

A Mother To Me
Pastor Joe Oakley
GFC – Mother’s Day – 5/12/19

Today is Mother’s Day and I’m preaching a message entitled A Mother to Me. I want to begin by asking, “What is a mother to you?” I know in a biological sense a mother is the one who gives birth to a child. But what are the characteristics of a mother?

Some of us had amazing moms who loved us and cared for us.
 Some of us had abusive moms who neglected or wounded us.
 But – go past your own mom – and think about what a mother *should* be.
 How would you answer that question - “What is a mother to you?”

This week, I prayed for a different kind of message about mothers since I’ve preached many Mother’s Day messages over the years. And in my study, I came across a sermon based on an obscure overlooked passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. I’ve read it many times, but never really thought about its meaning.

The book of Romans has some of the deepest theology in the Bible. Yet Paul closes out the letter on a very personal note by commending or greeting people he ministered with or who ministered to him.

Of the 30 people who Paul singles out for his personal greeting, 10 were women. The fact that Paul could not describe the church in Rome without mentioning women shows us the tremendous influence that women had in the early church. And he mentions some women who were very powerful ministers. He first mentions Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2.

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Phoebe is commended for being a leader in the church. We don’t know what Phoebe’s service to the church included, but according to the biblical definitions, she was at the least a deaconess and possibly a pastor or teacher. That’s because Strong’s Concordance says diakonos can mean a teacher or pastor. So, we see that Phoebe held an important ministry position in the church.

The greatest New Testament example of a man and a woman leading side by side is found in Romans 16:3 which says:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

The fact that Priscilla's name was listed first is important in itself. Paul called them both fellow workers, co-laborers who lead with him, side by side. In Acts 18:24-26 we find both Priscilla and Aquila explaining the way of God to Apollos.

Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

Notice that both Aquila (a man) and Priscilla (a woman) taught Apollos (a man). This is undeniably a woman teaching a man.

Paul also lists other women who worked with him in ministry. Romans 16:6 says: *Greet Mary, who labored much for us.* We don't know who this Mary is – but she was commended for her hard work.

The same is said in Romans 16:12 about *Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord.*

Romans 16:7 says: *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.*

Junia was a woman who was an apostle. Paul goes on and on listing these great women who were leaders and teachers and co-workers in the early church. But the verse that stood out to me was verse 13 which says:

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.

This statement could be taken two ways. It could mean that Paul and Rufus had the same mother. But we know from history that is not true. It helps to see how other Bible versions translate this verse: For instance, the Good News Translation says:

I send greetings to Rufus, that outstanding worker in the Lord's service, and to his mother, who has always treated me like a son.

The New International Version says:

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. That's where I get the title to this sermon: A Mother to Me.

So, who is this Rufus and who is his mother who treated Paul like a son? When and where did Paul meet Rufus' mother? Did Paul stay in her home during his missionary journeys? Why does he refer to her fondly as being like his mother?

Well – we can't answer all those questions, but we can piece some things together from other Bible passages and history. When Jesus was crucified, Mark 15:21 says:

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

All we know about Simon is that his name indicates that he was a Jew. Cyrene is in Libya, which is in north Africa. So, here we have an African Jew carrying the cross of Christ.

Can you imagine what that did to him? Can you imagine how that changed his life? I mean – we talk about taking up our cross and carrying it, but Simon literally picked up and carried the cross of Christ.

The blood of Christ that was on that cross dripped down on him.

When the nails were hammered into the hands and feet of Jesus, Simon saw it. When Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," Simon heard it.

Simon experienced the darkness and the earthquake which caused the centurion to say, "Surely, this is the Son of God."

When Jesus was on the cross and He made sure his mother was going to be taken care of by John – Simon saw it.

Undoubtedly, Simon became a believer in Jesus Christ. Then he passed his faith on to his wife and children. The fact that Mark lists Simon's sons Alexander and Rufus in his gospel means that they must have been well known among the Christians. We don't know what became of Alexander, but Rufus and his mother were living in Rome when Paul wrote his letter.

And sometime between Paul's salvation experience and his letter to the Romans, Paul had a close relationship with Rufus and his mother, who became like a mother to him. We don't know the details of their relationship, but somehow Rufus' mom ministered to Paul like a mother.

Think about this: there are many people Paul called saints, brothers and sisters in Christ, teachers, evangelists, apostles, and co-laborers... but there is only one person in the Bible he called mother.

When Paul said, "She is a mother to me," he did not define what that means, but he didn't really need to. We know what he meant by that.

This was no ordinary relationship.

This was not a casual relationship.

This was not a shallow relationship.

This was a relationship like that between a mother and her child.

What does it mean to be a mother to me?

We can know what Paul meant by what he said about mothers. He said in 1 Thessalonians 2:6-12:

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

... For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.

Paul reveals what it means to be a mother and a father. These passages show us the female role of gently nurturing children and the male role of exhorting, comforting and charging children to be all that God wants them to be. Those are both reflections of our Father God who is gentle when we need gentleness and exhorting when we need motivation. God is both tough and tender.

