

*Only One is Perfect
and He Is In You*

I AM THINKING right now of three mothers I have known. They had much in common during their child-rearing years. They were smart, conscientious, committed, and wanted more than anything else to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Whatever that meant, it certainly did not mean losing their cool and using expletives in interactions with their children! Yet, each one of these three mothers finally did just that when they reached levels of exasperation and frustration with their grown children. I was one of those mothers, and my son's response to my outburst was, "Now I see Mom as human after all." Another mother heard her son say in response to her tirade, "Now I've seen you as a person." The third, I believe, never quite caught his breath in time to respond to his mom's colorful convulsion!

Failure Reveals the Rock

What mother hasn't become exasperated and reacted in anger toward her children at some point? Although the reasons for a mother's outburst may vary—from simple frustration to the child's invasion of her boundaries—her over-reaction may leave her feeling like a failure. But such failures can have enduring and healthy results. It is good for both mother and child to appreciate that mom is human and that the only source of

perfection is God. For moms, what a relief to relinquish the need to be perfect. When we apologize for our outbursts and for our failure to avail ourselves of the richness of the English language (rather than resort to common expletives), this serves to strengthen the familial bond and reciprocal respect.

I and many of my peer group have lived to see some of our grown children make choices that leave us winded, wounded, and wondering where in the world we went wrong. We stayed at home—no day care for our children; we sat with our families in the pews every time the church doors opened; the Word reigned supreme. How do we come to terms, then, with outcomes in our children's lives that indicate our best efforts may have failed?

Seismic events in the lives of my grown children shattered what remained of my belief that there was a formula for raising fail-proof children. But the good news is that as the ground heaved beneath my feet, the Rock was revealed. God revealed Christ. Although an ardent student of the Word, I finally had a revelation of what Jesus was getting at when He said, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on My behalf. Yet you refuse to come to Me to have life" (John 5:39,40).

I had missed the pertinent point that He is my perfection, my fail-proof life—not my own efforts, expertise, or religious zeal. Now I look back over my active mothering years and wish that I had known these truths then. I am grateful, though, that I now have the opportunity to mentor young mothers and the privilege of sharing these truths with mothers still in the process of raising and influencing their little ones.

In the book of Job, God describes Job as "perfect" or "complete." The original Hebrew word here comes from a root word which can be translated "to be spent, consumed." I believe Job was consumed and exhausted with trying to be righteous; with compensating for whatever sin his children might be indulging

in; with maintaining and defending his reputation in the community. The quest for perfection consumed him. In a sense, our ancient brother Job was the quintessential mother. His wife seemed to have no such scruples about parenting or even her relationship with her Creator. In exasperation she exhorts her husband to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9). Like Job, and unlike his wife, many mothers struggle with perfectionism.

Author Kathy Collard Miller, in her great little book, *When Counting to 10 Isn't Enough*, writes,

. . . Megan, the mother of a fifteen month old, lives under the burden of an emotional dictator called perfectionism. Always striving to be better, she picks out and concentrates on her slightest error, even when her behavior is acceptable... It wasn't until Megan began to understand the difference between perfectionism and Christian perfection that she could accept herself as a person and as a child of God.¹

The Myth of Perfectionism

That quest for the mythical Holy Grail of perfectionism is responsible for dumping more guilt on a mother's heart than anything else of which I am aware. We buy into the paradigm and, from the moment we know we are pregnant until our children graduate from high school and beyond, we assume a larger than necessary burden of responsibility for our child's welfare. While we do pray for help, we still can't quite shake the suspicion that God is sometimes disapproving of our performance. *After all, we seem to reason, He cannot be everywhere, and has left me personally in charge of this precious child.*

Holding a newborn infant in our arms is an awesome, glorious, and yet frightening experience. Babies arrive wrapped in the smell of heaven, which will soon be exchanged for the

earthly redolence of throw-up and messy diapers. We feel completely responsible—only moms can feed them, particularly if we are breast-feeding; only moms may want, or know how, to change their diapers; and only moms seem to have the insight to know what is needed when everyone else resorts to handing back the inconsolable baby. No wonder a mom seems to think she is the god-person.

Brenda Hunter supports this popular assumption when she writes,

No one can ever replace you in your children's lives. For them you are the sun, the moon, the whole universe. You are your children's only mother, and if you are too often absent, harried, or preoccupied, they may yearn for you all of their lives.²

While these are wonderful, and to a large extent, true sentiments, they serve only to heap more guilt on the mother who fails to measure up. Loss of a mother or mother figure is not a trifling issue. It is a tragedy and does leave a gaping hole in our lives but not one that is beyond repair. God clearly has promised that even if father and mother do forsake us, He will never abandon us.³

By contrast, consider the revelation that a friend shared with me recently.

