

May 13, 2012

In Praise of Wives and Mothers: Keepers of the Spring

Peter Marshall, onetime chaplain of the U.S. Senate, loved to tell this story:

Once upon a time there was a fresh, pure, bubbling spring high up in the mountains that turned into a lively little brook that ran down the mountain to become a clear river that watered the valley far below. In time a small village grew up on the banks of this river – and the river brought life and health and prosperity to the village. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear river; the millwheels of various businesses were powered night and day by the flowing river; and farmlands in the valley were naturally irrigated, growing abundant crops. The elders of the village realizing that the health and vitality of their village depended upon the crystal clear waters of the spring above, hired a man to do nothing but keep that spring free of debris and silt and other contamination that would interrupt the flow life to the village. And so this man was paid to do nothing but be the keeper of the spring. His work being far above the hustle and bustle of the village, people soon forgot about him and took their clean water for granted.

Years passed, business thrived, the village became a popular spot for vacationers and attracted more people and the village grew into a town and then a city. But at one meeting of the town council as they reviewed the annual city budget, someone noticed a salary being paid to some obscure individual called a Keeper of the Spring for something no one knew anything about. And so in their wisdom, and concerned about fiscal responsibility, the city council decided to dispense with his services. Nothing changed immediately, but slowly the level of water in the river began to drop as debris accumulated high up in the spring and diverted the water. Small animals that died fell into the spring and rotted. The river that was once crystal clear began to take on a brownish, muddy look. A slimy film began to cover the surface of the river as it slowed and a foul odor began to be noticed by everyone in the city. The swans left, businesses folded, people moved away and the tourists stopped coming.

Finally someone recognized that the man they fired was the man that was responsible for the health and prosperity of the city, and so they hired the Keeper of the Springs back to do his job and in a matter of weeks that river that brought life to the valley was once more clear and clean; the wheels of business began to turn, people began to come back and life returned to that village once again.

My premise this morning is that mothers are the keepers of the spring in the village of family, and that without someone to keep the spring clean and pure, the whole village suffers. Now this does not excuse fathers from their responsibilities in the home – but I believe that the Bible teaches that mothers are the primary keepers of the spring. I believe that God has ordained it so that mothers have a home-heart – a heart that is centered around the affairs of the home.

One afternoon a man came home from work to find total mayhem in his house. His three children were outside, still in their pajamas, playing in the mud, with empty food boxes and candy wrappers strewn about. The door of his wife's car was open, as was the front door to the house. Proceeding into the house, he found an even bigger mess. A lamp had been knocked over, and the entry rug was wadded up against one wall. In the front room, the television was blaring to an empty room, and the family room was covered with toys and various items of clothing. In the kitchen, dirty dishes filled the sink, breakfast cereal was spilled all over the counter, dog food was on the floor, a broken glass lay under the table, and a small pile of sand was coming in the back door. He quickly headed up the stairs, stepping over more toys, and more clothes, looking for his wife. He was now terribly worried that she had gotten ill or had a sudden heart attack. But he found her lounging in bed, still curled up in her pajamas, sipping ice tea and reading a book. She looked up at him and smiled, and asked how his day went. He looked at her, bewildered and asked, 'What on earth happened here today?' She smiled again at him and said, 'You know every day when you come home from work and ask me what in the world I did today?' Her husband could only nod wordlessly. 'Well' she said, 'Today I didn't do it.'

And this is a job that is demeaned and devalued and despised by the culture at large today. Women are told in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that being a housewife, or homemaker is somehow less than noble or fulfilling or important. We have the image of the career 'mom' – the mom who balances her career with all the duties of wife and mother and somehow makes it all work. But guess what – it doesn't work. No woman has enough energy to make it all work. Something always suffers when we lose sight of our priorities.

We have raised a generation of children who have become used to coming home from school to an empty house because both mom and dad are busy with their work and careers and no one is watching over the spring. Now lest you think that your pastor is against women working outside the home – I want to tell you right now that is not the case. But what I am against is the sacrifice of our children and families on the altar of career and work, and leaving the spring to be polluted by the influence of the world and culture because we are more concerned about our standard of living than the condition of our spring.

God has ordered all things for our good – and that includes the roles moms and dads play. The evidence of this is there in the Bible for us to see, if we would be open to His word and not blinded by our prejudice and cultural trends. In Genesis 3 God lays out some of these role distinctives for us. To the woman God said, *'You will bear children with intense pain and suffering...'* and to the man He said, *'...you will sweat to produce food to your dying day...'* Now you can argue with this all you want – but not with me, you'll have to take it up with God. He's the one who said it; not me. **God inextricably linked children with mom and work with dad.** He said, 'Mom, you're going to have pain' and 'Dad, you're going to sweat.' Which is not to say that mom has nothing to do with work and dad has nothing to do with children – but as a primary responsibility, dads must work and moms must bear children. Now I have a lot to say to the dads, but this is Mother's Day, so I will hit the dads hard in June.

