

Isaiah 49:13-16a
1 Thessalonians 2:5-9
Mother's Day as a Cultural Landmark
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

Beloved, today is Mother's Day, the day our culture sets aside to honor its mothers. As a national holiday, Mother's Day goes back to 1914. On May 8, 1914, Congress passed a joint resolution designating the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. In their resolution, Congress took note of the important contribution to society made by mothers who dedicate themselves to the rearing of their children. President Woodrow Wilson then issued the first proclamation making Mother's Day an official national holiday.

I suspect that some of you may be surprised that Mother's Day as a national holiday is such a recent phenomenon. Father's Day is even more recent. It was in 1966 when President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday in June as Father's Day. You may have thought that Mother's Day and Father's Day were ancient traditions which your ancestors observed going back for many generations. That is not the case. These are modern customs which go back only a few generations.

As we deal with these traditions as a church, I believe we need to find a careful balance. On the one hand, we should not let Mother's Day or Father's Day interfere with our commitment to

centering our worship service around the Word of God. We mustn't start substituting special programs related to holidays for the preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

You might ask, Who would do such a thing? Well, let me tell you. A few years ago, I read an interesting historical study entitled "The Feminization of American Culture." The author of this book, Ann Douglas, is a secular feminist. She argues that it was in the Victorian era that the Protestant Church in America began multiplying holidays and special occasions. The reason this occurred is because during this period many Protestant ministers lost their faith in the facts of the Bible. As a result, they were no longer interested in delivering sermons on theology each Sunday morning. They were no longer interested in expounding God's thoughts as revealed in the Bible. They instead began focussing on whatever concerns were on the minds of their listeners. Instead of focussing the Sunday worship service on God and His worship and His Word, they began focussing it upon the spiritual, social and personal concerns of the congregation. It was in this context that the Protestant church in America began multiplying holidays and special occasions to become the focus of Sunday worship. If the ministers were not going to preach the Bible, they had to find something else to do each Sunday.

So we mustn't fall into that trap. On Mother's Day, for example, we mustn't cancel or downplay the preaching of the Word so we can have a special program honoring mothers or some other such event or production.

On the other hand, an occasion such as Mother's Day is a good time to look at what the Bible has to say about motherhood and the family. I'm not saying that we should view ourselves as under some obligation to do this on the second Sunday in May year after year, as if it would be sinful to preach on something else the second Sunday in May. But we do need to preach periodically on family and parenting and motherhood and fatherhood. And the second Sunday in May is a good time to do so because that is what is already on people's minds.

So today I want to look at motherhood, not in the spirit of conforming to this world and its expectations, not in the spirit for finding a substitute for preaching the Word of God, but in the spirit of renewing our minds by going to God's Word and asking what God has to say on this subject.

What then does the Bible have to say on this subject? Well, you don't have to study the Bible very long to discover that God expects the child to honor his parents, both his father and his mother. That is the subject of the first of the ten commandments with a promise, the fifth commandment:

Honor your father and your mother that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.

There is in the book of Proverbs a warning that is related to the fifth commandment sort of like the way a negative is related to a photograph. It is a warning with a curse, which is the symmetrical opposite of a commandment with a promise. This is found in Proverbs 30:17, and I want to read it because of its

shock value. We are so familiar with the fifth commandment about honoring our father and our mother, that we can hear those words without giving them much thought. But Proverbs 30:17 express the same message in a shocking negative way that grabs our attention:

The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.

If that doesn't get your attention and drive home the point, I don't know what will. The Bible teaches that children should honor their parents, both the father and the mother.

Now let's focus more specifically on the mother, because fathers and mothers are different. Fathers and mothers are both parents, but they are not identical. The father is the head of the home, but the mother is its heart. The father should provide the leadership, but the mother provides a special sort of love. In John 16:21, Jesus said,

"A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world."

God establishes a special bond of love between a mother and the child whom she brings into the world. This maternal love is revealed by a woman's willingness to endure the pain of the birth experience in order to experience the joy of motherhood.

This special love of the mother for her child is the subject of both of our Scripture readings for today. In Isaiah, God asks the question, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb?" God answers His own question with the words, "Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you." Yes, a mother may forget her nursing child, but the implication is that this is the exception and not the rule, that this is something rare because it is so contrary to human nature as God created it. God chooses this strong human bond of love to illustrate His even greater love for and devotion to His covenant people.

The prophet's words about the mother who doesn't forget her child reminds me of the story of Monica, the Christian mother of St. Augustine of Hippo. As a young man, Augustine got involved with pagan philosophies and sexual sin. Yet his Christian mother did not forget him. She continued to pray for his conversion year after year. Augustine became a Christian at age 30, shortly before his mother died. Of course, St. Augustine went on to be one of the leading Christians of his day and one of the most influential Christians in the history of the church.

Isaiah refers to the mother who doesn't forget her child, and Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2 speaks of the gentleness of a nursing mother who cherishes her child. The nursing mother literally gives of herself for the nurture of her child. The nursing child is helpless, and the good mother cherishes him by treating him with the gentleness he needs during this vulnerable stage of life. In this verse, Paul uses a mother's love for her child to illustrate Paul's sacrificial love for the church at Thessalonica in its vulnerable infancy.

