

Thoughts on Mother's Day, 2013
Mt. 16:25

Introduction: The passage we are going to be meditating on this morning is found in Mt. 16, and it is verse 25. How many of you ladies are glad we aren't turning to Prov. 31? That is the passage where the qualities of the excellent wife are laid out, and so there are many pastors around the country preaching out of Prov. 31 this morning. And I always feel bad for the mothers when that chapter is being taught because the standard is set awfully high. On the other hand, I doubt if you've ever thought about this verse in the context of Mother's Day, but I believe there is a truth in here that is beautifully exemplified by motherhood. When we think of motherhood, we often think of it in positive terms, don't we? I once asked an audience to tell me what terms came to mind when they thought of their mothers, and the terms were all positive – loving, caring, patient, sacrificial, kind, selfless, hard-working, gentle, serving, and so forth.

But I hope you can appreciate that if the demographics of our group were a little different – in other words, if we weren't rural, white, educated, and middle class – we wouldn't be hearing such endearing terms. All around our country there are people who would describe their mothers as selfish, addicted, aloof, abusive, or even evil. For most of us, motherhood conjures up warm, positive feelings; but for many, motherhood conjures up images of pain and alienation and rejection. We are all disgusted when we hear stories of mothers who give birth and then abandon their newborn babies in dumpsters, or starve them because they need money for drugs, or drug them so they can beg for money, or discipline them by keeping them chained to a radiator. And the reason we recoil when we hear these stories is because these kinds of actions are so aberrant. They are contrary to nature. So we are familiar with good mothering, and bad mothering, and then, of course, there are all kinds of mothers between these two ends of the spectrum.

So when we think about mothers, the question comes up, what separates an outstanding mother from a good mother from a mediocre mother from a terrible mother? And I believe the key is in this verse we find in Matthew 16:25. *“For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.”* In the immediate context, Jesus is talking about your eternal destiny. Biblical Christianity is all about dying to self and living for God. We offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), we die daily (1 Cor. 15:31), we put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:13) – and we do this because it is that mortification of the flesh that opens the way to eternal life in the presence of God. That is the specific point Jesus is making.

But at the same time, we can generalize this concept by saying that Jesus is also teaching, in broad terms, that when you make self the focus of your life, you will ultimately end up missing your goal. In other words, if you make your goals and your comforts and your plans and your desires the focus of your life’s energy, you will end up tragically short of what you are living for.

And it is this matter of dying to self that separates the excellent mother from the good mother from the mediocre mother. I can state this same principle positively by saying that it is living for someone else that sets the excellent mother apart from the average mother. So what I want to show you this morning is three ways excellent motherhood exemplifies this principle of dying to self, or living for someone else.

We see it first of all in the very activity that makes a woman a mother – childbirth. When a woman conceives and then chooses to carry that new life for nine months and then give birth to the child, she is demonstrating this principle of losing her life to gain something greater. And she does it in two ways.

First of all, she is exemplifying dying to self from the perspective that her life, and her goals, and her comforts, and her personal space, and her time, and sometimes even her dreams are basically put on hold for the next 18 years, or until that point when the child leaves the home and starts his own life. When you think of all the physical inconveniences a mother goes through year after year after year when she is raising her family; all the sleepless nights, all the runny noses and dirty diapers, the tedium of being at home all day long when the husband gets to go out and go to work – the mother who excels in this environment is the mother who has a firm grasp of this principle of dying to self and investing her life in her children.

When I was in college I did yard work every weekend for a couple of years for a very successful young couple. He was CPA, and she was a doctor in the local hospital. When I first started working for them, she had just had a baby and was on a 12 month maternity leave (which she should be commended for – companies are only required by law to give you 12 weeks!), and then went back to her practice. She would drop her baby off at a Nanny's house every day on her way to the hospital, and then pick him up again on the way home. And it wasn't uncommon for them to bring in a Nanny for the weekend when Clemson was playing and they would have a big party. They did not want to be saddled with the responsibility of child oversight when they were getting ready for and then hosting the party. That is not an example of dying to self and investing your life in something important. Where was her time being spent? Where were her energies being expended?

Many of us here today grew up under mothers who were highly capable and tremendously talented who could have pursued lucrative careers outside the home – yet they gave it all up to raise their children and nurture their family. That is excellent motherhood.

