

Introduction – Amanda Poppe

My dear sisters in Christ,

It's so good to be here with you this morning,

I've been thinking a lot about you as I was preparing this speech. Especially as I read over your responses to the survey questions. Thank you for openness and honesty.

(In case you missed it, one of the emails about League Day had a link to a survey, and we asked two questions: Where do you see God's design for women being attacked today. And how do you experience this personally)

Thank you for sharing the joys and struggles you face as a Christian woman in this culture. Each one of you is unique, with your own background and interests and limitations. We all have different responsibilities. We are all female, but what a variety! I celebrate God's creativity!

In all our different circumstances, we are trying to serve God as best we can. And we face a lot of challenges and pressures. The one word that came back over and over in the survey responses was the word "pressure." You wrote about:

"the pressures of not feeling enough."

"Pressure to look a certain way, pressure to have it all together like the false perfection portrayed on social media,

"The pressures of posting and keeping up on social media"

Pressure to have the perfect body; join the gym and wear the latest workout gear"

"pressure to send our children to kindy."

"Pressure to give your children the best parties/ birthday cakes/ clothes/extracurricular experiences"

pressure to have a career focus

"Pressure to continue working and prioritise work over children"

"the pressure to work in "our organisations" as teacher, carer at FH or Eucalypt, RN at FH, even when still have children at home or in primary school"

All these pressures! It's hard to be joyful when you are feeling pressure!

One woman summed it up like this:

"I am glad this topic is being addressed because the worldly attitudes are making [it] very hard to be happy as a woman."

To regain the joy of biblical womanhood, we need to shut out the loud voices of our culture and spend time in God's Word. We need to see again our Saviour, Jesus Christ standing before us in all his bright glory. He says, "You are my daughters. I bought you with my precious blood. This is how you are to live." Because in the end, his opinion is the only one that matters, and he is the only one we have to answer to.

We confess in Lord's Day 1 that we are not our own but belong with body and soul to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. This comes from 1 Cor 6:19-20 "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body."

At the Rally for Life earlier this year, there was a group of angry women (and men) who were trying to drown out the pro-life speeches. They shouted, "My body, my choice" over and over for more than an hour. Our culture says, I am autonomous: I decide how to live my life.

But a Christian says the exact opposite: I am not my own. Someone else is running my life and making my decisions.

So in all the areas of "womanhood" the key question is, What does Jesus want from me? Have I given this area and this area and this area over to him or am I still chanting, "My life, my choice."

The truth is we are not that different from those women screaming themselves hoarse. The Christian life is one long battle to die to self.

We need to surrender everything to Jesus Christ. Lay it all down:

Our bodies, minds, money, time, and talents.

And say, Lord, these are yours. They were never mine to begin with. Teach me what you want me to do with them.

To be able to do surrender to Jesus Christ, we need to know how utterly safe it is to do that. He is pure light. He is sweetness altogether. He loves you very much. When we lose sight of him and get sucked into the world's priorities, then life gets hard and we feel burdened.

We don't have to live that way. Jesus says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." We can experience joy as we follow our Saviour.

Modesty

So how does Jesus define our womanhood? How does he say we should live? This is a broad topic and we can only touch on a few things this morning. We want to focus on the passage in 1 Timothy 2.

When Paul addresses women, it's striking that the first thing he mentions is outward appearance.

We naturally spend a lot of time on externals. Well, God is interested in that, too, although maybe not in the way we are, and definitely not in the way the world is. So what does God say?

1 Tim 2:9-10 I desire then . . . likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness –with good works.

Everyone is telling a story about themselves and their relationship to God by what they wear, whether they realize it or not. Earlier this week I walked past a young woman in the shopping centre and her clothing and piercings and tattoos were telling a sad story of darkness and despair.

God has pulled us out of darkness and laid his claim on us. We are his image bearers to a watching world. We proclaim or deny the gospel story by what we wear. For example, if I wear inadequate clothing, I am saying that I'm not sinful, that I don't need the covering God gave to Adam and Eve after the fall into sin. If I wear extravagant clothing ("costly attire" as Paul calls it,) to draw attention to myself, then I am saying I deserve glory instead of God.

Think of how you dress for church. Are the people around you able to focus on worshipping God, or are they focusing on you?

This is not first of all a clothing issue, but a heart issue. Who are we seeking to glorify?

Dirk and I once had the opportunity to go to Bali. I did not pack a modest wardrobe for the trip, my reasoning being that this was a romantic getaway with my husband. I also assumed that Bali would be a decadent beach culture, and so my standard of immodesty would seem highly chaste. To my shame and sorrow, I discovered that the Balinese are very modest in their clothing. It's the tourists who show all the skin. The Balinese will not let foreigners in their temples unless they are properly covered. Before you come in, they will give you a robe to put on. These people treat their idols with greater reverence and awe than we show the Living God when we come for worship!

The same thing is true in China. All the women are very modestly dressed, not just the Christian women. I was invited to go there once for a conference, to speak to the wives of office bearers together with a sister in Christ. One morning in our hotel room, she had to rebuke me: "You can't wear that," she said. I was embarrassed and ashamed. But what a grace of God that he exposed my proud heart so I could repent! Without repentance there is no forgiveness. I am thankful that she had the courage to speak up about my choice of clothing.

Going to other countries gives you a different perspective on yourself and your own culture. How did we get to the place in our heads here in Australia where it is acceptable for a woman to walk around in public in her bra and panties? Our culture is in rebellion against God and you see that in the way people dress.

