

SHOULD WE EXPECT MOMS TO DO MORE? HOW MOMS MAKE DISCIPLES IN ALL NATIONS

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The Practical Reality of Overseas Moms

Sitting in a training course in 2003, I began collecting lofty expectations like a frantic child at a pizza buffet. I dreamed about seeing thousands of churches started, dozens healed, marriages saved, college students becoming theologians, all because I decided to pack a bag and move to China.

When I first moved overseas, I was expected to share my testimony using a language with which I couldn't even count to ten. I was supposed to start a church planting movement, disciple women, and keep our supporters in the States up to date. My first two months were spent dusting the layers of coal away each morning. The next month, I figured out how to pay the water bill without actually ordering water. In the two months that followed, I learned to buy lettuce and use the squatty potty. At the six-month mark, it was tempting to feel like I failed. I vomited my testimony out a few times. However, once they asked any sort of question of me, I simply smile and replied using the only phrase I could say correctly, "Yes, I am American." This is not a church planting strategy that fills books.

Cue the Great Commission

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Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:18–20)

Our organization prepares us to do our task—the Great Commission. Not long after moving to my new culture, I realized that our organization trains us in what they would *like* to see from us. However, it's my job as a mother to figure out how that actually plays out in both my family and my community. For each of our families, we have to discern what good and best look like at the practical level. And at the most foundational level, I had to come to the realization that I was too focused on what 'I' was supposed to be doing rather than what God was *already* doing.

I was ready to land in China and make disciples of my new Chinese friends. What I wasn't ready for is God's doing the Great Commission *on me*. I was not fully prepared for how God would disciple *me* through both difficult situations and people that I'd meet. My heart was not ready to see the goodness of the Lord that would come both through isolation and in community. The Great Commission was given for me AND for them.

Great Expectations

As far as I was concerned, the Great Commission was simple: Believe it, Crush it and Finish it. After all, we all “know” that Jesus gets to come back if only we would hurry the heck up. Well, that's at least what I was taught.

The Great Commission might be simple, but it certainly isn't easy. This hurried rush-rush mentality leads us to presumptuous ministry. We presume to understand the needs of the person in front of us. Therefore, we justify throwing tracts at people that are either poorly translated or in need of explanation. We do this for the sake of getting the task accomplished in order to obey the Great Commission. We push aside diligent homeschooling because entire people groups are dying without the gospel... TODAY! As moms, we are torn between reaching those people “on the edge of lostness” and teaching

our kids to be disciples of Jesus. Trying to do it all puts *us* on the edge of losing our minds!

We can believe the Great Commission with relative ease, but doing the Great Commission faithfully requires us to examine our expectations. The Great Commission is a long arduous, glorious process. If we expect this process to be easy and rapid, then everything else we're asked to do will be met with resentment. Many of the expectations placed on us are explicit. These include language learning, discipling believers, evangelism, and being loyal to organizational goals. However, the longer one is on the field, we run head on into a number of other expectations. For example, there are responsibilities in the home, taking care of kids, learning a new culture, homeschooling, and serving our husbands. All of these things require a recalibration on our part. When we originally visualized our lives overseas, most of us didn't picture ourselves folding socks and teaching our kids fractions.

If we are honest, raising healthy families can sometimes feel like it's an obstacle, which gets in the way of the "actual" work that missionaries are supposed to do. So what happens when we step back to focus more on empowering our husbands for fruitful ministry or slow down to breathe strong character into our 11-year old son? It feels like we've been sidelined. It seems that for now we settle for being the water boy and perhaps one-day we will be asked to play again. We may be on the team but we're not really contributing much. People really could get their own water. But here we sit.

Women often believe a lie—that ministry outside of the house is more valuable to the kingdom than anything we do inside of it. Although people would say that stay-at-home moms are important, their words can feel patronizing. When our daughter brings me a mud pie to contribute to the dinner spread, what do I say? I thank her. I give her a hug and tell her she did a great job. But actually, that mud pie won't be eaten or remembered.

In the same way, we walk away from organization meetings with the feeling that we have only offered mud pies. We hang our heads low knowing that we need to do more. Our organizations have a mountain of expectations for us. Jesus said we can move mountains if we have faith. Perhaps we don't have enough faith. We therefore decide to take on a Pauline mentality. We travel, train, and press into the work. If we would just do more, pray more, and teach more, then God would do enormous things through us. All the while, our children are left clinging to the shrapnel of a mother who has imploded from the guilt of not being enough.

Should We Be Like Paul?

Every mission organization uses Paul as an example of a "successful" missionary. And he was. Yet, as I look through Scripture, I can't help but ask a few questions: What would Paul's ministry have looked like had he been married? What if he had traveled with three (or more) children?

As a single man, many of Paul's years were spent in a semi-nomadic lifestyle. There were times he spent a few years at a place; other times he merely spent a few weeks. Being single, he was able to move quickly and efficiently. Paul was able to hear about the needs of a church or a city and then leave the next morning to minister to those people.