The Bible makes it clear that the primary realm of responsibility for mom is in the home. In Proverbs 31 we see the ideal mom and wife. *An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.* Proverbs 31:11 It is interesting that this book, which is known as a book of wisdom, concludes with this word about moms. This is wisdom. The picture we get here is that mom is at home taking care of things and dad is taking care of business outside the home. *Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land.* Proverbs 31:23

But notice that this does not limit her in any way. *'She looks for wool and flax and works with her hands in delight. She is like merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She rises also while it is still night and gives food to her household and portions to her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle.'* Proverbs 31:13 – 19

This isn't about having a career or not having a career, it is about recognizing the responsibility God has given mom. God has given mom the responsibility to be the keeper of the spring at home; because if that spring is muddy and polluted, everything downstream will be sick. Listen to the descriptions – verse 15: *'She rises also while it is still night and gives food to her household and portions to her maidens.'* Verse 21: *'She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet.'* Verse 27: *'She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.'* The center of her universe is the household and all that goes on there and she is the keeper of the spring.

Moms are the first line of defense against the impurities and evil influences that try to come into the home, because the role of dad is to be out in the world sweating. And if mom is not there – the spring is unguarded and disaster is not far off. When I was growing up, my mother took this role very seriously. I had spent a week away from my family with some friends where we experimented with some things we ought not to have been doing. When I got home, I wrote a letter to a friend of mine detailing our exploits. Well my mom knew something was up because I never wrote anyone anything before and she intercepted my letter, steamed it open and read it. Now my dad, poor soul, would never have had a clue anything was out of the ordinary – but mom knew. She was the Keeper of the Spring and she knew when something was muddying the waters. That led to all sorts of consequences I won't go into here – suffice it to say, mom was doing her job, and then dad did his.

Listen to what Paul tells us about the role of wives and mothers in the family: *Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.* Titus 2:3-5 First of all we need to note that some training is necessary. **Notice that teaching is going on here – teaching what is good.** And then Paul outlines the good that is to be taught. The younger women need to be told the story of the Keeper of the Spring so that they in turn can tell their children and other younger women so that this incredibly important position is neither neglected nor taken for granted. Don't suppose that just because someone is a mom she knows what an important job she has.

The first thing to be taught is to love your husband. – *encourage the young women to love their husbands* The word encourage here means to admonish, to exhort earnestly. It is also used to describe restoring one to their senses. In other words, even in Paul's day, there was an overwhelming message in the culture that undermined the proper role of women in the family, just as there is in this day. And the first thing that suffered was the love between husband and wife. Wives, mothers, the best thing you can do for your children is to love their father. The primary relationship in a family is the husband and wife. If things are not good with them – they will not be good with the children. We all know that more is caught than taught – and the essence of your relationship will be what is caught by your children – no matter what you preach. Mothers, if there is disrespect toward your husband, don't expect your daughters to magically learn how to respect their husbands. As the keeper of the spring, you are responsible to see to it that love reigns in the home, and that starts with loving your husband.

Secondly, women are to be encouraged to love their children. – *encourage the young women... to love their children*, This admonition presupposes that you have children. But some women have questions about that.

Q. Should I have children after 35?

A. No, 35 children are enough.

Q. I'm two months pregnant now. When will my baby move?

A. With any luck, right after he finishes college.

Q. What is the most reliable method to determine a baby's sex?

A. Childbirth

Q. My childbirth instructor says that it's not pain I'll feel during childbirth, but pressure. Is she right?

A. Yes, in the same way a hurricane could be described as a stiff breeze.

Q. What is the best time to get an epidural?

A. Right after you find out you're pregnant.

Q. Is there any reason I should be in the delivery room while my wife is in labor?

A. Not unless the word 'alimony' means anything to you.

The truth is that children are God's blessings to us and the means of delivery is mom. One of the highest privileges and honors for women is to have children; but this culture has reduced that blessing to a chore and a choice. We honestly believe that children are optional – and the result of that kind of thinking is abortion. If children are optional, then they are disposable and that is the tremendous tragedy today. Today, women who were made to bear and rear children, and were made with a heart to love children, have bought into the lie that life is all about them and if children complicate the issue – terminate them. I don't think there is anything that says how much God honors women more, than the fact that they are the ones He chose to give birth to children.

Wives and mothers are to be encouraged to live wisely. *encourage the young women... to live sensibly.* That is to be discreet, wise, self-controlled, prudent. '*She opens her mouth in wisdom...*' Proverbs 31:26a My wife is so much wiser than I am about things that go on in the home. Often she will ask me if I have noticed anything about one of our girls. To protect the innocent I won't mention any names. She is wise to their moods and emotions and spiritual well-being in ways I am not. I am not completely clueless I'll have you know – it is just that she has that wisdom that comes from being the keeper of the spring that I don't have. And she brings it to my attention and together we deal with it.

Wives and mothers are encouraged to be pure: *encourage the young women... to be pure.* Peter puts it like this: '*In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. Your adornment must not be merely external -braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.*' 1 Peter 3:1-4 What is precious to God is the pure godly behavior of wives and mothers that is expressed in the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

And then Paul says that women are encouraged to be workers at home – *encourage the young women to [be] ...workers at home.* This literally means '**keepers at home**' – busy at home, one who watches over the house. It is used in the sense of one who watches over a household and family, seeing to it that all members are cared for, and all things maintained in good order. I have come to understand a few things about my wife during our years together and one thing is that her identity is somehow linked to how things are in the home.

