

# For the Love

FIGHTING *for* GRACE  
in a World of Impossible Standards

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*For Jesus, who taught me how to love people.*



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# Introduction

**M**y girlfriend relayed a story to me recently about her conversation with my youngest daughter, Remy:

GF: Tell me about your mom's job, Remy.

REMY: Oh, she doesn't really have one.

GF: I'm pretty sure your mom works.

REMY: Yeah, but she doesn't have a job where she  
*knows* about something.

GF: So she just writes books about nothing?

REMY: Well, she also cooks a lot.

Besides being obviously esteemed in my own home, maybe I ought to clarify what exactly I specialize in, since it appears very, very unclear to my own child. Certain folks love numbers and columns and reconciled accounts. (I barely even know what this means.) Some of my good friends love organizing and

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administrating; they are weirdly good at it. I have family members who excel at web design and creative technology and others who are craftsmen and builders. Educators, chefs, sports medicine specialists, realtors: all people in my circle who obviously *know about something*.

A little closer to my space, some of my girlfriends are true theologians and love the ins and outs of sticky hermeneutics. Others are preachers with fire in their bellies. Some are academics working on graduate degrees in God. Some are social entrepreneurs doing great good with their companies and organizations. Still others give their lives to justice in hard places. This is how they are gifted and this is what they love.

I love people.

It's what I know.

God has always made the most sense to me through people, His image bearers. I crave dignity and healing and purpose and freedom for me and mine, you and yours, them and theirs. I want us to live well and love well. The substance of life isn't stuff or success or work or accomplishments or possessions. It really isn't, although we devote enormous energy to those goals. The fullest parts of my life, the best memories, the most satisfying pieces of my story have always involved people. Conversely, nothing hurts worse or steals more joy than broken relationships. We can heal and hurt each other, and we do.

*I'm hoping to help lead a tribe that does more healing and less hurting.*

I consider that my job.

I see a generation of people ON THE HOOK. Man, we are

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tough on one another, starting with ourselves. When Jesus said to “love your neighbor as yourself,” I don’t think He meant judgmentally; but that is exactly how we treat our own souls, so it bleeds out to others. Folks who thrive in God’s grace give grace easily, but the self-critical person becomes others-critical. We “love” people the way we “love” ourselves, and if we are not good enough, then no one is.

We keep ourselves brutally on the hook, plus our husbands, our kids, our friends, our churches, our leaders, anyone “other.” When we impose unrealistic expectations on ourselves, it’s natural to force them on everyone else. If we’re going to fail, at least we can expect others to fail; and misery loves company, right?

I believe we can do better than this. I think God wants us off the hook, since Jesus pretty much already handled that for us. Can I tell you my dream for this little book? I hope you close the last page and breathe an enormous sigh of relief. I hope you laugh out loud because you just got *free*. Then I hope you look with fresh, renewed eyes at all your people—that one you married, those ones you birthed, the ones on your street and in your church and at your work and around the world—and you are released to love them as though it is your job.

Maybe we can lay down our fear and criticism, self-directed and otherwise. Maybe if we let ourselves off the hook, we can let others off, too, and discover that God was in control all along, just as He tried to tell us. He is good at being God. Hooray! We don’t have to be saviors and critics for each other; we’re probably better as loved people beside one another.

We aren’t good gods, but we can be good humans.

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Spoiler alert: You are amazing. You are. This grace thing is no joke. We get to live a free life. So do other people because God gave us Jesus, who fixed everything. Instead of being “right” at each other all the time, we can just live these beautiful, precious lives of ours in full freedom. It really is good news.

I have an oft-quoted pet phrase I abuse with regularity: *for the love*. (Its cousins include “for crying out loud” and “good grief” and “for Pete’s sake” because dramatic hyperbole is my medium.) I use it all the time in ways that make sense and in ways that utterly don’t. I find it a delightful catchall response:

For the love of Moses.

For the love of Tina Turner.

For the love of Coach and Tami Taylor.

There is really no end to its uses. As this book started taking shape and I discovered its contents, the title became instantly clear: *For the Love*.

This is why we live and breathe: for the love of Jesus, for the love of our own souls, for the love of our families and people, for the love of our neighbors and this world. This is all that will last. Honestly, it is all that matters. Because as Paul basically said: We can have our junk together in a thousand areas, but if we don’t have love, we are totally bankrupt. Get this right and everything else follows. Get it wrong, and life becomes bitter, fear-based, and lonely. Dear ones, it doesn’t have to be.

Love is really the most excellent way.