The Holy Spirit lives in you. Don't grieve him by what you wear. Don't disqualify yourself from being able to point people to Jesus. On our morning run, Dirk and I often meet an elderly Chinese gentleman named Tim. We've stopped and spoken to him many times over the years and invited him over for tea. When I'm tempted to buy tight exercise clothes, I think, "How can I tell my neighbours about Jesus Christ if they see me wearing clothes that leave nothing to the imagination?"

When visitors come into our worship service, are they struck by how modestly we are dressed? In a recent sermon, Dirk talked about staying away from soft porn. Afterwards, a brother said to me, "What do you do when the soft porn is sitting in church?"

What about our weddings? Many unbelieving guests are in attendance. What story are we telling them about the holiness of God? Over the years as a minister couple we have attended many weddings, maybe more than most of you. We have often been grieved by the immodesty of the bride and bridesmaids. It's like the story of the Emperor's New Clothes. Everyone is smiling and congratulating and trying to pretend that they don't see all the breasts on display. Maybe, like the Balinese, we need to have robes available so we can cover up before we come into the throne room of God. There the angels are covering their feet before his majesty.

How can we encourage each other to pursue modesty? How do we teach our girls that "modest is hottest"? Fathers play a crucial role in helping their daughters. One man has a very helpful saying, "If I can see up it or down it or through it, it's not okay." We need to be willing to ask the question, "Is what I'm wearing appropriate?" and be humble enough to accept correction.

Dear sisters, don't join the world's mantra of "my body, my choice." Humble yourself before God and other people. Modesty is humility expressed in the way we dress and it is the most visible mark of a biblical woman. (p 138 Girl Talk)

Children

Getting back to 1 Timothy 2, how does Paul end that sentence about women? ". . . women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness – with good works."

God wants us to adorn ourselves with good works. What should take up the bulk of our time and headspace? Not our outward appearance, but good works. What does he mean by good works? You can think of the list of virtues God gives to men and women in 1 Peter 1 or the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. But does God say anything specifically to women? If you look a bit further in 1 Timothy 5, Paul describes what that looks like. He is talking about an older woman, a widow, but there are a lot of details here that are applicable to women in any stage of life, whether married or single. 1 Tim 5:9-10 "Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband and having a reputation for

good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.” And then a little later in verse 14: “So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan. If any believing woman has relatives that are widows, let her care for them.”

How’s that for a job description for women? Whatever your age or situation in life, you can find some direction for what God wants you to be busy with: caring for widows in your family or church community, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints (I love that expression! Sometimes I think we should do that literally.) caring for those in distress, managing your household, bringing up children.

This is God’s design for women.

If there is any part of this list that raises the hackles of our culture, it would be the emphasis on marriage and children. Especially bearing children. This is anathema to our society, and so we want to spend some time on this.

This is not to ignore the fact that some of you here today would love to be married or would love to have children, or more children. You might be thinking “How can Paul tell younger widows to marry and bear children. How are they supposed to make that happen?” And that’s the reality of life, right? We may long for the very thing God created us for, and He may not grant that to us. If you are in that situation, you need to remember that you belong to Jesus Christ. He loves you very much. He is Lord of your life and he is directing it exactly as he sees fit. And then you can keep bringing your longings to him, acknowledging that he is all wise and good. You can rest in him with a quiet confidence. In the meantime, look for ways that you can be a source of life and nurture for the people God has put in your life.

Our culture is very negative about having children. If a young Christian girl gets married (I mean, who gets married these days??) and has a baby right away, people at work will think she’s crazy. Especially if she tells them she’s not coming back to work. They will say she’s throwing her life away. And after her baby is born, her doctor will sit down with her and tell her how to prevent this from happening again. With each subsequent baby, the negative comments will get worse. Perfect strangers will think they can comment on her private life. “Are those all yours? Don’t you have a TV? Haven’t you heard of birth control?” She will be accused of destroying the planet through overpopulation.

When you obey God’s command to have children, you will experience scorn and hostility.

I’ll never forget the time we took our six kids to Australia to visit my family, the oldest was 12, youngest was still a baby. And on the way back we were on the last leg of our flight, we had hardly slept, what with holding a one year old on our laps. Dirk and I were in separate rows with a bunch of kids each. The stewardess had figured out that all these kids were ours, and she leans over the seat in front of me and narrows her painted eyes and says, “Is this some kind of breeding program?”

Why is our culture so negative toward having children?

It wasn't always this way.

Before the Industrial Revolution, when most people lived on farms and had to provide for themselves, children were seen as an asset. They were highly valued because they could contribute to the survival of the family. Each member of the family had an important role to play, and life was centred on the home. Fathers were primarily responsible for raising their children, passing on their skills and knowledge in daily interactions. Literature on parenting was addressed to *fathers*, not to mothers. Mothers cared for the little ones, taught their daughters how to run a household, and worked alongside their husbands either on the farm or in his trade.

After the Industrial Revolution, work moved out of the home into factories and other places of business. Fathers went away to work, and mothers were left to do most of the childrearing on their own. The paid work of men seemed more valuable and mothers felt isolated from the rest of society. One feminist, writing in 1912, said, "The duties and pleasures of the average woman bore and irritate [me]. The duties and pleasures of the average man interest and allure."

