

M *Is for* Mama

Abbie Halberstadt

Illustrations by Lindsay Long



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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M Is for Mama

Copyright © 2022 by Abbie Halberstadt

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-8377-8 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-7369-8378-5 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021943911

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Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 /VP/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*For Alby.
Because you always believed I could.
You are my favorite. Really, really.*



The Halberstadt Family

Shaun and Abbie

Ezra (16)

Theo (7)

Simon (14)

Honor (5)

Della (11)

Shiloh (3)

Evy and Nola (9)

Titus and Tobias (1)





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Introduction

If you've got two X chromosomes, you can be a mother. The standards are so low-key that fully 50 percent of the world's population acs the qualification test before they've even taken one breath outside their own mothers' bellies.

But the physical ability to bear children does little to lessen the pang of panicked inadequacy almost every new mother feels upon being handed a tiny mewling infant to take home mere hours after forceful eviction from her body. We buckle their fragile, twiglike arms into a contraption made of plastic and foam and wonder if it should even be legal to grant someone with so little experience the primary task of raising another person from birth to adulthood.

I mean, think about it. People go to school for years to clean teeth. And yet it's okay to be given full responsibility for an actual human being with literally zero required reading, certifications, degrees, or crash courses of any kind.

And therein lies the mystery of motherhood.

We're expected to simply "get it." To "go with our guts." To be a natural baby whisperer. That all-encompassing rush of intense mother love we experience when we first lock eyes with our newborn covers a multitude of sins, right?

Well, yes. And no.

Because no matter how attached (or not) we feel to our babies, the fact of the matter is that instincts do little to combat silent reflux or calm a baby who refuses to latch *or* take a bottle. Or how about convincing the sweet little gal who thinks it's hilarious to wake up at 3:00 a.m. to pat your face and play that sleep is a better idea?

And then there's the fact that they're only babies for approximately 17 blinks of the eye before, suddenly, they're walking and talking and expressing opinions like "Ew" and "No" and "Sto-op!"

And yet again, the game has changed. And you're faced with an entirely new set of challenges and joys.

As a mama to many, with children in every age category from baby to teenager, I can assure you that the game never stops changing. At least, not in its particulars. There will always be some new wrinkle to iron out—that *one child* who breaks the mold entirely.

However, I firmly believe that the Bible has given us clear principles to live by that can make this whole motherhood gig a lot less intimidating and isolating. If Eve and Ruth and Rachel and Elizabeth and Mary and millions more in between were able to muddle through this mess of motherhood by God's grace, then so can we.

But we must be willing to heed the words of Proverbs 4:6-7: "Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding." Hosea 4:6 (ESV) states it even more dramatically when it says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." The world may not officially require a degree for motherhood, but when we approach it with the same air of studiousness that we would any other profession at which we want to excel, we exponentially increase the likelihood of our not only surviving but thriving in a household of peace instead of chaos.

So where do we get this wisdom worth every penny we've got? Job 12:12 says, "Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?" My favorite source of mama know-how is those godly women

who have gone before me and “crash tested” so many different scenarios with their own kids. My own mother, who raised my brother and me. A precious friend and mama of twelve, almost twenty years my senior. Another wise mama of three who is a few years older than I. Sally Clarkson. Elisabeth Elliot. Ruth Bell Graham.

All these women have different numbers of children, mothering philosophies, personalities, and preferences. But they also have at least one thing in common that I want to emulate—something every godly mother should: a desire to “conduct [themselves] in a manner worthy of the gospel... without being frightened in any way by those who oppose [them]” (Philippians 1:27-28). That last bit is just as key as the first because, in a culture in which women clink their wine glasses in celebration each night for “surviving my kids for one more day,” there will be many who oppose a view of motherhood that says that we can do more by Christ’s strength.

Not only that, but there will be many who resent a perspective of motherhood that chooses to grasp hold of something other than the hard and the loss of “me time”: namely, the abundant gems of joy and fulfillment that glitter amidst the everyday landscape of lunch prep, potty training, and sassy attitudes. Sometimes we just need someone to remind us of what an incredibly rad undertaking this whole motherhood gig really is.

Which is where I come in. I’m not even forty yet, so I don’t qualify as “aged,” but I am a mama of ten children. And I’m volunteering to be your cheerleader, your boot camp coach, your friend, and your fellow journeyer—“all things to all mamas,” to paraphrase Paul. Because, while I do not have this whole mothering thing figured out or nailed down by any stretch, I have had enough practice applying some of the wise biblical principles I’ve learned from the women I listed above (and others) to get a pretty good feel for some strategies that are helpful to all mamas. For it is “a truth universally acknowledged: that a child in possession of a sinful nature must be in want of a mama who loves and seeks the Lord.” (Sorry, Jane Austen. I had to.)