Secondly, when a woman conceives and gives birth, she is demonstrating this principle in a very real way because childbirth is an activity that genuinely puts the life of the mother at risk. When you consider everything a woman goes through in those nine months of pregnancy, and then add to it the trauma of labor and childbirth, I can't come up with a better illustration of this principle of dying to self. Fortunately for us today, medical care has come a long way in the last 200 years, but the mortality rate for birth-giving women in the 1800's was sometimes as high as 40%! That is hard to comprehend, isn't it? If you got pregnant in the early 1800's, you basically had a 50 – 50 chance that you were going to die in the process. At the beginning of the 1900's it was down to about 1 in 100, and today it stands at about 24 per 100,000, or .024 %!¹ So today the decision to give birth isn't as "life and death" as it was 200 years ago, but you can see how the decision to actually carry through with the pregnancy and give birth is a great illustration of this principle that defines excellent motherhood.

I remember after Holly gave birth to Julie Ann, I was so traumatized by the ordeal that I told her, "no more babies! We're done!" That attitude is the exact opposite of what I'm talking about here in excellent motherhood. And unfortunately, this is precisely the attitude that is so prevalent in the pro-choice movement. Many times, the driving force behind the decision to abort is the impact the child is going to have on the mother. She's either on a career track, or doesn't want to be saddled with the responsibility of motherhood, especially if the father is nowhere around, or simply doesn't want the inconvenience that pregnancy and parenting necessarily involves. So do you see how excellent motherhood is demonstrated by childbirth? Few things exemplify this principle of dying to self like this does.

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maternal_death

The third way excellent motherhood illustrates this principle of dying to self is by living in front of your children in such a way as to perpetuate the next generation of excellent motherhood. This is something I feel like I can speak with authority about (unlike childbirth), because if being an excellent mother is anything like being an excellent father, it's easier to talk about being an excellent mother than it is to actually be an excellent mother. It's easier to be an excellent mother at church than it is to be an excellent mother at home. But being an excellent mother demands that you live in front of your children, in the home, in such a way as to perpetuate the next generation of excellent motherhood. Little boys learn how to father by watching their own fathers, and little girls learn how to mother by watching their own mothers. I came across a good quote the other day. "Children have never been very good at listening to their parents, but they have never failed to imitate them." So moms, if you are going to be excellent mothers, you are going to have to live it out in the most difficult arena there is, the home.

I believe the greatest legacy my first wife left our children was her walk with God. Almost every morning when I woke up, she was already awake and reading her Bible in bed. And I am immensely blessed and our children are fortunate that Nancy has perpetuated that very same legacy. The two most enduring memories I have of my own Mother are her prayers during family devotions (and you could tell by her prayers that she had a vital relationship with God), and her fasting and praying every Saturday for nearly two years for her out-of-control teenage son who happens to be your pastor today.

I have been blessed in my lifetime to see outstanding examples of excellent mothering in the trenches of life at home, and Moms, I assure you that living your faith in front of your children involves this principle we are talking about – dying to self. It is no easy thing to live in a biblically consistent way, day in and day out, year after year, in the home, but that is one of the marks of excellent motherhood.

In the Bible we have many wonderful examples of this, the most prominent one in my estimation being Timothy's mother and grandmother. The Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Tim. 1:5, "*I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well.*" It is very curious that there is the absence of a father or grandfather being mentioned in Timothy's spiritual lineage. And I believe illustrates the profound impact a godly mother can have. We don't know if Eunice was a single mom, or simply married to an unsaved man, but the testimony of Scripture is that she was directly responsible for the successful transmission of her faith to her son. That is excellent mothering. It doesn't require a degree, it doesn't require education, it doesn't require lots of resources at your disposal, it doesn't require a nice house, or a husband, or lots of money. What it does require is living for others and not yourself.

Conclusion: So as we think about the spectrum of mothering types, we see all kinds of mothers in our society, but hopefully for you mothers this morning, your goal is to be an excellent mother. You know as well as I do that the absence of children in the home makes no difference – you never stop being a mother. And I can assure you that every mother here is already on the path to being an excellent mother! How do I know that? Because of your willingness to go through with the pregnancy and give birth to your children. But that is only the first mark. It needs to be followed up by nurturing and raising the child instead of delegating that responsibility to someone else. And then it needs to be carried on by living in front of your children in such a way as to perpetuate the next generation of excellent motherhood.

Prayer: Our Father, I ask today that you would grant the mothers here this morning the grace they need to pursue excellence in their mothering.