Fast forward to today, and feminism is still pushing for women to have the same opportunities, jobs and salaries as men. They want to erase the differences between men and women (They've been so successful that now anyone can "be" a woman. Not sure if that's what they intended!). Equal opportunity sounds like a good thing, right? But what's the big obstacle that prevents women from keeping up with men in their field? The fact that women can get pregnant. So what's the solution? Prevent babies from being conceived or kill them through chemical contraceptives and abortions. Babies are the worst possible thing that can happen to you because they prevent you from pursuing your goals and dreams. In a culture that finds its identity in what you accomplish, to give up your career for children is suicidal. Especially when you are young, you need to be pursuing something. You need to go to university. Get a degree. Make something of yourself. Babies don't fit in this worldview.

Maybe a woman wants the "experience" of having a baby. Fine. One or at the most two is okay, but then she needs to get back into the work force as soon as possible. Otherwise she will get behind, she will miss out on that promotion, she will lose her registration.

Feminism also proclaims that a career is fully compatible with family responsibilities. And if you are struggling, you just need to get better at juggling.

This is the air we breathe, so unless you have stopped breathing for the last century or so, this is what you have been absorbing. It has affected our thinking.

For example, Dirk will tell you that when he teaches pre-marriage classes, about half the young couples say they don't want children right away. Why is that?

If God said to us, "I want to bless you with 100,000 dollars," we would say, "Yes, please!" When God says, "I want to bless you with children," do we say, "No thanks, not now."

Some of you wrote in the surveys:

“There feels to have been a shift over the past 9-10 years - people are waiting longer to get married, people are waiting until late 20s to have children, more people are first planning travelling/volunteering. I more often hear comments similar to "I can't imagine having kids right now I'm so comfortable with my life".

“Many young mothers openly say that two to four children is enough.”

“Children (even though it may not be said out loud) are not considered a blessing but more of an expectation in our families.”

Some of you wrote about getting negative comments from church members about their family size.

I've experienced that myself. When I was pregnant with number four, an older woman in our church, who hadn't seen me in a while, looked at my big belly and said, “Another one?! Doesn't your husband have enough work to do?”

Motherhood

We experience cultural pressure to limit our family size, sometimes even from within the church. What about the work of raising children? What pressures do we face?

Our culture says that you have no meaning, no value unless you make something of yourself.

And of course the world's definition of “accomplishment” does not include anything from the list Paul gives us here in 1 Timothy 5.

This soul-destroying thinking is part of the air we breathe. We start to believe our identity is based on what we do and we start running after all the things the world says are important. We feel pressure to make something of ourselves, rather than give our life in service to others.

You have value not because of what you do, but because of who you are. Or rather, WHOSE you are.

I am not my own but belong with body and soul to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

Is our culture influencing us?

The surveys showed that many mothers are struggling with the negative messages they are receiving from our culture.

“I feel inferior or less valuable as a stay at home[mom] than if I pursue a career.”

“I sometimes find as a stay at home mother that I feel like I'm somehow "less" even though I know biblically that isn't true and feel somewhat pressured to work.”

“I [often] find motherhood is undervalued and under appreciated by those around me, and I find myself restless and wondering if they're not right?”

“A few of my friends are now working a couple days a week and they generally start when their children are 6-12 months! How can we be content simply being a -stay-at-home Mum with slow days while the rest of the world is all about the hustle and being career driven?”

“As a young mum I feel the **pressure** to return to work after having a child. Society doesn't value the task that God has given me at home and it's easy to become overly focussed on the financial benefits this could bring in a materialistic world.”

It seems like a lot of us, not only mothers, are struggling with the question: What does God want me to do with my life.

“Making decisions about studying, working, marriage, having children etc have all been filled with doubt for me, questioning what is God's will for me and how I can use my talents for his glory.”

‘To what extent can I ask for time to develop my own gifts and talents, or do I just have to put that desire aside for the rest of my life?’”

“I am finding it difficult to decipher how exactly I am called to live.”

I've wrestled with these same questions myself, and Dirk and I have had many conversations about this. So now that I've laid out some of the questions, I'm going to hand over to my husband and let him come up with the answers!

Joy of Biblical Womanhood in a hostile world – Rev Poppe

Introduction

So what does the Bible say about being a mother? What does God want from mothers, especially as that relates to the development of children. The real question is: what are our priorities and how are we supposed to think about that?

The gift of children

So first, about being a mum. In 1 Timothy 2:15 Paul has this curious saying, “Yet she will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” A few months ago I was going through the book of 1 Timothy with our new members class. We had talked a bunch of times earlier about the place of women in marriage and in the church and so they got the

verses just prior to this one. But then one woman asked about this verse. What's with that? What does God mean: women will be saved through childbearing?

It doesn't mean that you can earn your way into heaven as long as you have lots of babies. The only way to be saved is through faith in our Lord Jesus who has done it for us. The way to make sense of this verse is to compare it to what Paul told Timothy a few chapters later. In 1 Timothy 4:16 he told Timothy, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." Timothy can't save anyone. But by faithfully doing his task, he shows that he knows Christ and believes in him. A woman shows that she has faith in Christ and that the Spirit of Christ lives in her heart when she has children and models for them what life in Christ looks like.

It is God's desire for those women who are married to have children. This is his joy. It's part of his plan. He wants children to be born in godly families and then he wants the mums and dads to bring up their children in a godly way so that they might know and love him. Reminds you of Psalm 127:3-5, "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate." Children are a heritage. An inheritance. God's got something really precious for you. He's going to give out an inheritance. Only this time it's much more precious than money. It's children.