One of the best parts of being human is other humans. It’s true, because life is hard; but people get to show up for one another, as God told us to, and we remember we are loved and

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seen and God is here and we are not alone. We can't deliver folks from their pits, but we can sure get in there with them until God does. Live long enough and it becomes clear that stuff is not the stuff of life. People are. We need each other, so we probably ought to practice radical grace, because our well-flaunted opinions are cold companions when real life hits.

So grab my hand, good reader. I'll tell you how amazing you are, how shockingly gracious God is, and how free we are to love well. I hope to lift every noose from your neck, both the ones you put there and the ones someone else did. We are going to let ourselves and each other off the hook, and in the end, we will be free to run our races well; to live wide, generous days; and to practice the wholehearted living we were created for.

Oh! I will also be discussing high-waisted jeans and Netflix addictions, so you have a lot of substance ahead of you.

This is going to be so fun.



YOUR VERY  
OWN SELF



## CHAPTER I

# Worst Beam Ever

**M**y nine-year-old daughter Remy is in gymnastics. After her second practice, she asked when she would have her first competition. Bless. No one ever accused that one of low self-esteem. (She is currently deciding between a future as a professional gymnast or a singer, and may I just say that both plan A and plan B are fatally flawed?)

She struggles most with the balance beam. It's unclear who invented this particular apparatus, but it was certainly not the mother of a gangly third-grader with delusions of grandeur. She is still attempting to get from one end to the other with a few "dips" and "scoops" and "leans" without falling to the mat. Forget the fancy moves; just one notch above walking throws her so off-kilter, I am beginning to wonder how she will ever become an Olympian with a music career on the side.

If I had to recite the top questions I'm asked in interviews, conversations, and e-mails, certainly included would be this one:

*How do you balance work and family and community?*

And every time, I think: *Do you even know me?*

Balance. It's like a unicorn; we've heard about it, everyone talks about it and makes airbrushed T-shirts celebrating it, it seems super rad, but we haven't actually seen one. I'm beginning to think it isn't a thing.

Here is part of the problem, girls: we've been sold a bill of goods. Back in the day, women didn't run themselves ragged trying to achieve some impressively developed life in eight different categories. No one constructed fairy-tale childhoods for their spawn, developed an innate set of personal talents, fostered a stimulating and world-changing career, created stunning homes and yard-scapes, provided homemade food for every meal (locally sourced, of course), kept all marriage fires burning, sustained meaningful relationships in various environments, carved out plenty of time for "self care," served neighbors/church/world, and maintained a fulfilling, active relationship with Jesus our Lord and Savior.

*You can't balance that job description.*

Listen to me: No one can pull this off. No one *is* pulling this off. The women who seem to ride this unicorn only display the best parts of their stories. Trust me. No one can fragment her time and attention into this many segments.

The trouble is, we have up-close access to women who excel in each individual sphere. With social media and its carefully selected messaging, we see career women killing it, craft moms slaying it, chef moms nailing it, Christian leaders working it. We register their beautiful yards, homemade green chile enchiladas, themed birthday parties, eight-week Bible study series, chore charts, ab routines,

“10 Tips for a Happy Marriage,” career best practices, volunteer work, and Family Fun Night ideas. We make note of their achievements, cataloging their successes and observing their talents. Then we combine the best of everything we see, every woman we admire in every genre, and conclude: *I should be all of that.*

It is certifiably insane.

The only thing worse than this unattainable standard is the guilt that follows when perfection proves impossible. Sister, what could be crazier than a woman who wakes children up before dawn, feeds and waters them while listening and affirming all their chatter, gets them dressed and off to school with signed folders, then perhaps heads to a job to put food on the table or stays home to raise littles who cannot even wipe, completes one million domestic chores that multiply like gremlins, breaks up forty-four fights, intentionally disciplines 293 times a day, attends to all e-mails/correspondence/deadlines, helps with math/writing/biology homework, serves dinner while engineering a round of “High-Low,” oversees Bedtime and Bath Marathon, reads lovingly to lap children, tucks them in with prayers, finishes the endless Daily Junk Everywhere Pickup, turns attention to husband with either mind or body, then has one last thought of the day: *I am doing a terrible job at everything.*

I feel like I’m taking crazy pills.

This is beyond unreasonable. It is destructive. We no longer assess our lives with any accuracy. We have lost the ability to declare a job well-done. We measure our performance against an *invented standard* and come up wanting, and it is destroying our joy. No matter how hard we work or excel in an area or two,

it never feels like enough. Our primary defaults are exhaustion and guilt.

Meanwhile, we have beautiful lives begging to be really lived, really enjoyed, really applauded—and it is simpler than we dare hope: we gotta unload that beam.

We cannot do it all, have it all, or master it all. That is simply not a thing. May I tell you something? Because women ask constantly how I “do it all,” let me clear something up: I HAVE HELP. My booking representative handles events, my literary agent manages publishing stuff, my tech person does all the Internet things, my extraordinary housekeepers do in two hours what would take me twelve, and our part-time nanny fills in the gaps.