The Culture of Mediocre Motherhood

EXAMINING THE ATTITUDES THAT
KEEP US FROM CHRISTLIKE
EXCELLENCE

I have a feeling that the phrase “mediocre motherhood” will have quite the polarizing effect on the casual bookstore browser who happens to catch sight of this cover. A certain percentage of the population will immediately relate to it, assuming they know exactly what I mean. They may or may not be right. Another group might pick up this book and thumb through it out of sheer curiosity. What could this crazy lady with all these kids possibly mean by referring to motherhood of any kind as “mediocre”? And the last type of reader will probably pick up this book with the express intention of using it for kindling without ever cracking its spine. How *dare* I imply that any mother might possibly be less than a sparkly unicorn goddess warrior? After all, we have *given birth* or *gone through fire to choose our children*.

We are mothers. Hear us *roar*!

I’m sure I’ve missed a reaction or two, including that of utter indifference, but these are the three most prevalent possibilities that pop to mind, and so I feel compelled to explain, as clearly as I can, what I mean by such a loaded phrase.

But first, let's see what Merriam-Webster has to say about the word "mediocre." It describes someone or something as "of moderate or low quality, value, ability, or performance: ordinary, so-so."

Ouch, right?

It's not a state to which any human wants to aspire. Or at least, none *should* want to. And yet it's a state I can all too easily slide toward—and one to which our current mothering culture seems to gravitate.

In the words of *The Princess Bride's* inimitable Inigo Montoya, "Let me 'splain."

Why Relatable Is Not Always Reliable

My blog requires that I spend time on social media, interacting primarily with other mothers. And as anyone who has spent two minutes on Facebook or Instagram surely knows, social media is full of memes. Especially motherhood memes.

One in particular has stuck with me for years. It goes a little something like this:

God: So how do you think you're doing as a mother?

Me: Well, I fed my kids pizza almost every night this week, and I know I should read to them, but I don't really enjoy it, so I usually skip it. I've worn the same outfit three days in a row, and I can't remember the last time I washed my hair. I like our talks at dinner, but I worry a lot, so a lot of the time I'm thinking about stuff that's stressing me instead of really listening when my daughter tells me about her day, and I think she knows it. Most days, I'm too exhausted to do anything but watch Netflix all evening while I sip a couple of glasses of wine, and then I end up going to bed too late, so when I wake up in the morning to do it all over again, I'm really grouchy with my kids.

God: But do you love them?

Me: With all my heart.

God: You sound like a wonderful mom to me.

Setting aside the contrived “conversation with God” construct of this meme, let’s examine it a little more closely, shall we?

Here are the parts I don’t give a rip about (you may feel differently). First, your three-day clothes. If you don’t smell, and you haven’t encountered the same people every single day (you know, besides your children and your husband), you can probably get away with this. Heaven knows I’ve thrown on the same top and jeans (and the same pj pants and tee) a couple of days in a row because they just ain’t dirty enough to throw in the hamper. Also, about the unwashed hair thing, as a curly girl who washes her hair once a week *at most*, I am throwing zero shade in your direction over this. Unless it’s grease city—in which case, girl, wash your hair.

Things start to get a little iffier for me with the pizza-on-repeat business. And not because I don’t love a good pie every now and again. I’m also not a stickler for organic or hemp hearts or kombucha (though all three can be stellar life choices), but I do feel like we, as the providers of sustenance, should be making an effort here. Our children’s health is a big deal, and a steady diet of pizza (or chicken nuggets or boxed mac and cheese) is only going to go so far toward giving them the good stuff their bodies and brains need to thrive.

From this point on, the meme completely falls apart for me. And it’s *not* because I can’t relate to not particularly enjoying certain activities with my kids, worrying too much and listening too little, or wanting to do nothing more than veg on the sofa every evening.

Because I can.

I think all those are perfectly normal escapist responses to the overwhelm that motherhood can bring. And they are the first doors that my tired self wants to walk through when I’m given the option to choose. But here’s the thing: Just because something is relatable doesn’t mean it’s not mediocre.



*Just because something is relatable
doesn't mean it's not mediocre.*

In fact, relatability can stray far past mediocrity and nose-dive into outright petty meanness. Another meme that I stumbled upon went a little something like this: “You’re not a real mother unless you’ve given your three-year-old the finger behind your back today.” Based on the hundreds of enthusiastically affirmative responses, I couldn’t help but conclude that this was a highly relatable sentiment for this poster’s audience (which was, presumably, comprised of women who had mothered at least one three-year-old).




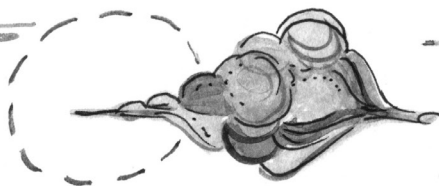
The thing is, I’ve parented eight three-year-olds so far, and while “giving the finger” isn’t really on my radar, I can’t deny the ungodly anger that has welled up in my soul at times over the actions of a tiny human who only recently stopped wearing a diaper.