For example, if the house is in disarray, if there is dissension and disagreement, if there are things broken or not working in the home, she doesn't feel too good about herself. And one of the things that delights her soul is to have me fix the things that are broken or don't work around the house. When that happens it is as though I've fixed whatever was broken in her emotions. Her domain is the household and the house, and if things are not running smoothly there, her soul is not at peace.

The primary responsibility God has given mom is to be the one who watches over the home. This does not mean that women cannot work outside the home. Clearly the verses we read about the virtuous woman indicated that at least some of her work was conducted outside the home. No, the main issue here is that the primary responsibility for her is the home. Mom is the keeper of the spring, and if the spring gets muddy and polluted because she's gone – something needs to change. Paul tells Timothy: *Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach* 1 Timothy 5:14 Because the enemy comes in when the keeper of the spring is gone, and he dirties the water and pollutes the spring and the family gets sick and people die – and not only spiritually or emotionally.

Kindness is another mark of the godly wife and mother: *encourage the young women... to be kind* Kindness ought to be the rule in the home. That is mom shouldn't be hard or mean in her management of the home. And she is to teach that in her home: *'...and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.'* Proverbs 31:26b There's nothing worse than a mean mom. Now this does not mean that you are just a pushover or you never require your children to toe the line – but you are not mean about it. And you are kind in your administration of your household. Which teaches your children the value of kindness. She is also kind to those who are less fortunate: *She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy.* Proverbs 31:20

Submission to their husbands – *being subject to their own husbands.* This is probably the area in which most women have their greatest struggle. The word means to be in subjection to, obedient to. Back in Genesis 3, when God outlines the consequences of sin for Adam and Eve, He told her: *"I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."* Genesis 3:16 This points up the basic conflict in a woman's soul. God created Eve as a helpmate to Adam – not to be independent of him and have her own career. But there is a desire to be in control, which is a direct result of the fall. Literally the sense of this is that because of sin, Eve would now struggle with her desire to rule over her husband, not be ruled over.

Eve had no problem with submission before the Fall – now she's going to struggle. Sin causes us to see God's order as distasteful, abhorrent even. In our minds submission has become offensive instead of desirable. But in God's mind, submission is something holy, something pure, something beautiful. Peter talks about this in his first letter: *In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands, even those who refuse to accept the Good News... That is the way the holy women of old made themselves beautiful. They trusted God and accepted the authority of their husbands. For instance, Sarah obeyed her husband, Abraham, when she called him her master. You are her daughters when you do what is right without fear of what your husbands might do.* 1 Peter 3:1, 5-6 NLT

I think the biggest fear a woman has is that if she leaves it up to her husband – he'll screw it up. But this is not a matter of who is better qualified to do the job; this is a matter of God's divine provision. And when this is in order, all the rest of life will tend to be in order. But if this is out of order, don't expect that your family will prosper in all things. Proverbs 31 says that *'The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.'* Proverbs 31:11-12 Some people seem to think that this is a competition but it's not. God has given each of us roles to play, and when we fail to play those roles, things get out of order.

Finally, notice that all of these instructions are *'...so that the word of God may not be dishonored.'* Literally so that the word of God might not be blasphemed – or spoken evil of. In other words your lives, as wives and mothers are meant to point **to the glory of God.** We are meant to display the glory of God and we do that as we conform to His word. The world demeans and cheapens the role of wives and mothers by insisting that women break free from what they see as the chains of bondage in being a wife, a mother, a worker at home, submissive to their husbands. And when we buy into that kind of thinking we blaspheme the word of God. But as you love your husbands, love your children, live sensibly and pure, as you embrace your role as a worker at home and respond to your husband in glad submission, the word of God is preached more powerfully than word could ever do.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for many years, had four sons and they were all preachers. Once, when the whole family was gathered, a visitor asked Howard, one of his sons, "Howard, who is the greatest preacher in your family?" Howard, who had a tremendous admiration for his father, looked straight across at him and without a moments hesitation he said, "Mother." Mothers, wives – you are the **Keeper of the Spring**. This is a high and holy calling. The health and direction of your family depends in large part on how seriously you take this responsibility. Don't let this world define you. Don't let the wisdom of this age take you captive and force you into its mold. Be a Keeper of the Spring.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

We thank You today for the high honor and purpose You have given wives and mothers. May we always cherish and hold in high regard the Keeper of the Spring. May our homes be blessed by Your presence and power as we guard the life-giving spring; and may our children and husbands rise up and call their mothers and wives, blessed. Lord, teach us what is truly important so that we will not spend our lives in pursuit of vain things and temporal pleasures and gain. But let us lay hold of the eternal truths in Your word. Protect us and save us from the insidious corrupting influence of the philosophy and so-called wisdom of this age that devalues and demeans motherhood. Give us right perspective and empower every mother to be a Keeper of the Spring. In the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.