I’m not doing it all. Who could? I can’t. You can’t. I decided what tricks belonged on my beam and dropped the rest or figured out a way to delegate. I love to write but hate web management. Off the beam. I could not juggle weekend travel, weeknight activities (times five kids . . . be near, Jesus), and a weekly small group, so as much as I love our church people, we aren’t in a group right now. (And I am the pastor’s wife, so let that speak freedom over your *shoulds*.) Off the beam.

Cooking and sit-down dinners? Life-giving for me. On the beam.

Coffee with everyone who wants to “pick my brain”? I simply can’t. Off the beam.

After-hours with our best friends on the patio? Must. On the beam.

Classroom Mom? I don’t have the skill set. Off the beam.

You get to do this too. You have permission to examine all

*Worst Beam Ever*

the tricks and decide what should stay. What parts do you love? What are you good at? What brings you life? What *has* to stay during this season? *Don't look sideways for these answers.* Don't transplant someone else's keepers onto your beam. I could cook for days, but this does not mean you want to. Classroom Mom for me would mean a nervous breakdown; it might be the highlight of your year. You do you here. There are only twenty-four hours in a day.

We need to quit trying to be awesome and instead be wise.

Decide which parts are draining you dry. What do you dread? What are you including for all the wrong reasons? Which parts are for approval? Is there anything you could delegate or hand off? Could you sacrifice a Good for a Best? Throw out every *should* or *should not* and make ruthless cuts. Go ahead. Your beam is too crowded. I know it.

Frame your choices through this lens: season. If your kids are under five, you cannot possibly include the things I can with middle and high schoolers. You are ruled by a tiny army you created yourself. This is just how it is right now. If you have bigs like I do, we run a taxi service from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m. virtually every night. Evening real estate belongs to family for now. In ten years when they are gone, the story will change (*sob*). Perhaps you have a fabulous trick that no longer works, and you might need to set it aside for a season. Those are often the hardest cuts. The choices you make today may completely change in five years or even next year. Operate in the right-now.

What does this season require of you? Unsure? Ask God. He is a wonderful advisor who always, always knows the Best Thing.

He will help you sort it out. When you can't trust your own discernment, you can certainly trust His. God has no agenda other than your highest good in His kingdom. There is no better leader through this minefield.

I labored over a scheduling decision last year, and the drama I projected was undoubtedly annoying. I fretted and agonized and vacillated before I remembered to pray. (I am a delightful choice for your spiritual advisor, yes?) I kid you not: I finally gave the decision to God, and in five seconds, it was instantly clear. The answer was no and it probably saved my life.

By the way, no one will make these choices for you. People will take as much as you will give them, not because they are terrible humans, but because they only want this one slice of you. It doesn't seem like much to them. On paper, it's just that one thing, that one night, that one commitment. Plus, you're probably good at their pet thing. But they don't observe the scope of your life and all the other tricks on your beam. They just want that one dip/scoop/lean, but only so many tricks fit into a day.

Good news: most people are surprisingly respectful with boundaries. Folks take a no better than I suspected. When I say, "Thank you for inviting me into this good thing of yours. It is as extraordinary as you are. But any new yes I give means a no to my family and sanity. Please accept my sincere regrets and count on my prayers," most people are amazing. You can say no, and no one will die. In fact, gracious noes challenge the myth of Doing It All. When I see another woman fighting for her balance beam, I am inspired because if she has permission, then I do too. Wise women know what to hold onto and what to release, and

how to walk confidently in their choices—no regrets, no apologies, no guilt.

I deeply believe God wants this freedom for us. Scripture instructs us to live presently and joyfully, resisting worry and believing Jesus set us free for freedom's sake. We have an abundance of good and perfect gifts that often look like a messy house full of laughter, a ten-year-old running through a sprinkler, a heart unburdened by comparison, an afternoon nap, joy in using our gifts and leaving the rest to people better suited. Our generation is so hamstrung with striving and guilt, we no longer recognize God's good and perfect gifts staring us in the face. What a tragedy. What a loss. We will never get these lovely years back.

So no, you cannot balance an overloaded beam. That is not a possibility. But maybe if we reject the invented standard, if we stop fearing a no will end the world, if we pare our lives down to what is beautiful, essential, life-giving, if we refuse to guilt one another for different choices, and if we celebrate the decent accomplishments of Ordinary Good Hard Life, then we'll discover there wasn't a beam in the first place, that God's kingdom never required a balancing act, and Jesus was in that fun foam pit all along.

We are all Olympic hopefuls in *that* event.