

Loving the Little Years

MOTHERHOOD IN THE TRENCHES

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Rachel Jankovic

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To Luke
on whose shoulders we all ride

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Foreword



Sometimes all we really need is a fresh perspective on our circumstances. We need someone to open a window and let a breeze blow into the room that we didn't realize had gotten so stuffy. This book is about opening the windows.

Mothers of little people have the most challenging and important job on earth. But it is a humble job. And it takes the eye of faith to see the fruit of a coming generation of faithfulness. This book is about hardship and humor, sacrifice and satisfaction.

Rachel Jankovic is a woman who lives out her story with humility, grace, and a houseful of humor. With five exuberant children, ages five and under, she knows what she is talking about. She keeps her windows open.

She called me just the other day when she was writing like crazy to meet the deadline for this book. Having been careful to not shortchange the kids while writing

a book on loving them, she was squeezing her writing into the nooks and tight crannies of her days. On this particular day, she had opened the windows. The kids were wheeling around their small house, happily whooping it up while she was writing, and she was close to finishing. But a couple of flies had gotten into the house, much to her distraction.

“Mom,” she said, “I need three things to make everything all right: a fly-swatter, a pumpkin candle, and a babysitter!”

I had to laugh! What a funny gift bag that would make (especially since Rachel isn’t a big fan of scented candles). So, open the window, get out a fly-swatter, light a pumpkin candle, and sorry about the babysitter. I’m over at Rachel’s.

Nancy Wilson

Welcome to My Circus



If there is anything I have learned in the course of my fast and furious mothering journey, it is that there is only one thing in my entire life that must be organized. The kids can be running like a bunch of hooligans through a house that appears to be at the bottom of a toaster, and yet, if organization and order can still be found in my attitude, we are doing well. But if my attitude falters, even in the midst of external order, so does everything else.

It is one thing to state this casually, another to believe it, and yet quite another to keep it in sight when you most need to. And if you have small children like I do, you need to keep it in mind all the time.

The following is a loose collection of thoughts on mothering young children—for when you are motivated, for when you are discouraged, for the times when discipline seems fruitless, and for when you are just plain

old tired. Think of this as organizational tools for a mother's attitude. A lot of the time all you need is a good old perspective adjustment and a label.

This is not a tender reminiscence from someone who had children so long ago that she only remembers the sweet parts. I do not have a foggy, precious perspective on mothering little ones. My children do not sit on monogrammed picnic blankets in coordinated outfits while I bring them nutritious snacks on a silver tray. You are more likely to find me putting an end to them pulling each other around at breakneck speeds on a tablecloth tied to a jump rope, or seriously counseling someone who has part of a toilet paper tube taped to their nose. At the time of writing this, I have three children in diapers, and I can recognize the sound of hundreds of toothpicks being dumped out in the hall. Sure, I am looking back in retrospect on nursing the twins in the park with a blanket between my teeth, but it wasn't so long ago that I have forgotten about the overheated kind of specialness of it.

I didn't write this book because mothering little ones is easy for me. I wrote it because it isn't. I know that this is a hard job, because I am right here in the middle of it. I know you need encouragement every day, because I do too.

In the Rock Tumbler



I remember a time when I used to be much godlier. It was sometime in junior high and my room was clean. It must have been beautiful weather outside because the lighting was very nice in my room where I was reading my Bible every day and feeling really good. It was quite clear to me that my sanctification was progressing very well. As the feeling wore off, I remember looking back to that time as a high point. That was really living the Christian life.

The truth is my Christian life then was like a rock being refined by a slow river in a quiet place. It wasn't as though I wasn't growing spiritually, but my word! So easily! And so little!

But God took me out of that life and threw me into the rock tumbler. Here, it is not so easy to feel godly, because we spend our days crashing into each other and actually getting our problems addressed. Here there is

very little time for quiet reflection. I do a lot of on-the-job failure and correction. Repenting and forgiving. Laughing. Lots and lots of laughing. Because if there is anything that life in the rock tumbler will teach you, it is that there is no room to take yourself seriously. Like trying to strike “cool” poses on a rug that someone is continually pulling out from under you, self-seriousness in mothering is totally pointless and probably painful!