It’s ridiculous (I mean, we’re the adults in this scenario), but it’s also relatable. Which is why I feel I must reiterate: Relatability—while helpful at times—is not the gold standard of motherhood.

And that very relatability is, all too often, the rotten core of the argument that says, “If this many mothers also feel this way, it must be right and true.”

Thank God that we have his Holy Word, the Bible, to combat this kind of reasoning. Paul, the “super apostle” himself, says, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Romans 7:18-19 ESV).

Talk about the height of relatability (how many times have I mentally bemoaned my inability to resist that cinnamon roll or bowl of ice cream I *know* I don’t really need?)—except with a solid undergirding of truth. The first meme I mentioned expresses a kind of wistfulness—almost a wishing that the mother in the scenario *could* do better—then ends with a shrug of acknowledgment (and an A-okay from God) that “it is what it is.” And the



It's not our bad days
or our hormones
that are the real hang-ups
but instead
our inability to be anything
other than mediocre
without Christ.

second meme is full of angry defiance. Yes, my attitude toward my own child is one of rage and impatience, but so what? Everybody feels this way.

Neither acknowledges that the real root of the issue is our own sinful mothering tendencies. Because it's not our bad days or our hormones or our understandably tired responses that are the real hang-ups here. The true culprit? Our inability to be anything other than mediocre without Christ.

Sure, we can bootstrap our way through a day, a week, a month, or even a year. But without Christ's transforming power at work in us, we will inevitably slide back into our patterns of complacency or anger. For as Philippians 2:13 (ESV) says, "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." The most disciplined of us might be able to maintain a veneer of schedules and control most of the time, but true excellence—the kind that comes from a renewed mind and heart—can only flow from the Holy Spirit's pricking of our consciences and what Ephesians 5:26 describes as "the washing with water through the word."

I experienced just such a conscience pricking when I was in the throes of first-trimester exhaustion and nausea during my pregnancy with Honor. We had a family wedding looming, and I was hoping to find just the right dress to accommodate my awkward "is-she-or-isn't-she" bump. I didn't care nearly as much about the dress as my hours spent scrolling the internet implied. It was the mindless distraction from my pregnancy misery that I craved. I knew I should read my Bible with at least as much fervor as I cross-referenced dress sales and that I should go to bed at a decent time so that I had the energy both my growing baby and my other children required. But I stubbornly clung to my right to "check out" each evening after the kids had gone to bed. Even as I defensively told myself that this was "my time" and that my nightly mental escape wasn't affecting anyone else, the Lord was gently poking and prodding at my stubborn heart. He reminded me that even though wedding-party dress shopping isn't mediocre, devoting myself to it to the detriment of my family or my relationship with him is.

I'm fairly certain most pregnant moms have shared my hormone-fueled feelings of escapism, at least briefly. So what am I proposing? If relatability

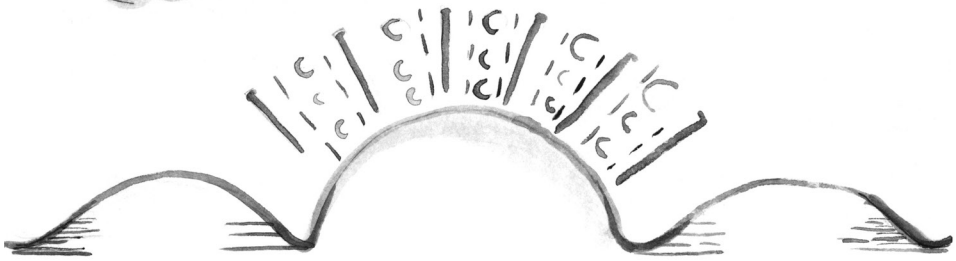
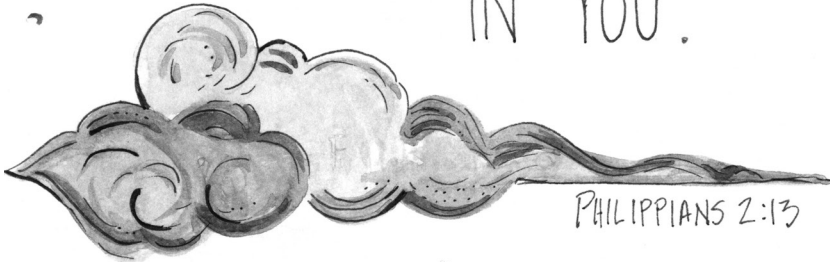
IT IS

Good

WHO WORKS

IN YOU.