When I was first riding home from the hospital with my daughter I was pretty anxious," she said. "I remember putting my head back on the seat and clearly hearing Christ say, "Let me be the mother through you." That calmed me considerably.

Learning Christ as Life

Our heavenly Parent planned it this way. Paul writes in

his letter to the Christians in Galatia that when God revealed Christ in him, he realized, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:19, 20). The God who only helps from afar is the God of the Old Covenant to whom the psalmist David cried. He recorded some of the most beautiful expressions of the human heart, yet his God was still a separate entity. In the New Covenant, He has come to dwell within the human heart. The mystery, hidden from the ages and of which the patriarchs longed to know, now revealed as “Christ in us the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). He no longer wants to simply help us from a distance; He wants to guide, nurture, encourage, strengthen, and enable us from the inside out.

Failures and frustrations on the outside squeeze us in order that the life of Christ may emanate from the inside, rather like the squeezing of a tube releases the toothpaste. The purpose of the container in the first place is to hold the contents of the tube. Our own weaknesses are blessings that reveal the bankruptcy of our own flesh to accomplish perfection. “The flesh” means the self-life, or attempting to live out of one’s own resources. Some of us are more positively programmed than others, more naturally nice, of a pleasant and patient disposition—what we might call prime-cut flesh. Others are tougher, brasher personalities and could be considered analogous to chuck beef. It is all still flesh. Our first parents ate of the tree of the knowledge of both good and evil. Good is no more acceptable than evil in our relationship with God or in facilitating our freedom. His love is such that He will permit us to come to the end of our own good efforts in order to reveal the bankruptcy of the flesh, at which point we will be ready to exchange the self-life for the Christ-life.

So, the mother becomes the child, learning from her heavenly Parent even as she herself is parenting. The way to be free

from the myth of being the perfect mother is to see that the only one who is perfect is Christ. We do not dispute that. What is hard to comprehend is that His perfect life has been imparted to us. Feel the tension diminish as we imagine really taking Jesus at His word, believing that we can do nothing without Him and trusting Him to parent through us—full of exquisite wisdom, love, and grace according to each child's particular needs and bent.

There is a story about a little girl who, on the way home from church, turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, the preacher's sermon this morning confused me."

The mother replied, "Oh! Why is that?"

"Well, he said God is bigger than we are. Is that true?"

"Yes, that is true."

"He also said that God lives within us. Is that true too?"

Again the mother replied, "Yes."

"Well," said the girl, "If God is bigger than we are, and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?"⁴

Letting Him show through brings great relief. Our attempts to live separately from this indwelling life is an untenable position causing disappointment, dissonance, and depression in our own lives and certainly not what we want to impart to our beloved children. Our bottled-up frustration in failing to be perfect finally bursts through the thin veneer of pretense, resulting in more guilt and remorse over a less-than-perfect display of temper. Then the circle is complete.

Released Mom

I thought maybe I could make up for my less-than-perfect mother performance by being the perfect grandmother until I heard God say, "How are your grandchildren ever going to look for Me if you never let them down?" Every one of us, parent

and child alike, must learn Christ for ourselves. As we learn to accept one another for who we are—as God accepts us—we are passing on the only perfection there is, His. As I said goodbye at the airport to my son and his wife recently, he leaned down to embrace me saying, “Thank you for loving us with God’s love.” I knew then, that by God’s great grace, I had attained unto a new place of motherhood.

As this particular son and I have come to terms with one another’s weaknesses, there is a far deeper, freer, richer bond between us. He is my son who is learning Christ’s sufficiency in his life through his own failures. I am the mother who is willing to acknowledge that the good I strived for was not sufficient and that I must forgive myself for this.

In a touching moment in the movie, *Billy Elliot*, the dance teacher listens to descriptions of the boy’s deceased mother, then says, “She must have been a special woman.” To this Billy tersely replies in a broad, English North Country accent, “Na, she was just me mam!”⁵

At the end of the day, that is all we are, just moms. We are biologically blessed, emotionally ever involved, yet spiritually insufficient to the task without the indwelling life of Christ who is our perfection, a perfection that makes us right with both our God and our family. Let’s celebrate the unique expressions of Christ that we are as women and mothers.

Nourishing Nuggets from *The Message*:

“When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing” (John 15).

“Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am” (Philippians 4).