The opportunities for growth and refinement abound here—but you have to be willing. You have to open your heart to the tumble. As you deal with your children, deal with yourself always and first. This is what it looks like and feels like to walk with God, as a mother.

God treats us with great kindness as we fail daily. He takes the long view of our sin—knowing that every time we fail and repent, we grow in our walk with Him. It is easy for us to accept this, because our sins are, well, ours.

But our children sin against us, annoy us, and mess up our stuff. We want to hold it against them, complain about them (if only to ourselves), and feel put upon by their sin. We have a much harder time accepting that every failure from them is a wonderful opportunity for repentance and growth and not an opportunity for us to exact penance.

It is no abstract thing—the state of your heart is the state of your home. You cannot harbor resentment secretly toward your children and expect their hearts to be submissive and tender. You cannot be greedy

with your time and expect them to share their toys. And perhaps most importantly, you cannot resist your opportunities to be corrected by God and expect them to receive correction from you.

God has given us the job of teaching His law and demonstrating His grace. We are to be guides to our children as they learn to walk with God.

Sin is just a fact of life. It is the way we deal with it that changes ours.

Picky Chickens



Several years ago I was driving through Pennsylvania with some friends, and we stopped near the most gorgeous old farmhouse. Inside its large and fabulous yard there were a bunch of hilarious chickens running around. They must have been a variety of heirloom breeds—the colors and hairdos and feather leg warmers were just a little too outrageous for normal chickens, if you know what I mean! Anyway, we walked over to see them and they ran to us (presumably thinking we would offer them more than praise). But as soon as they got close, they were no longer the cute stuff. All of them had bald and bleeding spots where they had been picking one another's feathers out, the nasty little things.

These chickens came to my mind suddenly one day while I was trying to explain to my little girls why they may not fuss and bicker at each other, and it has since become its own offense in our home—being “picky

chickens.” My girls are of such an age that they get a big kick out of apologizing and returning feathers to each other. They actually have to say something like, “I love you because you are a sweet sister. I’m sorry I was picking at your feathers—here you go,” and they exchange and return feathers and compliments. It has been our most successful picture of infighting, and a great tool for them to see themselves in their actions. I mean, honestly, who really likes the idea of being a mean chicken with open sores?

One of the great things about having children is that you constantly convict yourself by teaching them. If you are addressing their problems honestly, and if you double-check yourself, you will almost always find a little something to think about. Have you ever been frustrated by something your kids did? For me it is usually something I was not expecting—when the disobedience falls suddenly outside the normal range. Like filling up the bathroom sink with toothpaste and soap and shampoo. The need to correct is real, but so is the desire to pick a feather out while you are at it. Do you really want to be the fastest, biggest, pickiest, meanest chicken in the barnyard?

So think about your language with your children. When they disobey, do you talk about your own hurt? Are you pointing to all the work that you have to do now that they screwed up? Do you want to elaborate at all on how bad, bad, bad that particular thing was? Do

you want to see them feel bad, or see them with a clear conscience so you can have a little snuggle tickle-fest?

I think we can all picture the kind of mother who sets a beautiful dinner on the table and then brings down all the people gathered around it with her nasty comments. Now try thinking of discipline as a different kind of nourishment—a sweet means of grace to your children. Bring that to the table with a smile and a wink—a means of building up little people, not a means of bringing them down. Make a point of telling them all about how you love them—with a lot of good solid points. Leave that table refreshed in your love for one another, and happy.

Of course life is real and life is earnest, and sometimes you just don't have time for a big chat over discipline because you are pretty sure you can hear someone playing with the microwave. But it doesn't take long to fluff feathers—you can do it on the go. One of the favorite techniques in our house is to periodically startle the kids by yelling, "Uh-oh!" and when they all look at you with concern you yell, "I love you!" It is funny every single time, and the kids know you wouldn't act that stupid if you didn't love them.

