—and that's the bond between a mother and her child.* So God pulls that out and says, *As committed as a mother is to that child—and actually even more so—even if that relationship were to fail, I will be even more committed to you.*

I think a lot of Christians struggle with what I would call spiritual insecurity. What I mean by that is they just fear that God is going to get tired of them, that God is going to get disgusted with them, that God is going to be embarrassed of them, that God is going to despise them—that God somehow is just going to kind of forsake them and walk away. The reality is we have days when spiritually we do great. We also have days when spiritually we do lousy—and in those days there is a certain spiritual insecurity that rises up within us. What God is saying in this text is, *I'm not like that!*

I go back to what I experienced with my earthly mother. There was never a time in my childhood when I ever questioned whether or not my mom loved me. I never really questioned her commitment. I never felt like, *She's going to abandon me; she's going to leave me; she's going to forsake me.* There were times when I disappointed her. There were times when she disciplined me. But in the midst of that, I always knew that she loved me and she would be there for me. And I learned something about the character of God. I realized that as God's child, He loves me even *more* than that. He's even *more* committed to me than that. Even when I completely blow it, He isn't going to forsake me and He isn't embarrassed that I'm His child.

It is true that I disappoint God. And it is true that sometimes He has to discipline me. But in the midst of all of that, I still experience that unconditional love that says, *You are my child and I am committed to you. And you need to know that.* And when God wanted that to be known, He used the metaphor of a mother.

Isaiah 66:13 communicates the comfort side of God. "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you will be comforted in Jerusalem." (NASB) When God wanted to communicate to His people, *I will be your comfort; I will care for you; I will take care of you,* He used again the metaphor of a mother. He went back and said, *Just as you have been comforted by your mother, know that I will comfort you.*

You see the same thing in the New Testament in 1 Thessalonians 2:7. Paul says, "But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children." (NASB) I think Paul was very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, and when he wanted to communicate this side of compassion and nurture and comfort and care, He pulled the Old Testament imagery of that of a mother.

Well, if we put all that together (and you could have many more verses that make this same case), what God is saying is that when He wanted to communicate that side of His character that is nurturing, that is safe, that is committed, that has the unconditional love—that side of Him that is a place of refuge for His children—He used consistently the imagery of a mother because that defines the role of the mother. The role of the mother is to be the primary nurturer of the children.

In the process of that, what that mother is actually doing is teaching those children, *This is what God is like. This is the very character of God. God is your refuge. God is your safe place. God is the place where you go when life gets too hard. God is the One that loves you with that bond like a mother to a child.* Therefore the mother communicates, *This is the character of God.* And as the child grows up and begins to understand who God is, it's a natural transition—because those are things that have been experienced and they're real and they're understood.

In the process of saying this, I am not saying that I believe that a mother loves her children more than the father does. I don't believe that Patti loves our girls more than I do. But I do believe that she loves them differently. I think I love them and respond to them according to my calling and my wiring. And I think Patti does too.

One example of this that we could all relate to would be when our girls were young and they'd be out riding a bicycle and they'd crash and burn. When they come inside, if the first person they meet is me, I can try to do the whole routine. I've seen Patti do it a hundred times! I clean them up and I'm real careful. I put on a Band-Aid; I can put them in a chair; I can rock them. I can do...whatever. And they just kind of tolerate it, you know. And finally it's over and it's like, *Daddy, are you done doing this?* And I put them down and they go and find Patti! And she does her thing. And frankly, it's the same thing I did. But there's something about that that works. And then they're happy and they run outside.

Now if you reverse that and the first person they run into when they come in the house is Patti—and she does her thing—they don't come looking for me when she's done. They just go outside! There's something there that happens. There's a nurturing connection that's a little bit hard to describe. But it's there, and it's real, and our children experience that. In the process, what they're experiencing is that part of the character of God.

The reality is a lot of mothers often say, "I feel like all I ever do is get after my kids—all I ever do is yell at them; all I ever do is discipline them." I think what she is saying is that deep in her heart, what she wants to do is nurture, but what she is being forced to do is discipline.

This is where we get into the discussion about the role of the father—because the reality is you cannot be both the primary disciplinarian and the primary nurturer. If you are, something is going to give. On Father's Day we're going to talk about the fact that I think the calling of the father is to be the primary disciplinarian. Some of you wives and mothers are sitting out there and saying, "You know, this would be great, but my husband is really not very cooperative and he doesn't do his part." Well, drag him back on Father's Day and we'll yell at him! I do realize for some of you, though, it isn't that funny because you have a husband that just isn't very

cooperative. I understand that. We're talking about the ideal. But you do need to understand, as a mother, your primary role. And you need to focus on your primary role and then you need to creatively figure out what to do about this gap.

I think it's also true that single mothers need to understand that God understands your situation. You need to understand your primary role and you need to focus on that. You also, then, can better understand what that gap is, what's missing—and we need to figure out creative ways to address that. But I still think it's best that you function mostly in your primary calling, and God will meet that need accordingly.

