

# The opportunity to challenge your people to spiritual parenting

Many women who attend your church on Mother's Day are not moms. The reasons for that pain are many: they may have lost a child; they may be unmarried and with little prospects of a future marriage. They may be infertile and may not have had enough money for adoption or fertility treatments. They may have prayed for children for years, but for some reason the answer received was "no." The reasons are many, but the pain felt daily by many of these women is deepened significantly on Mother's Day. Often this pain is intensified by unintentionally unthinking and unkind actions of churches on Mother's Day.

One church for example, asked women as they entered, "Are you a mother?" if the answer was "No" they were informed the flowers were for mothers ONLY. In some churches only Moms are clapped for, receive a free brunch, acknowledged as significant or given other public affirmations. It is publically obvious and on display if a woman is not a mother. If a woman has spent many private hours crying over her inability to have children, imagine her feelings at that time.

Again, these reminders are not meant as a suggestion not to honor mothers, but honor can be done sensitively and with the feelings of the childless women in mind. One additional idea might be to focus perhaps briefly on the joy of physical children but then to shift into a challenge for spiritual parenting. You cannot take away the pain of childlessness, but that pain can be transformed into a vision for ministry if, in addition to special actions done for moms, the pastor actively presents some of the following ideas. One more note: though directed to women, in this article and for this day, mention should be made of the men who are not fathers and for whom often the pain is even more deeply hidden. Include them in the challenges listed below.

## Challenges for spiritual parenting

- Remind all of the women in the church that the option to be a spiritual parent is one that is open to all women, as the prophet Isaiah said in Isa. 54:1 "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD.
- Remind them that though they may not have physical children and truly insurmountable obstacles may prevent that, that nothing can prevent the birthing and raising of many spiritual children.
- Remind them that to be childless does not mean you do not have God's favor. Jesus never had an earthly child. Consider what that may have meant. He was fully human. Most likely all his childhood friends had children when he left home to travel around Israel and teach. I have wondered if the human part of him didn't feel pain, perhaps sometimes wondering what it would be like to have lived quietly in Nazareth and had a son who would have grown up beside him in the carpenter shop or a little daughter who would bring him water in the middle of a hot day. We know he struggled with God the Father over the cross and I wonder if in some lonely early morning prayer times he struggled with the wish that a child, like the children who loved him and clamored to be on his lap as he traveled and taught, that someday one would be his, truly, humanly, physically his.

But Jesus didn't have physical children and neither have many of the great leaders of the church, such as Paul. Yet because they didn't have physical children, does not mean they did not have spiritual children. Paul called Timothy, "His dear son," and Jesus often referred to his followers as his children.

You must be honest in your challenge that embracing spiritual parenting is not easy. It requires all the commitment, patience, and life-long support of physical parenting if it is to be done well. Like physical children also, spiritual children will learn far more from what they see than what they are told. Spiritual parents must live lives of holiness, discipline, and love for Jesus if that is the kind of life they want emulated by their spiritual children.

In addition, there are many spiritual orphans in every church—those who perhaps started a relationship with the Lord in college or another place, but who have moved and have been wandering spiritually since then. Challenge the potential spiritual parents in your church to help raise to maturity those around them who are young and weak in the family of God.

Finally, remind prospective spiritual parents that in addition to the commitment, work and possible pain of spiritual parenting, the words of the apostle John, who said near the end of a long life of ministry adventures and trials: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth (3 John 4)."

### **This might be a message for the Sunday after Mother's Day**

Or maybe for your website.

Many who do not have children quietly avoid Mother's Day at church because the pain is simply too much to bear, and it does not go away quickly after Mother's Day. For weeks the childless are confronted with advertisements in print, on TV, the internet and every imaginable communication medium that remind them of what they do not have and perhaps never will have.

For the moms whose children are physically alive, but who were not at church on Mother's Day or perhaps are never around, watching other moms with happy families, children and grandchildren can also be emotionally wrenching.

A message the week after Mother's Day, if presented in an all-inclusive encouraging way and challenging everyone to be a spiritual parent can be a way to fill an empty place in a heart and heal pain. God put the desire to nurture the young in every heart and he has provided a way in his church to make that possible for everyone.

### **If you get a negative response**

You can try to be sensitive and caring and you should, but don't be surprised if you are told it didn't help. Or if you don't get a positive response or receive an angry one—people react in many, not always pleasant, ways to hidden pain.

There are no reasons, explanations, or solutions for the depths of some pain. The best we can do at those times is to share Jesus and lead people to his love and comfort and pray that it will be accepted.

There is a reason that the Bible tells us that someday God will wipe away our tears. Some hurts can never heal on earth. All we can do is hold tightly to the one who promises that someday all will be well.