I think we see from these verses that there is something special about a mother's love. It is only appropriate that we should all reciprocate that love and honor our mothers. Thus when our culture encourages us to honor our mothers, our culture is in conformity with the revealed will of God. But I fear that it is not so much today's culture that is in conformity with the Bible on this subject. It is more the American culture of 1914, the year in which Mother's Day became a nationally recognized American holiday. 1914 is not that long ago, and yet there have been so many changes, and many of them for the worse.

Mother's Day is an opportunity to give thanks to God for our mothers, but also a time to recognize how far our culture has fallen and to pray for revival and reformation in the churches.

Our culture has strayed far since 1914. Let me give you some examples. There are efforts to give homosexual relationships the same legal status as marriage between a man and a woman. There are other countries, such as Canada and Sweden, where people have been successfully prosecuted for doing nothing more than expressing the opinion that homosexuality is morally wrong. There are countries today where expressing the opinion that homosexual activity is immoral, is a so-called "hate crime." There are now efforts to enact such "hate crime" laws in America. The current effort to promote homosexuality as a respected alternate lifestyle certainly contradicts in a most basic way the Biblical teaching on family and motherhood.

We also live in a culture that gives women the legal right to have their unborn children killed in the womb for any and every reason. With this legal right has come increasing social pressure on wives and girlfriends to have abortions in the name of convenience. This is certainly contrary to the Biblical teaching on motherhood. Remember, Isaiah spoke as if it were something rare for a mother not to have compassion on the son of her womb. Yet in today's culture of death, such has become disturbingly common.

Several years ago when I was a pastor in Arkansas, I helped get signatures of registered Arkansas voters on a petition to allow the state to vote on adding the Unborn Child Amendment to the Arkansas constitution. We would go to the polls on election days, stay the legally required distance away from the polls, and ask those who came to vote to sign our petition. After one such day, a fellow volunteer shared with me an experience she had that day. She had asked a lady with two young boys if she would sign the petition. The lady angrily refused and said that she believed in a woman's right to an abortion. And then she pointed at her two sons and said, I wish I had aborted these two when I had the chance.

I remember something else regarding this pro-life lady who had this experience with that angry mother. One time at her house, she was discussing the abortion crisis in America with someone, and her little daughter overheard the conversation. The little girl began to understand what is going on in America today. Her little daughter came up to her mother and said in all sincerity, Thank you, Mommy, for letting me live.

Another example of our falling away is our culture's attitude toward marriage and divorce. Our culture allows divorce for any and every reason, or for no reason at all. It is hard to think of any legally binding contract that is easier to get out of in American than is a marriage. That, however, is not the only problem. More and more individuals in our day break their marriage covenants through adultery and desertion and thus destroy their marriages and victimize their spouse. We all know divorced people who are the victims of such behaviour, divorced people who kept their marriage vows only to have their dreams shattered by a faithless and abusive marriage partner.

Our parents' generation more faithfully preserved their marriages, if for no other reason, for the sake of the children. They usually did not set aside the marriage covenant lightly, and they certainly were less likely to engage in those grievously self-centered sins which betray and destroy the marriage covenant. In this regard, our parents' generation had more wisdom than today's generation. Studies have shown them right about what is best for the children. Divorce is very painful both for the faithful spouse who is victimized by an unfaithful marriage partner and for the children of divorce.

As we think on these things, we are reminded that our society has significant moral and spiritual problems. Our culture is too plagued with selfcenteredness and selfishness. The answer to these problems is not Mother's Day. I have a very credible witness to that. She is the person credited with establishing Mother's Day as a national holiday. Her name is Anna Jarvis. In 1907, she and her friends began writing thousands of letters to

people of influence to gain support for declaring a national Mother's Day holiday. In 1914, her mission was accomplished and her goal was reached.

In her later years, Miss Jarvis lived in a nursing home. She had never married. She had no children. Yet every Mother's Day she would receive thousands of cards from around the world. Shortly before her death in 1948, Anna Jarvis told a reporter that she was sorry she had ever started the Mother's Day tradition. Instead of being the simple recognition of mothers she had intended, it had become just another over commercialized holiday.

The answer to our nation's problems is not Mother's Day. The answer is Jesus Christ. Jesus alone can forgive us for all our failures both as parents and as children. Jesus alone can deliver us from our sinful and selfish ways. Jesus alone can give us the power to have healthy families.

And Jesus can deliver not only us as individuals but also our nation. We need to pray that God will give new spiritual life to the churches of America, that God will raise up ministers who are committed to the preaching of God's Word. We need to pray for the day when Mother's Day in America is more than an occasion to send cards and flowers. We need to pray for the day when Mother's Day becomes a day to celebrate America's commitment as a culture to the family as Biblically defined.

God in the prophecy of Isaiah said, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her

womb?" We need to pray for the coming day when we can answer that question with the words, "Yes, a woman can forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb, but in Christian America, that rarely happens."

The answer is not Mother's Day. The answer is the power of Jesus' death to enable us to die unto sin and the power of Jesus's resurrection to enable us to live unto righteousness. That is what our nation needs.