Blessed is the man whose quiver is filled with them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. You have to remember that the gate is the place where the elders sat, where court was convened and transactions and village life was settled. When this man comes to the gate to sort something out with his enemy, he doesn't come alone. He's not a pushover. He is surrounded by a bunch of strapping young men who support him. I wonder if we also couldn't understand this verse in a spiritual sense. In the face of the devil's opposition, the Lord is establishing the kingdom of heaven. How? It's when you mums have children, and when you live in faith, love, propriety and self control, what for your children what it looks like to live as citizens of

God's kingdom. Then your children learn to put their trust in God. They believe in him, become part of his kingdom and live a life of service before him. The greatest way God builds up his church is not even by preaching the gospel to those who have never heard it. It's by dads and mums in the church having children and bringing these children up in the fear of the LORD. You are doing the most important work in the world, mums. The devil knows this. That is why there is a relentless opposition against you having children and faithfully bringing up those children to know and love the LORD.

The blessing of children

Now you hear that and you might think to yourself: Ah! Kids are a lot of work! I don't know if I can do that! I don't know if I want to do that. You know, it's interesting. When you read through the Bible it's very interesting to notice how often God tells us that children are a blessing. Genesis 1:28, "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.'" The God of life who fills the earth with an abundance of living things, fish and birds, plants and animals, also wishes his people to share in that blessing. We just read Psalm 127:3, "Children are a heritage from the LORD ... Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." Psalm 128 tells us about some of the blessings that come on the man who fears the LORD: a wife who is like a fruitful vine and children who are like olive shoots around your table. God plainly teaches us that children are a blessing and we are rich if we receive children from him. In 1 Chronicles 26:4-5 it says, "And Obed-edom had [eight] sons ... for God blessed him." God loves you and he just wants to bless you by giving you children. Do you understand that? It's a very different perspective than our culture. Many of the people around us see children as a liability. Like Amanda said: you have to make all sorts of sacrifices: your career, time, money, sports, hobbies, vacations and lifestyle.

So in what way are they a blessing? Do you see children as a blessing? Sometimes it's really obvious. I remember with fondness holding our son Matthew when he was a brand new baby. It was very special to cuddle him in my arms, breathe in a whiff of that new baby smell, hear him cooing and snuggle with him. It is heart-warming watch your growing children explore their world and you

witness their first smile, their first taste of gherkin and their joy in whacking a balloon with a badminton racquet. One day Amanda was reading the story of the good shepherd to our four year old. Then she asked, "Are you a little sheep, too?" In a matter of fact tone he says, "Actually, I am a duck." Apparently, there is one duck in our Lord's flock of sheep. So many good times. As the years go by, you get to play games and sports together, go hiking, camping or on road trips. You get to build stuff, help people or make music together. You get to walk alongside of them through their pain, guide them, challenge them and learn from them. God gives us a real gift in our children and he often blesses us richly through them.

But what about the trying times when they disobey you, fight with each other, argue, complain, refuse to do their chores, write with permanent marker on your new furniture or scratch the paint job on your car? Can we still see them as a blessing? God helps us with that in James 1:2-4, where he calls us to count it all joy when we face various trials, because God uses those trials to bring us to the maturity of our faith. Yes, children are a trial. They are a lot of work and they challenge us in ways that no one else can. But this is exactly how God blesses us through our children. He is working on our character and making us into renewed people who are recreated into the image of Jesus Christ. Think of a new mother with her 3 week old baby. She tends her infant all day and then gets up at 1:00 am and again at 4:00 am for a feeding. She just gives and gives and gives. At the time, it's hard. She wakes up bleary-eyed and stumbles through the day, holding out till nap-time. But as she does this day after day, week after week, year after year, she learns a bit about the satisfaction and blessing in giving of herself for the well-being of another. Our Lord Jesus taught us that it is better to give than to receive. As we feed our children, wash them, change them, cuddle them, read books to them, tend to their scrapes and bruises, teach them and discipline them we are learning that, contrary to what our culture thinks, life is not about what you can get for yourself. Life is about service. Our Lord Jesus Christ poured out his life in order to serve us and secure redemption for us. In this way our children are a blessing to our spiritual growth.

We grow not only through the endless service required in bringing up our children, but we also grow through the inevitable conflicts that arise in family life. Our children are sinful by nature and foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child (Proverbs 22:15). How often do we not witness a profound selfishness in our children? A boy can ignore the bouncy ball for weeks, but as soon as his brother picks it up, instantly that ball becomes the most important thing in the world. In *Loving the Little Years*, Rachel Jankovic tells the story about how they got one of those Fisher Price cars that kids can ride in. It caused so much conflict in their home that it was nicknamed "The sin wagon."

We share this sinful nature with our children and conflict tends to bring out the worst in us. How often don't we yell at our children when they disobey? How often are we not annoyed with them because they are ruining a quiet evening, or impatient with them because they don't get their act together when we have to go somewhere? How often does it not happen to us that we discipline them in anger? I have a strong memory of my little boy looking at me with big eyes and a hurt look on his face after I yelled at him for something minor. I wondered: what am I doing to his soul? Please forgive me, Father. Being a parent is extremely humbling. You get to see your own sins and weaknesses up close. As we live in close relationships with our children, we see our own selfishness, anger and pride. You realise how far you fall short of God's will and his wonderful example of being a faithful Father of his children. You end up at the foot of the cross. But if you think about it, isn't that another blessing? The LORD uses our children to humble us and to recreate us in the image of his Son. Truth is that children are a great blessing in all sorts of ways.