The next thing I'm going to say is going to get me into all kinds of trouble—but I have to go there. I think in many homes there is a problem with that nurturing instinct within the mother run amuck. It's out of control and it creates a controlling, possessive type thing. And what ends up happening is that the mother will not let the father discipline the children. And he has just given up. Every time he tries, he gets in trouble because he doesn't do it right. So he has just checked out.

Most mothers do that because they are committed to their children. But ladies, you need to understand you have lost way more than you have gained. That is a *huge* mistake. The reality is, ladies, your husband will not discipline your children the way you would—and that is the point. Let him fulfill his calling, and you fulfill your calling. But if, instead, you choose to be the primary disciplinarian, then your children will miss much of the nurturing that they need to really understand God and who He is.

Now I understand that no mother has just an unlimited amount of love to give. In other words, you could think of it like having a love tank, and the only way for that mother to really nurture that child is if that love tank is filled—and it's out of that capacity that she loves.

Therefore, I think about my role as a husband. What is my role as a husband? It is to die to myself and love my wife as Christ loved the Church. In other words, my job as the husband is to fill the tank. That's my calling. And as I fill my wife's love tank, then she has the capacity she needs to, in turn, nurture my children. So it's very important that I understand my role in all that—that we work as a team. That's why it's so important that a husband and wife continue to cultivate that love relationship between themselves in order to properly parent their children.

But I realize there are single parents and there are those of you whose marriages are struggling. You say, "My husband doesn't fill my tank." That's what's great about 1 John chapter 4, because ultimately the source to fill your tank is God Himself. As a matter of fact, I would go so far as to say any mother who is not rightly related to God does not have what she needs to fully nurture her children. Listen to these words, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and every one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (1 John 4: 7-11, NASB)

John is very clear: If you don't know God, you really don't know love. One of the most important things that a mother can do is to be rightly related to God and to be growing and flourishing spiritually so that she has what she needs to properly nurture her children. She cannot give what she does not have. This means that one of the top priorities for any mother is to be spiritually connected and growing. And yet it has been my experience over the years to see

most young mothers, I think, grow stagnant or decline rather than grow spiritually. And there are reasons for that. I understand you're tired and you're busy—and there are all those dynamics. But I think it is very important that you do whatever you need to do in order to maintain a growing walk with God.

The reality is, ladies, you do have a high and holy calling. Your responsibility is to demonstrate to your children, *This is what God is like. God is like me. He's a safe place. He's a place of refuge. He's a fortress. He has this unconditional love and commitment to you. He offers you this comfort, this nurture.*

I think it would do well for all of us to stop and think about how we were mothered, how we were parented. Did you experience these things in your home growing up? If you did not, it's very likely that you hold warped views of God. And those views of God need to be corrected. The ideal is that a husband and wife work together as a team, as God intended, in order to provide the environment that is best for these children. Where that is not possible, you need to understand your primary role, your primary calling. You need to function in your area of strength and trust God that He'll meet those needs in creative and unique ways.

I do know sometimes when parents hear this discussion about roles, there's a temptation to say, "Well, you know when I think about nurturing and caring, it's really my husband that is more like that. He's more soft and gentle, and I'm a little bit more of the aggressive, go-getter type." That's okay. That's the way God has made you and there's nothing wrong with that. But you do need to understand the roles are *not* reversible. What I mean by that is, even if that is not you according to your bent, God uses those roles to create in you Christlike character. And He will use your children as instruments to do that.

In other words, if you say, "Well, that isn't really me to be caring and nurturing in that way"—well, it *needs* to be you, because to be like that is to be like Christ. That is a side of the nature of God that needs to be reflected in you as God's child. So rather than just dismiss it and say, "Well, my husband is better in that"—no, *you* need to be better in that and let God use your children to teach you to become more like Him as you fulfill that role and that calling in order to accomplish what He has called you to.

So ladies, you have a high and holy calling. It's a calling that cannot be accomplished apart from being rightly related to God. My suggestion to you would be: Rather than spending a lot of time reading books about parenting, listening to a lot of radio programs about parenting, going to parenting seminars—if you'll take that same amount of time and invest it in intimacy with God, you're going to come out way ahead. If you are rightly related to God so that God is filling that love tank, then you, in turn, can turn around and offer what God has given you to your children and say, "This is what God is like." That's your calling, and it is indeed high and holy.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning for each one of these mothers here in the auditorium and in the upper room. God, what a holy calling they have: not just to raise a child but to represent You and Your character to their children—that one day each child will then, in turn, walk in obedience to You. Lord, it's a big task and we just commit each one of these husbands and wives to you that together, as a team, the mission might be accomplished. Lord, I do pray especially for those single parents that really do have a task that the rest of us can't even understand. Lord, I pray that You would help them to understand their primary calling, and Lord, that You would meet those needs that need to be met within the context of those homes. Lord, we commit all this to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.