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## Mothering by Heart

Can you cook. . .that is, besides Macaroni and Cheese from a box?” my aunt asked me one Saturday only a few months before my wedding. It was not a rhetorical question. She knew I’d spent my childhood outside playing instead of in the kitchen learning to cook with Mama.

“Well, no, but just give me some recipes and I can learn!” I replied.

After the wedding, I tucked my trusty wooden recipe box of “no-fail” casserole dishes under my arm, and I was ready to tackle this new challenge with recipes for meaty macaroni, mushroom soup stroganoff, and chili stew. But a few of the recipes weren’t as “no-fail” as I’d thought—as I found out one night when the whole house began to have a strange odor after the casserole of the day began to bake. My husband insisted we chuck the entrée, open the windows to air out the duplex, and go out for hamburgers.

Little by little, though, I did learn some cooking skills. I’m not a gourmet cook, but I’ve managed to feed a family of five.

Many of us approach parenting the way I approached cooking. We’re trying to find our way, or perhaps have been parenting a while and have lost our way, so we look for a formula—something concrete and structured that we hope might be the ideal parenting system. But through my years as a mom of children now ages

twenty-six, twenty-eight and thirty-one, I've found that the way isn't a formula. Instead, it's connecting with God's heart and with our kids' hearts. As we do, He will lead us and grow us into the moms we're meant to be and the parents our children need.

While there is no one recipe for perfect, foolproof parenting, there's a lot to be gleaned from reading books on child development that give you ideas and suggestions and help you understand the needs of your children as they change and grow. But you should not allow one parenting book or program to overrule your own judgment, silence your own heart response to your child, or leave out how God personally may instruct you concerning your child.

God promises wisdom when you're fresh out of it. He offers hope and comfort when you're discouraged. His joy can give you the strength you need to minister to your family—not just to survive, but to thrive and even enjoy the season you and your children are in. Jesus wants not only to walk alongside you in your mothering journey, but to live through you. And that's one of the main themes of this book—how you can love your kids while you lean on God.

While being a mom is a great privilege and gift, it's also an awesome challenge—and the biggest responsibility you'll ever face! That's why you can't do it in your own strength, but can by depending on the Lord.

Besides fun things like playing at the park with our kids, cheering from the stands in a winning game, cuddling a little one's soft baby face next to yours as you rock him to sleep, or taking photos on birthdays, one of my favorite aspects of mothering is the great spiritual growth potential.

You see, being a mom gives you lots of opportunities to lose

your life and to choose your child's good at the expense of your own rights; for example, when it's 2:00 a.m. and your well-deserved sleep is interrupted by a little person who needs you. Or when you'd love to read a magazine, but your children are stir-crazy and want you to read them *Amelia Bedelia* for the fifth time. Or when you see a needed change in your child's life, and as you pray about it, the Lord points out the same need in your life.

So you won't think I'm writing this book because I believe I have "arrived" as a mom, let me share the three prayers most often in my heart when my children were growing up. Since no one except God is a perfect parent, I often prayed, "Lord, please fill the gaps between the love my kids needed today and didn't get from me, even though I was loving them the best I could." My second prayer was, "Jesus, redeem my mistakes." Believe me, I made plenty of them, but I was encouraged that God could use even my blunders to draw my children to Himself. And finally, "Lord, help our marriage, but let it begin in me."

I asked for His mercy and wisdom often because I knew I couldn't do this important job apart from the Lord's grace. That's because just when I got one of my kids figured out and things were in harmony, he or she was off to a new stage with a new set of challenges and reasons for me to be on my knees.

When our oldest child became a teenager I remember my husband and I looking at each other with baffled expressions, saying, "Nothing prepared us for this!" Then after the ups and downs of high school, we adapted to the empty nest. When our kids graduated from college and got married, I faced an entirely new season: being a mother-in-law. (I'm still learning about this one!) Then came a delightful new role as grandma. Maybe these

ever-changing seasons of motherhood are God’s way of continually drawing us to depend on Him and not on ourselves.

As mothers, we come in different colors, are from unique backgrounds, and live in different parts of the world. But we have a lot in common: We are all working mothers from the minute we leave the delivery room because, as Leslie Parrott said, “[Mothering] depletes, expends, and burns up more time and energy than any other human activity I’ve encountered. It’s a job that never stops. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, a mom is on call to feed, clean, play, and care for her little one.”<sup>1</sup> And that’s just the first year!

As moms, we want to protect our children. We want the very best for them as we help develop their gifts and talents. We want them to become all they are meant to be! And as Christian mothers, we want our children to know and love Jesus and experience how much He loves them.

In the chapters ahead you won’t find ironclad feeding formulas or ways to structure your newborn’s schedule so you can get uninterrupted sleep. What you will find addressed are matters of a mother’s heart and reflections on becoming the mom you’re meant to be—like throwing away the cookie cutter and appreciating each child’s individuality; finding a mentor mom to help you along; developing a heart for your home; and not putting off joy so you can really enjoy this brief season of mothering. You’ll also discover practical suggestions for making memories, building your child’s faith, praying for your child in the midst of a busy life, and moving your body so you’ll have enough energy to keep up with your kids and to meet the challenges of each day. You’ll find some secrets to effective mothering, such as living out of a sense

that people are more important than things, finding words that work to communicate with your kids, and finding creative ways to connect with your children on their turf. Plus there's wisdom from Scripture, from mothers who've gone before you, and a lot of hope, encouragement, and inspiration along the way.

My prayer is that this book will help you find a new joy in whatever season of mothering you're experiencing—because there's so much fun to be had and so much to be enjoyed in the midst of kitchen floors tracked with muddy little footprints and noisy cars full of kids you're carting around. And while each chapter has several suggestions, don't think you have to do it all. Pick one that fits where you are as a mom and try it out, and save the other ideas for a different season. You can ponder the "Question for Reflection" by journaling, praying, or talking it over with a friend at a coffee shop or in a moms' group.

More importantly, as you read, remember: When you get to the end of your rope, you'll find God there. Although I've often found myself fresh out of loving feelings and low on patience, I've found that as Romans 8:36–39 promises, God's love never fails. If you surrender to Him in those "end of your rope, all out of love" moments; receive His love for you; and are willing to be a conduit of His love to your children, husband, and others around you, you'll be amazed at the grace He gives you again and again to be the mom you're meant to be as you love your kids while leaning on God.

## Throw Away the Cookie Cutter

It was a hot, sunny day, and I was poolside, watching as two neighborhood four-year-olds, Jenny and Olivia, began a swimming lesson.

“Let’s play the submarine game and go under the water at the count of three,” their instructor, John, said after they had splashed and played around for a few minutes.

Olivia dunked her head and treaded water like a fish, did an underwater handstand, and came up smiling, while her proud mom looked on. But Jenny protested, “I don’t like to get my face wet! I don’t want to go under!”

“Come on, honey,” her mom encouraged from the sidelines. “You can do it. Going under the water is fun.”

“No, it’s not! I wanna go home,” Jenny wailed.

“Okay, we’ll play a different game,” John suggested. “London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down...and when we get to the end of the song, we’ll all three go under.”

John tried every strategy he knew, but nothing would coax Jenny to join in the submarine or any other game. Normally enthusiastic, she became tearful and anxious, and she didn’t enjoy that swimming lesson or the ones that followed. After the first series of lessons was over, her mom wisely gave her a break and just let her play at the pool and go at her own pace. A few weeks