The needs of children: how to do it well

So let's say that you get to the place that you realise that becoming a mum is a really precious gift and that children are a unique blessing from our Father in heaven. Now that God has given you children you feel torn. You want to be a good mum. But you also feel lots of pressure in all sorts of other ways. You also want to keep up your nursing or your teaching registration. You want to have a nice house. You want to give your kids the things that you wished you had a child. You also

want to look after yourself, make sure you can get to the gym, visit with your friends and have a bit of time to play netball or do your card making or photography.

Tricky. So how do you figure that out? What are the priorities? In Titus 2:4-5 God helps us a bit with that. There Paul teaches that older women “are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.”

Young women: if you are married, God says that your first priority is to love your husband and children, to work at home and to be filled with the Spirit of Christ as you do that. Self-control. Purity. Kindness. Submission. If you think about it, that ties in to the vows you made. If you are married and have children, then you have likely made three vows in your life. A vow to love and serve God, to be true to your husband and to bring up your children to know and love God. That’s not a bad way to think of what your priorities should be. In the first place, have a robust life of faith with the LORD. Know him and love him. Depend on him for what you need and thank him for what he gives.

Then be busy at home, loving your husband and children. It is the task of you women to make your house into a home. So how do you do that? Instagram and Pinterest says it means that you decorate your house beautifully and that you have fancy birthday parties for your kids. It is true that God values order and beauty. You can love your husband and children by making your home beautiful and keeping it neat. But that’s only a tiny part of making a house into a home.

A home becomes beautiful when the woman at the centre of it has a beautiful heart. If you take time and effort to reach out to your husband in love, then your house becomes a home. One of the most loving things you can do is to make sure that you are there and you are attending during the transitions and during the important things that go down. Imagine that when he first gets home that you take a few moments to connect and to tend to each other. When something goes down in your family, it’s very beautiful to take a few moments to touch base and process it together. It’s also very kind to love your husband and children in the way that they like to be loved. Gary Chapman

wrote the book, *The Five Love Languages*. Every one of us is a bit different. Some thrive with words of affirmation, others with quality time, still others with gifts or acts of service or physical touch. Be sensitive to what gives your husband shining eyes and try to love him well. I'm all over the board. I love all of them and it's a delight when my wife makes lemon meringue pie, gives me a hug or wants to chat about the kids. And you know, if you love your husband from the heart, God will use that to bind you closely together and also bless your kids through that. Probably the greatest gift you could give your children is love, peace and stability between you and your husband. It's actually your husband's job in the first place. But he's not here today, so I can't tell him that. And truth is, you too have a role in that. So go home and love your husbands well.

And then God says that another real priority is for you to love your children. I'd say that when a young mum receives a baby and loves that child, she is doing the most important job in the world. When you bear a child, God uses you to bring a new person into existence. This child is going to live for all eternity. And you get to have the biggest impact of anyone on that child. You get to love and nurture your child so that deep down in their heart they know what it means to be loved. You get to shape their world for them and set the trajectory of their lives. What is the saying: he who rocks the cradle, rules the world. There is more truth in that than first meets the eye.

And now I am going to jump into a bit of psychology and child development to flesh out and help us appreciate the LORD's calling for you to be busy at home loving your children. Young women, your children need you. Especially when they are babies. Dr. Bruce Perry is a psychiatrist who has worked with many children who have been damaged through trauma and neglect. I have three of his books. The first is *The Boy who was Raised as a Dog*. He tells about a dozen stories of children who have been damaged and uses them to show some of the critically important parts of what a child needs to have a healthy, happy, beautiful life. Some of the saddest stories in the world. Hard reading. His second book *Born for Love* builds off of that and shows that the most important thing in the world is showing love and empathy, especially to children when they are very young. And then his third book is written with Oprah Winfrey called, *What happened to you? Conversations on*

trauma, resilience and healing. This book is the least confronting and it's the most accessible. Shows what neglect and trauma does and how it's possible to heal from that.

So what does he say? When a child's body grows, it's pretty much a straight line for the first twenty years. But the brain is very different. It grows like crazy at first, and then levels off after two, three years. Comparatively, the head and brain are actually already huge before the baby is born. And that continues for the first few years. The reason for that is because there are some areas where the brain needs to be used in order to properly develop. Sight is one example. Did you know that if you tape a kitten's eye shut for the first few weeks of it's life that the kitten will be blind in that eye for the rest of it's life? If that eye isn't used, then the part of the brain that would have normally developed based on the inputs of the eye never develops. And then even though you can take the tape off later, the critical period of development has been missed and that part of the kitten's brain will never develop. Something similar happens for our eyesight. It develops with use. The same is true for language. The part of the brain responsible for processing language develops in the first two years of life. Sadly there have been some children in the world who have never been spoken to during that time. Their capacity for language is profoundly damaged. They can learn words by rote and be taught to communicate with stilted phrases. But they don't get language. They don't have the capacity to understand the grammar or nuances of language. For the rest of their lives they will struggle to communicate with other people.