When you bring 5 kids along, nothing happens quickly or efficiently. That being the case, as a family, we need to recalibrate how we measure fruitfulness and think about our ministry calling. If Paul's effectiveness was at least partially linked to his ability to travel and not settle down, then might our effectiveness also be linked to our ability to settle in a community and stay for a bit?

Had Paul been married and had kids, Paul's ministry would have looked different. He by necessity would need a team that did things instead of him. Maybe he would have sent out not just Timothy but also teams of people to go out for him. Could it have been

that his main task would have been discipling a group of young single men who could sail ships and ride camelback to remote areas of Asia? Perhaps time would have been spent teaching small groups how to preach the kingdom of God. We will never know how this would have looked, but I think these questions are important ones for moms to think through.

Somehow we think the title “missionary” gives us three arms and 35 hours in a day. Why do we have higher expectations of ourselves when we move overseas? If we were homeschooling and taking care of our kids in our passport country, would we still feel as guilty about not leading six Bible studies a week? Most likely not.

So what is it about taking up the call to be a missionary that places this burden so squarely in our minds? It really boils down to expectations. We have both supporters and an organization who look at our lives and ask what have we accomplished. Many times our inclination is to do more so that we can get recognition from both our organization and those in the States. We want people to think we are doing a great job. At some point, many of us decided to crank up the volume so that we overwhelmingly hear the voices of our supporters and our organizations. All the noise mutes out Scripture, which sits nearby reminding us of who we are in Christ.

Ask yourself this question, as believers, isn't our calling the same regardless of geography? If our family were in America, wouldn't we still be called to reach the lost, train our children, and serve the poor? Living overseas doesn't change our fundamental calling. We are called to be resurrected people, who live as freed, rescued, treasured, and holy. Scripture reminds us over and over again what we are to be doing. We are to love our neighbors, care for the widows and orphans, show mercy, disciple, and pray continually.

These things are not a checklist. If they were, then we can look at any point in Paul's journey and say that he failed. While out teaching in the synagogues, he's not feeding the poor. While surviving in jail and writing Philippians, he's not tending to the

needs of widows. Nobody in church history is going to call Paul a failure. But it seems that we as women think we are supposed to be doing it all and doing it every day. Not even Paul did everything all the time.

Cleaning Our Homes from what is Dishonorable

II Timothy 2 outlines a few of the Lord's expectations of us. Verse 21 says, "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work." Here is what the Lord expects from us: to cleanse ourselves from what is dishonorable.

What are some things that are "dishonorable"? Sometimes it is dishonorable to treat our kids as interruptions. We treat them as interruptions when we make so many commitments to others that we are ragged and tired whenever we are at home. At other times, we neglect language learning because it's just plain hard. Perhaps, we dishonor the Lord when we say "yes" to everybody else *except* our husband.

We need to be about the business of ridding our hearts from dishonorable desires, like jealousy, comparison, and complaining. In this cleansing, we will be holy, ready for every good work.

If this seems works-oriented, that's because it is. There are practical gritty, grainy things that we have to do in order to cleanse ourselves of what is dishonorable. If we are to be clean vessels, it will take more than a simple morning devotional. It's going to require us to show up each and every day, committed to removing what is dishonorable from our midst. Cleansing requires deep scrubbing, changing habits, and doing things that you know are good for you (even if they are miserably difficult). According to II Timothy, if the cleansing isn't taking place then we will not be useful and ready for every good work.

God uses seemingly mundane things to cleanse us of what is dishonorable. There was a season when I had four children under six years of age. While I was in language school, my tutor came to the house where I nursed my newborn while learning the if-then clause in Chinese. For most lunches, we ordered in. We ate more eggs than is humanly healthy. Fried eggs, scrambled eggs, hard-boiled eggs, omelets, and rice with eggs. These were all considered different meals. More days than not, I wanted to give up speaking and instead surrender myself to just playing charades every time I wanted to buy milk. If you want to pantomime the need for milk, it's going to require you to pretend you are milking a cow. Yes, I was willing to act that out every time; this should tell you my level of desperation.

Nevertheless, our family knew that hunkering down and learning Chinese would help us be "vessels for honorable use." This process prepared us for other good works. As I walked to class each morning, I listened to the Rita Springer song, "It's Gonna be Worth It." I would cry as I walked, partly because I didn't want to study anymore and partly because I was reminded that it would indeed be worth it.

Language school alone taught me to love Chinese people before I could even tell them hello in their heart language. It reminded me that contentment isn't magical. Sometimes, it comes with hard work and patience. Learning language showed me that God was in the business of humbling me as I took baby steps in my new culture. Otherwise, he would have entered me into the Matrix and downloaded Mandarin into my brain. He could have, but he didn't.

Because of that hard work of language learning a decade ago, I have since been able to walk into an abortion clinic with my friend and tell her how the Lord still loves her. I can use Chinese to explain to a woman bound in Buddhism that her marriage is falling apart and she needs to start praying to a God who can heal. These things are holy. Through the pain of language school all those years ago, I was able to "be a vessel for

honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.””

We are to be women of preparation, vessels for honorable use. The commitment to be a clean vessel requires big faith. This type of faith requires us to believe that our calling as sanctified believers is more important than our calling as missionaries.