APPETIZERS

- ❖ *If you hover to control every eventuality in your children's lives, you may blow them off the course that God has planned for them.*
- ❖ *From the very beginning, you learn to let your children go.*
- ❖ *From teething to toddling to teenage years, your children's heavenly Parent is in compassionate oversight of their lives.*

*Helicopter Mom,
You're Creating a Draft*

I'M SURE THAT we are all familiar with news footage of dignitaries descending from a helicopter. They duck down and hold on to hat or hair until they are clear of the whirring blades of the helicopter that has deposited them at their destination. Only when they are safely out of the wind, can they stand upright, readjust their clothing and coiffures, and then proceed to their engagements.

Controlling for Take-Off

When my daughter was raising little ones, I first heard of the helicopter analogy. It paints a picture of a fussing, overly solicitous mom who is fearful to let Tommy toddler try anything new without the constant whirring of her benevolent blades. Then, just as the helicopter hovers over its occupants even after they have disembarked, so we often continue trying to control our children even when they are grown and gone, creating the kind of draft that causes our offspring to duck out of the way. The current is often so great that they feel helpless to be free of its influence—an influence that haunts them and continues to disturb their adult lives. If they do get away, they don't come back.

We hover because we think we can preside over all the

eventualities of our children's lives. Of course genuine, responsible guidance is essential, especially to ensure the physical welfare of a small child. But we often go beyond what's necessary, thinking that if only we stay near to oversee, then we will be able to make sure no evil befalls them. This propensity is yet another outward expression of our penchant for perfection. Our friend Job, whom we mentioned in the last chapter, forever offering sacrifices to atone for the possible sins of his sons and daughters, is also a great example of hovering to control all eventualities. The record shows that in Job's family God had a far-reaching plan that included grave loss and tragedy before eventually, good prevailed.

We are often unaware that the draft we cause with our fussing actually blows our children off course and out of the wind of the Spirit who is directing their lives. Someone once compiled a list of a few examples of how our natural proclivities as mothers sometimes get in the way of the greater good:

- Being a mother is wanting to pick up your children each time they fall, but teaching them to pick themselves up instead.
- Being a mother is wanting to keep them from all hurt and harm, but knowing that they must be taught to take care of themselves.
- Being a mother is wanting to give them the best of everything, but knowing they will value life more if they wait and work for many of their rewards.

My own rewarding mothering life is replete with illustrations of yours truly as Helicopter Mom. Many years ago, one of our sons was living alone some distance from us, where he was working just before going to college. From every communication I had with him, it appeared that his life was one catastrophe

after another. Following one telephone conversation, I slumped down into the chair saying, “God, please do something.”

The response was swift and searing: “I will, if you get out of the way!”

I was dumbfounded. God could do it!—without my fretting, cajoling, or even sending care packages. And He did. In the heavenly Parent’s own good time, all the issues were resolved—car finally up and running, rent money provided, fingers healed from a nasty accident—and my son took another step on the journey of trusting the God who is everywhere, rather than a mother who is not.

Heavenly Parentage Does Not Hover

As much as we care, think about how little control we have when our babies are forming in the womb. Though we can exercise and eat right, we cannot determine their personality, the color of their hair, eyes, or even their gender—despite a plethora of folksy methods suggested to guarantee a boy or a girl. Even with the rapidly approaching specter of human cloning crossing our horizon (which sounds like heaven for control addicts), God alone holds the life force in His hands. Even if science and questionable ethics collude in forming a human being, surely that life will still exist beyond our ability to dictate its destiny. The heavenly Parent is the one who designates the journey.

From the moment we first hold our babies in our arms, we need to grasp this holy concept: God has paths planned for them from the foundation of the earth. In the case of the little lives whose destinies are snuffed out before they begin, the Father still has the final say. When mothers use the ultimate means of control by aborting their unborn babies, I believe that these lives return to His presence and fulfill His purposes in another realm (See 2 Sam. 12:22, 23).

Whether at the far end of the spectrum as in abortion, or at any point along the continuum of parental choices, the need to control has its roots firmly embedded in fear. The presence of fear means we are unaware of the intensity of God's love and care for us. Fear drives us to take matters into our own hands. A quote from a mother in a recently-published book labels it accurately, "The worst thing about being a mother is not the sleepless nights or dirty diapers or less money or whatever. It's just the fear. I don't know how to keep both of them safe every second of the day!"¹ We do not have to know how; we only need to know the One who can and does.