The first two, three months of a child's development are the most critical. And the same is true for the first three years of a child's life. It is during this time that a child attaches to mum and learns what love is. And he learns how to regulate his inner world and his emotions. A couple of stories. Laura was a little girl he saw in a hospital. At four years old, she was only about 12 kilos. They had put a feeding tube up her nose and were pumping in a huge number of calories each day. But no matter what they did, she didn't grow. None of the doctors could figure it out. When Perry began chatting with her mother Virginia, he immediately began to suspect this little girl's problems stemmed in her mother's past. Her mum had been abandoned by her drug addicted mother, father

unknown. She had been bounced around from one foster home to another every six months. It wasn't until she was five years old that she finally settled into a Christian home with parents who loved her. But in the years when she was bounced from one home to another, she missed out on the attentive, attuned, loving care from one mother that most children receive. When we are hungry, cold, thirsty, frightened or distressed in any way, we cry and mum fixes it with her loving attention. She does it over and over and over again. Thousands of times. It's as she feeds and snuggles us, rocks and comforts us, looks into our eyes and changes us, smiles and plays with us that we connect the feeling of being warm, safe, comforted and loved with her presence, her face, smile, voice, hugs, cuddles and scent. At a gut level we attach to mum and we learn that people are safe, loving and comforting. As we are loved by mum, we learn what love is.

Virginia never got that in her first years. She also never knew how to give that to others. So when she had a daughter, she never knew what to do with her. She couldn't ask her foster parents because the system forbade her from having any contact with them after she was 18. So she was on her own. She knew that Laura needed to be fed, dressed and bathed, but emotionally she was lost. She never knew how to give her daughter the loving, nurturing, physical, attentive care that most children receive from their mother. She was disconnected emotionally. She didn't snuggle her daughter when she fed her. Instead she propped her up on her knee. She didn't rock her, sing to her, coo or stare into her eyes or count the tiny little toes on her feet like mums normally do. And then when Laura got distressed she got frustrated with her and either harshly disciplined her or ignored her. Although Laura had been diagnosed with "failure to thrive" right near the beginning, no one over four years had done an assessment of mum's emotional capacity to care for her baby. Perry set her up with Mama P, a large, powerful woman who was a stunning foster mum. Perry had learned a lot from her in the past. Virginia and Laura moved in with Mama P. She instinctively knew what Laura needed and gave it to her by the bucket load. Lots of hugs and cuddles. Lots of love and attention, rocking and singing. Mama P. gave it not only to Laura, but also to Virginia. Conflict around mealtimes quickly faded away and the little girl started thriving. Apparently we have

hormones that are released in our brain when we get the physical touch and emotional care that we need. In one month, this malnourished little girl put on five kilos. They stayed with Mama P. for a year. Best thing that ever happened to Laura.

Another story: Bruce Perry was asked to do an assessment for the courts of a young man who had raped and killed two teenage girls. He went to prison to meet with him. From the moment he walked in the young man, Leon, was utterly cold and without remorse. He tried to blame the girls for leading him on. He had the coldest heart, utterly incapable of even putting on a show of some compassion for a shrink who might be able to help him in his court case. He was not unintelligent. So how could that happen?

When he got to interview the parents the real story started coming out. Mum and dad, Alan and Maria, were loving, kind people. She was quiet and a bit simple. Alan did most of the talking and sometimes it even seemed that she didn't understand the questions. They had an older son, Frank who was a successful plumber and a respected member of the community.

So what happened? Alan and Maria lived with large extended families in a small rural town. They were surrounded with cousins, uncles and aunties and grandparents who went to the same school, church and lived in the same neighbourhood. They were rich in relationship. When the eldest boy, Frank was born, they were living with their family. Mum was at times overwhelmed by looking after her son, but she was surrounded by family. They lived in the basement apartment of a building owned by an uncle. Mom and dad lived next door. His family, one block over. Both mum and baby were immersed in the loving care of the extended family. They stepped in whenever she needed help. But then Alan lost his job. They moved to an apartment complex in the city. Alan went off to work early in the morning and came home late at night exhausted. Maria was lonely. Her three year old son became her best friend. She went out all day every day for a walk, took the bus to free museum tours, went to a mother's drop in program at the church.

But then when Leon was born, things became difficult. She had never raised a baby on her own. There was no family safety net to help her. Leon was a fussy baby. She was overwhelmed. And

so she found a solution. She went back to her walks. After feeding and washing him, she would put him in his crib and leave with Frank for they day like she used to. Over time, Leon stopped crying so much. He lay there, alone and neglected for day after day. No one to talk to. No one to cuddle him or praise him all day long. For most of the day he heard no language, saw no sights and had no new experiences. Occasionally Alan was home and would play with him. But more often he was out working or too exhausted to deal with a baby. Whereas Frank was always running to mum or dad for a hug or cuddle, and he would respond to their praise or disappointment, it was different with Leon. From a very early age, he learned that he couldn't count on anyone but himself. His neediness made him seem demanding, aggressive or cold. In an attempt to get love and attention, he would take things, hit people, lash out. But the only attention he got was punishment which made him even more angry. By the time he was three he was put in a program for troubled children. But he had missed so much. He learned to mimic others. But he never really learned to have any kind of genuine emotional connection with people. He didn't understand relationships. He didn't know how to love. Over time, he learned to use flattery, flirtation and manipulation to get what he wanted. Or he just took it. The coldest heart.