PHILIPPIANS 2:13



is mediocrity (it isn't always, by the way), then what exactly are we called to be as mothers? Is this some sort of competition to collect accolades from our peers? Are we called to be a generation of Tiger Moms with perfectly coiffed hair (nope), polished children (nuh-uh), and Instagram-worthy quiet times with the Lord (ha!)?

Can you tell yet that my answer is a thousand times no?

A Sacred Sameness

In fact, rather than making this about being better or different from any other mom out there, I'm proposing that we pursue conformity. But not conformity to our cultural norm. If that's what we're chasing, we may discover that we fit in just fine and can always manage to find someone to justify our shortcomings or make us feel better about our bad days. But we will not have found, at the end of it all, that we look much like Jesus or that we have gotten any closer to feeling at peace with motherhood. The only way to effect real change—the kind that produces lasting joy and fulfillment—is to pursue what Romans 8:29 calls conformity to the image of Christ.

We are *all* supposed to be like Christ—a kind of sacred sameness that unites rather than divides us. The basics of Christlike conformity are identical for all of us: repentance, salvation, Scripture, prayer, loving the Lord our God, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. But the particular ways in which we express our devotion to him will be different for each individual mama, depending on temperament, background, personality, resources, and giftings.

In this digital age, we have access to what *seems* like a front-row seat to other people's entire lives—their children, their vacations, the books they read, the clothes they wear. It's tempting to study what others do and err on one side or the other of the comparison spectrum. Either we will feel superior when we notice someone struggling in an area in which we excel, or we will begin to doubt our own giftings when we see someone who seems to be doing particularly well. "I'm not artsy or creative," we'll think. "So I

can't possibly be a super-engaging mom like Willow. Look at all the amazing hands-on projects she does with her children.” Or “I’m not organized like Suzy. Surely my kids would be better off if I had more labeled bins in my pantry.”

Of course, the truth is that while we are *all* created in God’s image, he has graciously granted us different aspects of his nature, and that is where the sameness ends. And praise the Lord for that! The world would be a chaotic place with all art projects and no organization. Likewise, it would be a very dull place indeed with only label makers and no creative free play.

Excellent motherhood in Christ is achievable through a myriad of biblically sound paths. That is freeing news! We do not have to be slaves to the culture of mediocre motherhood, which says, “I stank at motherhood today. You too?” We do not have to find solace in the knowledge that wine o’clock is coming (I am not objecting to wine specifically but rather the dependence on it). We do not have to find our identity in fist bumps of solidarity with similarly burned-out moms. Fist bumps are awesome and burnout is real. And there is nothing wrong with acknowledging the hard and seeking encouragement.



*We do not have to be slaves to the culture
of mediocre motherhood, which says,
“I stank at motherhood today. You too?”*

But when our goal is validation rather than Christ, it ultimately pushes us down into the mire of self-focus and, all too often, self-pity. Jesus holds out his hand to draw us up to excellent motherhood in freedom, giving us the ability to pursue it through the unique strengths (and weaknesses) he has blessed us with. Biblical motherhood encourages us to look outside

ourselves—at our children, our homes, our husbands, our friends, and our communities at large—and find ways to overcome mediocrity and uplift each other in the spirit of a mutual (and yet gloriously varied) pursuit of righteousness.

Note: As a busy mama, I know there are many times I have read and even agreed with a chapter in a book, only to immediately dive into another task without fully processing what I have just ingested. I wanted to give you something to help your brain continue to chew on what you have read as you go about your daily responsibilities. So at the end of each chapter, I've provided a few takeaways (called "The Narrative"), some action steps, questions for personal reflection, and a prayer. I pray these tools will help you absorb the information and apply it to your life!



The Narrative

MEDIOCRE MOTHERHOOD

Wallows in struggles, resulting
in prolonged anger or apathy

Sees community as a source
of self-affirmation

Seeks approval for mediocrity

CHRISTLIKE MOTHERHOOD

Acknowledges struggles
but leans on the Lord for
strength and direction

Sees community as a source of
encouragement and wisdom

Seeks to "do better"
through Christ



Action Steps

- Memorize and meditate on Proverbs 11:14 (ESV): “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”
- Make a list of three Christlike mamas whom you could seek out for help and guidance.
- Unfollow accounts that glorify and glamorize snark, hopelessness, or abdication of responsibility in motherhood.



Questions

Am I using Scripture as my standard for excellence in motherhood?

Do I feel validated when I see others struggling (and failing) in the same areas as I am?

Am I willing to make changes to my attitudes and behavior when the Holy Spirit convicts me?



Prayer

Lord, thank you for giving wisdom generously and without reproach to all who ask (James 1:5). May we turn to you each day in every area of our lives, including motherhood, recognizing that conformity to Christ is infinitely better than fitting in with the world.