An insightful and wise friend has suggested that in the same way men find it hard to let God be God in their work, women find it hard to let God be God in their children's lives. Pronouncements from the pulpit frequently support the stance of the parent's sole responsibility in child rearing. I recently watched a TV preacher pacing the platform cradling a baby in his arms and declaring that parents are wholly responsible for their child's future behavior, citing the infamous Colorado Columbine High School shooting in 1999 where two students ran amok killing classmates and a teacher. He bellowed, "Who lit the fuse on their time bomb? You, the parent did." While there is much that parents do to influence their children for good or evil, the decisions children make are ultimately theirs alone, especially in the decision to accept or reject Christ as Savior. A friend of mine writhed under a burden of guilt regarding her children's spiritual destiny after she heard her pastor pronounce that it was her responsibility to get that child through the pearly gates.

Thanks be to God that we are not the ultimate authority in the lives of our progeny. He has provided from His rich repository for both their present and their future. Four years ago one of my precious grandbabies was born, just three months after

my father's death. He had died thousands of miles from where his fourth great-grandchild came into the world. Apart from the obvious bloodlines, they had something else in common: angels. As I looked at my father's still and cold form that May morning, I ached that he had died alone in his little cottage in his native Scottish islands. Then it seemed I heard the Father say, "He was not alone. My angel brought him home." When I later gazed in rapture at the warm bundle of new life, I knew this child had not arrived alone either. Angels had come with him and would watch over him until he left this earth.

In Matthew 18:10, the gospel writer indicates that the angels in charge of the children ever look toward God the Father for their instructions. I've always found it significant and immensely comforting that they are looking to the Father, not to their charges or their mothers.

Limits of Loving and Praying

Well, if hovering and controlling is out for mothers, then what about prayer? Surely prayer is a more effective and safe domain for the concerned mother. I had an epiphany regarding even the parameters of prayer once. My son and his fiancée had given me a date when they were en route to a certain destination, so I ensconced myself to pray during the hours of the journey, being careful to adjust for time zones. I discovered some days later that they had changed the date (without telling me!) and had traveled a few days earlier, and without my prayer covering. Not only that, but they had been involved in a serious roll-over in their old pick-up truck and yet had escaped unscathed. I was compelled to conclude that their heavenly Parent could bring them through without my accompanying prayer, though I like to believe that perhaps He responded retroactively in this case!

Please understand, I fervently believe in prayer. I'm not entirely clear as to how it works, only that it does and is often my only recourse, the only thing I can do in most situations. However, this story illustrates the fact that God cares more than any mother can and is consistently committed to our children's welfare and training. Heavy and aching mother hearts find access to a kind of prayer that intercedes perfectly and accurately; groanings of the spirit that are beyond words, or "too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Our love motivates us to want the best for our priceless children, and our love is undisputedly powerful. Yet, as I stood under the hot Phoenix sun some years ago and viewed the quilt created to commemorate the victims of AIDS on its nation-wide tour, one sentiment among the many thousands of hand-designed epitaphs stood out. It simply said, "If love could have kept you, you never would have died."

Our love is limited and lacks the divine perspective. As such, our attempts to control can result in over-involvement in our children's lives that ranges from the ridiculous, like the mother who wanted to go on her daughter's honeymoon, to the more sinister situation of the son who felt constrained to call his mother when sexual temptation with his fiancée threatened to overtake him. Such was the extent of the toxicity in that unhealthy mother-son relationship. Kenneth M. Adams poses a piercing question for our consideration:

Did you have a parent whose love for you felt more confining than freeing, more demanding than giving, more intrusive than nurturing?²

Yes, we are in a wonderfully privileged position, and we may well be our child's best, and most trusted, friend. We do have the responsibility to be available to listen, guide, and model, but our best efforts cannot preside over every outcome. Our calling is simply to stand, confident of the supremacy of

God as their perfect Parent. If we stand still, we do not create unwanted currents.

We do the best by our children when we cultivate calmness and model faith instead of fretting and manipulating. As we learn to relinquish our need for control, we are free to love more unconditionally and lend support, rather than running to the rescue. When we allow our children, no matter how little they are, to take responsibility for their own behaviors, we facilitate the flow of health, wholeness, and wisdom in their lives. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, an eighteenth-century writer, rightly said, "A mother is not a person to lean on, but a person to make leaning unnecessary."³

Let's start early to lift off in our helicopters so our children can run clear of the whirring blades and have the opportunity to know only the wind of God's Spirit as their guiding force.

Nourishing Nuggets from *The Message*:

"You realize, don't you, that their personal angels are constantly in touch with my Father in heaven?" (Matthew 18).

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life" (Philippians 4).