I could tell lots more stories. No time. The point is, sisters, it is your task to love your children. You need to faithfully and consistently care for your children. The first few months are the most critical. Just love and care for your little ones. The researchers aren't sure if there is a critical period to develop that love and attachment and emotional connection. But more and more research is suggesting that the first three years are the most important. You want to read another book about it. Erica Komisar spells it out in: *Being there: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters*. She makes the point that the attachment that a baby has to her mother is critical for all the future relationships. If mum is physically present and she is there for her child, then the child learns to become secure in her love. And that sets baby up for the rest of his life. She compares it to a boat being moored in the water. If your boat is well moored and doesn't drift away, then you learn to trust it. You can go away and when you come back you can trust that it's still there. The more deeply

that you have that trust, the more willing you are to go out and explore. But if mum's absent, physically or emotionally, then instead of going out and exploring, baby becomes clingy. She will only go out a little way, and only do that with anxiety in her heart. She will always need affirmation. And sadly, that often extends though childhood into adulthood. Those who have not been nurtured, loved, comforted and attended to in a consistent, faithful way though their childhood often carry insecurities throughout their lives. And an inability to connect deeply with others. And then it's not as if your job is done when kids are three. It's just that they feel safe to go away for longer before needing to come back to you. You need to keep loving, nurturing them.

This is not to say that kids are very fragile or that no one can heal. But the point is that if you have a baby, then you have an incredibly important job to do. You get to have a huge influence setting up your children for the rest of their lives. Erica says that means two things. In the first few months, in the first three years, you need to be there for your children. Physically present. Not off working or gone pursuing all sorts of others things. And then second you also need to be emotionally present. Loving, nurturing, attending to your child's needs when they happen. Cuddling, feeding, changing a nappy, rocking, looking into her eyes, counting her toes. Do you know what that means? You need to put away your phone. If you quit working and you are physically present, but your head is filled with everything that's going on in your social media feed, that's not okay. You need to attend to your child. We have a strong memory of that in our family. Amanda had just gotten a phone and she was absorbed in something. Matthew, five years old, was trying to get her attention to tell her something. And she was just ignoring him. And then Caleb sticks his face into Amanda's face and says to her: mum, you have to look at him when he's talking to you. Dear Caleb. He just knew.

Real life, do you know what that means? It means that if you have a baby and then the school calls and says, we really need you to teach a few days a week, you say: too bad, so sad. I'm not doing it. Fair Haven or Eucalypt calls and says: we need you to do some care giving a few days a week, you say: forget it. I have something much more important that needs my attention right now. When Amanda and I were young and first learning how to love each other well, Ben was six months

old, Amanda got a call from the school. We really need you to teach at Timothy. Can't find anyone. We talked it over and said: forget it. Ben is only six months once in his life. The answer is no. Tough decision. I was finishing off my studies and we really could have used the money. They called back a few months later. We really need you. No. And a month later. We have no other options. We really, really need you. You can forget it. It's just not happening. Our boy needed his mum. That's all there is to it. Nice result. This beautiful young woman from BC eventually took the job. And fell in love with Amanda's brother Nick. We're so glad Lisa that we said no! That was for sure the best call ever!

Just love your children. When they are babies, hug them, and snuggle them. Breastfeed your children. In the most critical phase of their development, it gives you very special time together. Talk to them, coo over them, count their toes and play pat-a-cake with them. When they are upset, then rhythmically rock them and pat their back. Ben used to like being held up against my shoulder. Angelica loved being held over my arm and patting her back. Put them in your lap and read books to them. As they grow up, regularly give them your undivided attention. Really attend to them. Be present. Have joy in them. Spend time with them. You don't have to do that all the time. But you need to do it regularly. Neglecting your children can cause serious damage. You need to be available, especially when they need you. Help them to regulate their emotions and to learn to be at rest. In our situation, there were times when Amanda was looking after the baby or busy with something else. The others would get into a tiff and over time it would escalate a little. And then a little more. And then the volume would go up a bit more. And then I said in my head: okay, now we're done. And I would get up and find out what's happening and help them to sort it out. If your children face stress in life, that's not a bad thing. It's actually a really important part of their development. As long as it's not crazy. If it's somewhat predictable, if it's moderate and if it's controlled so that it doesn't get completely out of hand, then it leads to resilience and growth. When they face stress and deal with it, then they learn to manage it and it's easier next time. But if life is chaotic, if the stress they face is unpredictable, if it's extreme and if there is no way out, then it can do serious damage. And you know, there are times in life when that happens. Our children sometimes face some pretty

terrible things. But even that can be overcome. From a developmental perspective, what's even more important than the damage that's done to them, is the value and the number of loving and empathetic relationships the child has. If a little girl has a mom who knows and loves her and who is consistently available and if she also has a dad, a sibling, a grandma, an aunt, a friend who know and love and care, then she can deal with a lot and heal. The most dangerous place is if our children are isolated and alone. If they are neglected or if no one is there for them when they need help.

You don't need to be there all the time. But you need to be available, you need to attend, and there will be times when you need to step in and help out. And that doesn't end. As your children grow up, they can be away from you for longer and longer periods of time. But they still need you to be available. There needs to be enough of a connection, you need to be sensitive enough to know when something is going down so that you can be available and talk them through it. I even have it with my adult children that I am available. There is a lot of stuff that goes down in their lives that I don't know about. And that's good. They are their own people. Especially when they are married. But it's delightful to be available to talk things through if they want to. And the beautiful thing is that as time goes on, it becomes mutual. I also get to share the things that are going on in my heart with my adult children and we get to encourage one another.

