

Motherhood Culture

QUICK THEOLOGY WOMEN'S SERIES



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Introduction

Perhaps you picked up this book because asceticism is a new concept for you. Or maybe you have heard about it before but don't quite see its relevance to today's culture. Once I describe it, however, I think you will recognize it right away.

An ascetic is a person who practices extreme self-denial in order to achieve greater spirituality. And the truth is, many of us unconsciously practice asceticism, especially in motherhood. Asceticism can actually filter into almost every area of parenting, including the birth you had, your feeding choices, and how you approach baby sleep. In fact, it is even at the root of many of the "mommy wars" on social media today. It is a difficult topic, but as we work through asceticism and its implications I hope you will be encouraged to see how legalistic asceticism hurts and how the true gospel meets us in motherhood.



Legalism in Motherhood

The gospel is not just for spiritual things; it applies to every situation and person, and it has particular implications in the area of motherhood. The gospel, by its nature, should move Christians toward peace. If that is the case, *why is there so much division among Christian moms—especially online?*

In the space of Christian parenting there should be unity; but instead there are often layers of dissension, grief, anger, and shame surrounding many topics within motherhood. And anywhere these emotions are present, the gospel has something to say.

When speaking to friends who are about to have kids, are pregnant, or are planning their family, I continually hear things such as, “I am astonished at how it’s all so controversial. I ask an honest question, and I’m completely demolished because of what I’m planning to do with my kids.” If you have ever been in a Facebook

moms' group, you have probably keenly felt this reality. So why is it happening?

The answer has to do with identity, idolatry, and legalism. The mommy wars exist because of a unique cultural idolatry—the idolatry of our children—and our warped identities as moms. We become what we worship, and if we are not careful we can begin to worship our children, our performance in motherhood, and the decisions we make for our kids. Obviously we love our kids (Note: Love is not the same as idolatry). Of course we want what is best for our family! The problem arises when what we think is “best” becomes a central part of our identity. If our identity is wrapped up in our kids and our mothering choices, when another mom has a different idea of what is “best” for her kids, we will feel threatened or attacked. Thus begin the mommy wars!

When we have an idol in our lives, we set up laws—or operating guidelines—for ourselves. Those guidelines become the measure for how we make our decisions. We adopt extra regulations and strict rules that God never outlined, telling ourselves, “this is what good parents do.”

We also create laws for how *others* should parent. We say, “I’ve done the research; I’ve read everything about it. This is the only way—the *best* way.” Even if science, experience, and Scripture offer the possibility of

a different opinion, we can't see it because our identity is so wrapped up in the issue. We are blind to why someone would do parenting differently. We refuse to think generously enough to say, "Maybe something happened during her birth and she had to have a C-section," or, "Maybe she can't breastfeed or doesn't want to, but her baby is still getting the best alternative to breast milk. That's great." We will not have this posture though if our identity is dependent on our mothering decisions. After all, if what she did is as good as or better than what we did, then maybe we are not actually doing the "best" thing! This thought process leads us to create our own legalism, measuring other moms by our standard and judging them wanting.

We would never explicitly say another mom is not worthy of salvation or the love of God. But in the way we talk about them and their decisions, we insinuate judgment. The underlying message of the mommy wars is this: "You don't really love your kids the way God wants you to love them because you don't co-sleep (or you sleep train), because you use formula (or you don't use formula), or because you breastfeed until your kids are two (or you stop breastfeeding at six weeks)." The judgment comes from every side. I have seen the shame and guilt a lot in the "crunchy" (or natural) world of

thinking, but you see it everywhere! You may be a long-term breasfeeder and receive shame from people for not using formula. It can happen with decisions to birth naturally versus having a C-section. You see it in the conversations about sleep training, baby-led weaning, potty training, and discipline.

Anywhere you have an idol, you will have legalism. Anywhere your identity is wrapped up in what you do, you will apply that legalism to other people. Unless Jesus is on the throne of our hearts, we will be prone to fall into this trap.