By the way – single parents – you need to really take this to heart because you must fulfill both roles. We all have differing parenting styles, but usually moms are more tender and dads are more tough. Sometimes, that's reversed. But the point is: children need parents who are both tough and tender. All toughness leads to fear. All tenderness leads to foolishness. That's why Proverbs 22:15 says:

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

Proverbs 23:13-23 says:

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.

My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad; my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right. Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord. There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.

Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path. Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.

Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding.

We see here again – children need parents who are tough and tender.

Now – in the passage from Thessalonians, Paul gives six characteristics of a mother.

A mother is gentle. Paul said *...we were gentle among you,*

A mother is caring. Paul said *...like a mother caring for her little children.*

A mother is loving. Paul said - *We loved you so much...*

I love the way the King James Version translates this: *So, being affectionately desirous of you...* The Greek word used here occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It means to "long after, to have a strong affection for." The words used here by the apostle express the strongest affection and attachment. The sense is that Paul was so strongly attached to them that he would have been willing to lay down his life for them.

A mother is shares truth and shares life. Paul said - *We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*

Paul shared the truth of God's word and he shared his life with them. This was not about rules divorced from relationships! Remember – rules without relationship result in rebellion. You can't have rules without relationship, just as you cannot have relationship without any rules.

So, we need to share the truths of God's word and share life together with our families. We need to pray together and play together.

A mother is hard working. Paul said - *Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*

Hardship in the KJV is translated travail, which is hard work – but it also speaks of intense intercessory prayer. Parents – you need to be intensely praying and doing spiritual warfare for you children.

Your main job is to raise your children in the faith! Yes, we want them to be productive and educated and earn a decent living. But what if they gain the whole world and lose their soul? 3 John 4 says:

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

That is our goal as parents: that our children will know God, love God and walk in truth.

Our faith should be passed down to future generations. Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:5-

I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.

We see here that mothers passed on their faith to their children who passed on their faith to their children.

Are you passing it on to your children or is the faith stopping with you?
 Are you training them in the word and ways of God?
 Are you answering their hard questions?
 Are you praying with them about difficult situations they face in life?
 Are you showing them answers to their problems in the Bible?
 Or are you just taking a passive role thinking they can just go out into the world, figure it out on their own and make their own way?

Let me tell you this: everything in the world – entertainment, education, friends, social media, music, movies – everything is designed to draw your child away from God!

That's why you should know what your children are watching and listening to.
 That's why you should know who their friends are.
 That's why you should take an active role in what they are learning!
 You cannot be a passive parent because there is an active devil roaming around seeking whom he can destroy!

Listen, we have awesome children's and youth ministries here at Grace. We don't babysit – we teach the word of God! But we only impact your child for an hour or 2 a week. And that's if you come to church every week – which most people don't.

So – if you're putting sports or other activities before church on your family's priority list – you are teaching you children what's really important to you in life.

I know people will say, "I'm showing my children that they are important." And that's a good thing to do. But not at the expense of putting them before God! Not at the expense of showing them that God is of lesser importance!

Raising your children in faith is a 24/7 responsibility! Deuteronomy 6:5-7 says:

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night.

Teaching your children about God is your full-time job!

Ladies – if you don't have any children or if your children are already adults – you can still have an impact on other people like Rufus' mother had on the Apostle Paul!

In the natural – motherhood is determined by birth. But in the family of faith – motherhood is birthed by determination!

Determine to look around for people who need a spiritual parent and begin to love and nurture them. That's what the mother of Rufus did for Paul.

She loved him unconditionally.

She fed him nourishing meals.

She listened to him.

She nurtured him and comforted him in his pain.

Think about it – before he was saved – Paul was a terrorist going around imprisoning and killing Christians. I'm sure if he had any pain over that, Rufus' mom could have reminded him, "My dear son Paul, my husband was there when they crucified Jesus and he told me that Jesus forgave those who crucified Him. if Jesus forgave those who crucified Him, surely He will forgive you!"

When Paul got tired in the ministry – she could have reminded Paul, "Even Jesus got tired carrying the cross. I know that because my husband picked it up and carried it for Him. So, let me cook you a good meal and then you go take a nap!" This mother's care and love for Saul of Tarsus, the terrorist-turned-missionary, should inspire us all.

Think about it. Without knowing who he would become, *she was a mother to the most significant convert in the history of the church.* Thank God for her!

And parents – you know your children, but you don't really know who they will become.

When my parents were raising me and discipling me and spanking me – they knew I was Joey Oakley – but they didn't know I would become THE Joe Oakley!

Abraham Lincoln led this nation through our greatest crisis, but who made Abraham Lincoln the man that he was? Lincoln said it was his mother. And she didn't know he would become THE Abraham Lincoln!

Listen, your child might become a preacher or a president!
But whatever they become – raise them to be full of faith!

And children – young or old – honor your mother!

It's great that we single out a day in the year to recognize mothers, but there should not be a day that goes by that we do not honor our mothers!

The highest tribute that we can give to our mothers is not to praise her, or give her a gift, or to come to church on her day - the greatest tribute that we can give to our mother is love her God and to become the person she wants us to be!