You have to model for your children who God is. He is faithful. He is loving. He is present. You can always go to him and he will always help you. The more often you do that, the more often you go to him, ask for what you need, experience his kind, loving, faithful attention, the more deeply you learn to trust him and to love him. He is a God who is gentle and kind, patient, forgiving, nurturing. From day one model that, teach that, live it out. It's the greatest gift that you can give to your children. Then deep down in their heart, they will know the LORD and they will become like him. That's what Bruce Perry says in *What Happened to You?* A child can only love if they have first been loved. Reminds me of 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us."

Now it's possible that you hear me talk about the need for you to love and nurture your child and think about all the times in which you failed to do that. Maybe you missed out on the first

years of your kids lives because of work, or postpartum depression. Maybe you have been far too distracted following your social media or trying to make your house nice. Maybe you make a habit of dropping off your kids at daycare so that you can have some time for yourself. Maybe you don't like babies very much and you are resentful about how much energy they take. You feel really bored or like your life is pointless: feeding and washing and cleaning and changing nappies all day long. And it showed in how you took care of them. And now you feel terrible. You feel like you failed as a mum. Like you damaged your child and they are going to suffer for the rest of their lives.

So what do you do? You go to your Father in heaven and to your Lord Jesus and you tell them that you made a big mistake. And you are really sad about that. And then you ask him to forgive you. And you ask him to give you a change of heart. And you ask him to fix your children and to help them. And then you do what you can to love them.

Do you know where it starts. With your own relationship with God. You need to know deep down in your heart that the LORD's ship is safely moored in the harbour. You need to know of his love and kindness, his grace and mercy, his faithfulness and commitment, his compassion and goodness. It gives you a deep down security. Then you know that you are safe and loved. And then you can reflect that in your dealings with your children, no matter what their age or stage of life.

Don't forget about the grace God has shown you. It's the ultimate reason for you to serve your family in love. In Titus 2, after spelling out the role of men and women, then in verse 11 Paul says that it is the grace of God that teaches us to say no to ungodliness and live self controlled, upright and godly lives. God loved us first. He has forgiven us all our sins and he cares deeply for us. When you get up at 2 in the morning to feed your baby, or when you have to sort out another fight between your children, don't just do it for them. Do it for your Lord Jesus. He sees everything that you do and he loves you for it. Ask Christ for his Spirit. I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man abides in me, he will bear much fruit. Christ will give you his power so that you can live in joyful service before him.

You know, it's never too late to love. You go home today and you start loving your children, then no matter what happened in the past, things can change for them. The little ones need lots of physical touch. Hugs and cuddles. Breastfeeding and snuggles. If they are older, they still need physical touch. Especially if they missed that when they were young. Hugs. Hand on the shoulder. Massages. Dad does a rumble with the kids or grandkids.

Emotionally, you need to be there for your children. If you are present and available, that's huge. If you are there and if you really love and attend to them, they open up to you. If it hasn't been a pattern, it might take a while to get there. But no one can resist love. Faithful, consistent love, guidance, direction is the most powerful thing in the world. A few years ago my dishwasher broke. I still haven't fixed it. Thought about it a bunch of times. But every day, I get to do the dishes with my kids. It's one of those really unique times when you are productively busy, standing next to your kids. The amount of parenting I have done standing next to my kids doing dishes is staggering. We talk and laugh and process all sorts of things. It's a beautiful time.

If you have failed your children and by now they are older or even moved out of the house, it's never too late to love. Some of the most profound healing that I have witnessed took place as parents in their old age, nearing death told their adult children about how they failed as parents and apologised. That gave so much rest and peace and healing.

Another reflection. If you love your children, you are going to put time into them. When they are young, you can love and nurture them and give them a really solid basis for the rest of their lives. Or you can skimp during that time. Then it shouldn't be a surprise that when they are teenagers or adults that they make lots of wrong choices in life. And then you will put in time, helping them to pick up the pieces and try to put their lives back together again. I'd love for you women to have a vision for living a righteous life. For living the way God intended. He loves you dearly. He really wants to bless you. He's telling you: if you are married, the best life is loving your husband, having children, and investing a huge amount of yourself in loving and nurturing them. By the time they are 20, you are mostly done. They come to you less and less often. They don't need you in the same way. You've

done well when you have worked yourself out of a job. They are safe and secure in God's love and your love for them and so now they are off living a life of joyful service before him.

What it also means is that if you are single, if you are an older woman, if you are a grandma, you also have a huge role to play. The older women are to teach the younger women, God says. A young mum often doesn't know what she's doing. Especially today in our segregated lives. She needs to see it modelled. Make yourself available to these young mothers. Find a way to develop a relationship with a young mum and get to know her. Drop by to help her with the housework and share a coffee. Mentor her in her task. Be a Mama P. I have seen some older women, some single women who have walk a journey with their nephews and nieces, with their grandchildren from their youth. And they have been such a blessing. Not just helping mum. But by building a beautiful relationship she could be there at times when mum couldn't.

And then when I look around I see another huge need. The only way mum can be at home with the little ones is if someone else is teaching at school, helping out at Fair haven, Eucalypt. If you are single and have gifts in those areas, then please help. There is a huge need in those areas. It's not to say that you have to do that. If you are single, then your role is also a lot more like the single men. You have to find the place in the world where you can use your gifts in God's service. Find your niche. Find out what job you can do, what relationships you can pursue. As you have been loved by your LORD, find out how you can extend his love to those around you.

Dirk Poppe

October 2023