Making Disciples Every Day

Since Jesus gave the Great Commission as a game plan to his disciples, we need to look at his life to see how he modeled it for them. Imagine that Jesus had gathered his disciples but then told them that he had more important stuff to do. What if he had healed the demoniac without bringing along the 12 apostles, who gave up everything to trust and follow him? The fact is that Jesus didn't do that; instead, he brought his disciples along.

Jesus did not regard his disciples as “interruptions” to the so-called “main task” of ministry. Don't forget that these are the same guys who botched up healings and told Jesus there wasn't enough food. Those same disciples ran away the moment Jesus was taken into custody. These were not easy men to include in on things. Nevertheless, he ministered with and through them.

Jesus understood that discipleship happens in the dirt. It wasn't going to happen by simply giving a killer morning devotional, fist pounding the disciples, and walking out on his own to minister to the community. He discipled them by walking alongside them and talking about whom among them is the greatest. It happened as they fished and paid taxes as a team.

If Jesus discipled people by bringing them alongside him, this means we need to get more creative in how to include our children in our ministry as we disciple them and others. Also, we need to allow others to join us in discipling our children. Jesus didn't separate his ministry to the disciples from his mission to reach the masses. In the same way, we should not rank our calling as mothers and our calling as missionaries.

As a stay-at-home-mom, we should *not* have a ministry that looks like Paul's. We often forget that Acts simply gives us the highlights of Paul's ministry. If we travel as much as Paul, we essentially leave our family to disciple themselves. Paul spent many days just walking. Days layered upon days of praying, walking, and doing laundry. Countless weeks and years are not documented in Scripture because it doesn't make for the most interesting of reads. Before Paul could do daring things, he first had to do daily ones. There were tasks that needed his attention so that he would be ready when he arrived at a place to minister to the masses. He could free his mind and his time to proclaim the kingdom of God because the necessary daily chores had already been completed.

As women, our ministry involves constant preparation. We cook, clean, learn language, and educate our kids, not just to make sure people in our home can thrive but so that we as a family can be vessels ready for honorable use, ready for every good work. If we neglect our children and our home life, then we will not be ready when things do arise for us to minister to others outside the home. The chaos of our home lives will make us too tired, too frustrated, and too distracted to meet the needs of others. Also, we will lose the opportunity to demonstrate what it looks like to be holy amid the ordinary things of life. Those opportunities will pass us by and leave us feeling resentful towards our own family. We will blame them for getting in the way. And so the cycle will continue.

In contrast, if we diligently cleanse our vessels through the ministry of preparation, we will be set apart as holy, ready for every good work. Sometimes those holy moments come in seeing an atheist come to Christ. Other times are just as sacred, such as when our 6-year old prays for her brother's hurt finger. Those are all Great Commission things. Teaching my 6-year old to pray for her brother will hopefully allow her to come to Christ more authentically because she understands the power of prayer.

The Great Commission calls us to make disciples of all nations. This includes the souls living under your roof. If we have the mentality that we must get through the

parenting thing in order to do the “real” task of ministry, then we’ve missed the point. The Great Commission does not say, “Make disciples of all nations, except your children.” Too often, the second half of the Great Commission is conveniently overlooked: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...” This second part is where the game is really played. Teaching them to observe all that Jesus commands simply does not happen by throwing cute Christian phrases at a tribal group *or* at our children. This is the part that requires us to suit up, strap on, and start sweating.

“Teaching them to observe” requires both time and patience. Sometimes this will require a mother to be up front and center. At other times, it means reserving a hotel or cooking lunch for the others. All of these things are a part of the work of ministry that needs to get done. If we feel like we need to get credit for being up in front, we have become dishonorable vessels. Instead, we simply ought to find a need and then figure out how to meet it. How often we miss out on true holiness.

Concluding Applications

Figuring out how to minister both in and out of the home takes time and requires that we wear blinders. We need time because none of us is going to balance perfectly all of the time. Even for Paul, there was never a time where he was doing all the things believers are called to do. Also, we must put on blinders so that we don’t start comparing ourselves to others. We cannot look at how one certain family does it and presume it’s a formula for our particular family. We will need to put on blinders to the things that are good but maybe not best for that particular season. Most of the tasks we do overseas can be categorized as “good,” but not all will be “best.”

Practically, what are we to do? Here are a few suggestions. First, we need to make clear commitments about how our family will do ministry in the community. What are your priorities? Maybe it’s volunteering at an orphanage once a week or hosting an English corner on Friday night. That single commitment becomes your primary focus in

the community. If you know this is your priority, it becomes easier to say “no” to other good things that come your way. When a new opportunity arises, we need to ask ourselves what is going to be dropped if and when we say “yes” to this?

Second, we have to commit to serving our family. As moms, we are to be diligent in training our children, teaching them to obey not only our voices but also the Lord’s. We need to be committed to respecting our husbands, making space for them to thrive in ministry to the community.

Finally, we should commit ourselves to preparation. We are to prepare our vessels in holiness, godliness, and perseverance so that we are ready to be holy. In this way, we will fulfill not only our call as missionaries but also our call to be loyal daughters of the King.