Fruit of the Spirit

Speed Quiz



Each day we get a sheet of paper with math problems on them. Except instead of basic addition and subtraction problems, they are little tests for our patience, for our peace, for our kindness. It is a regular fruit of the spirit speed quiz. They are easy, basic, Christian living challenges brought to us daily by our children, and the allotted time is our waking hours. Sometimes sporadically through the night.

We struggle our way through, and our score is not so good. So the next day, we will be given another test. As we get the hang of some problems, they disappear off the test and new, harder ones replace them. Eventually, the situation, which would have made us lose the bubble when we started the class, doesn't even cause us to hesitate. Easy peasy. Great! Time to move on!

My point here has to do with our attitudes, not only toward our own struggles, but toward the struggles that

our children face. They are doing the same thing in their Christian lives.

It is very easy for us to forget about the progress they make and to ignore the problems that they no longer wrestle with. If you have been faithfully disciplining your children, I guarantee you that there are many, many problems that they no longer struggle with. Remember the era when they couldn't resist coloring on the walls? Or the times when so-and-so used to refuse to say "Amen"? Or back when going to bed was such a struggle?

As a parent it is very easy to demean their progress by demeaning the struggle. Instead of praising them and pointing to their progress to encourage them, we ignore it. We might even try to make them feel like they never make any progress. Like all these swats we give them are something they are failing to turn a profit on—"What's wrong with you? Why are you *still* doing this?" Sometimes this is because the struggle just seemed so dumb in the first place. Why our children have ever felt like it is a good idea to quickly unbuckle and dive over the back seat into the back hatch is beyond me. So when they quit doing it, we don't recognize they've gained the victory over a very real struggle with temptation. Oftentimes we don't even notice that they aren't doing it, because something else has replaced it, and we are now too busy nagging them about facing forward in the car.

Try to notice these little mile markers on the path of sanctification. If the sins have changed, it can be a

sign of growth. It is not as though our children are going to emerge from their current problems into perfect holiness if only we give them enough swats. They are going to emerge from one set of problems into the next, and that is good. That is the way of the Christian walk. Treat sins that your children struggle with like basic math. Practice, practice, and you'll get it!

Another important aspect of this is that new problems come with age, whether or not we are ready for it. As parents, we are responsible to cover a certain amount of material, in a certain amount of time. If we get tired, distracted, or discouraged and stop teaching them, then they will very soon be in over their heads. Spiritual trigonometry is eventually coming for your children. It will really, really help them if they don't even need to think about basic multiplication by then! If your son in his high chair is struggling with anger about his vegetables, you should be seeing a high school boy acting out after a lost basketball game. Give him the tools now that he will need then.

If you have more than one child, it is especially easy to forget about their progress, because no sooner does one outgrow something than the next takes it up—like the Olympic torch. In fact, toothbrushes and the many evil deeds they incite has been a constant problem at our house for at least five years, but it has not been the same children wrestling with that temptation for all five years. In fact, it was only this afternoon that I had to grab a wet wipe on my way out the door to remove

some toothpaste from the side of my shoe. I don't even know who did it (but I could narrow the field of suspects, because one of our children has finished their leg of the toothpaste race and one is not yet running).

So while this should remind us to encourage our children, it should also encourage us. The discipline does work. We *are* making progress with our children. And if you have been faithfully repenting of your own failures and looking for chances to grow, you are making progress too. You might feel just as tired, but you are now running ten miles instead of two blocks. Take a moment to remember what used to annoy you when you were single—are you done howling with laughter yet? Do you see how totally unchallenging that looks now?

Especially for those of us who have a bunch of little ones and feel like we have been talking about not fussing on endless repeat since some time in 2003, it is good to stop and look back and see that the journey really is taking us somewhere. So don't give up! Don't think that the endless trips off to the bathroom for correction with a toddler or two are just a waste of time and energy—it is a gift that you are giving to your children. They will need these life skills! You are repeating these things for them just like a teacher circling missed math problems with a red pen. They will get it eventually, they just need lots and lots of repetition.

It is this repetition that discourages parents of little ones. You can feel like the only thing you do all day every day is tell the kids to stop. Stop fussing, stop