

Families that Kids Love – Women of Significance

Esther 4:12-17

TOP TEN REASONS GOD CREATED EVE

10. God worried that Adam would always be lost in the garden because He knew men would never ask for directions.
 9. God knew that Adam would one day need someone to hand him the TV remote because men don't want to see what is on TV; they want to see WHAT ELSE is on TV.
 8. God knew that Adam would never buy a new fig leaf when the seat wore out and therefore would need Eve to get one for him.
 7. God knew that Adam would never make a doctor's appt for himself.
 6. God knew that Adam would never remember which night was garbage night.
 5. God knew that if the world was to be populated there would have to be someone to bear children because men would never be able to handle it.
 4. As Keeper of the Garden Adam would never remember where he put his tools.
 3. The Scripture account of creation indicates that Adam needed someone to blame his troubles on when God caught him hiding in the garden.
 2. As the Bible says, "It is not good for man to be alone", he only ends up getting himself in trouble.
- And the NUMBER ONE reason...
1. When God finished the creation of Adam he stepped back, scratched his head and said, "I can do better than that."

Imagine with me the impact on our world today of families that kids love. Imagine with me the difference it could make in our nation and society when our kids simply love their families.

When you find a family that kids love ... you will most often find a woman of significance. This is not meant to lessen the contribution of men. Nor is it meant to belittle the single parent dads that are also investing in healthy families that kids love. But in general, we all understand that women can play a significant role in shaping families that kids love.

Pastor Chuck Swindoll wrote that the five major needs of women are: 1) Affection, 2) Conversation, 3) Honesty and openness, 4) Financial support, and 5) Family commitment. The Deer Flat Church is a family. We are a family of families. We want the Deer Flat church family to be a place that kids love. But even more importantly, we want each of our families to be a place that kids love. To that end, the Deer Flat family needs to invest in the spiritual and emotional well being of women.

This past week I again thought of the women that were a part of the pioneering story of the Deer Flat family. I thought of the women young and old who add such a great blessing to our Deer Flat family today. I thought of the women throughout the Bible who were used of God in significant ways. This morning I want us to look at the story of a woman of significance – Esther.

Esther's story takes place in Persia, which is modern day Iran. God's people previously lived as a nation under one ruler. After King David and his son Solomon who succeeded him as king, their nation was divided into two – Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Both nations were eventually over run because of their disobedience to God. The temple and many cities were destroyed and many of the people were carried into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar into Babylon (which is a city about 85 kilometers south of present day Baghdad). At that time Babylon was estimated to be the largest city in the world. The Babylonians were later overrun by the Persians.

Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed some of the Jewish exiles to return to rebuild Jerusalem. His two successors, Xerxes and Artaxerxes did not offer the same support. It wasn't until King Darius that the Jewish exiles were again given full support to continue the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of the city.

We pick up the story of Esther during the time of King Xerxes, one of the Persian kings who did not give support to the Jewish exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, King Xerxes ordered the reconstruction of the temple and the city walls to be stopped.

Apparently King Xerxes had a rather large ego. In Esther 1:4 we read that “for a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty”. And in Vs 5 we read that at the end of these 180 days, the King gave a banquet that lasted seven days. King Xerxes laid out quite a spread: “When these (180) days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king’s liberality. By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.” (1:5-8)

Wow – this sounds like a lavish party only a king could throw! In 1:9 we read that while the king was throwing his party, the queen – a woman by the name of Vashti – was throwing her own party.

The drama builds. In Vs 10 we read that the king was in “high spirits” from the wine. He commanded his eunuchs to bring in the queen wearing her royal crown so that he could show her off as a trophy wife. Why did the king want to parade his wife in front of all who were present? The answer is in Vs 11, “... in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at”. The king was still exercising his inflated ego.

But there was a problem. In Vs 12 the Bible says that the queen refused to come. The king is royally embarrassed. His advisers say that he cannot allow the queen to get away with this or women everywhere would revolt and rebel. So the king rules that Queen Vashti is to be banished and to never again come into the king’s presence. And to cover his embarrassment, in

Vs 22 the king sends a proclamation throughout his kingdom stating that “every man should be ruler over his own household.”

The drama only thickens. In Chapter 2:1 we see that later when the king’s anger had subsided, he begins a search for a new queen. Women from all across the kingdom were brought to the royal city. In 2:12 we see that one by one these women were brought before the king. Before they went into the king they received twelve months of beauty treatments.

One of the women in this harem was Esther. Esther’s parents had died and she was raised by a cousin – Mordecai. Esther was Jewish however and since the Jewish people were living in Persia as a conquered people in forced exile and because there was an ongoing prejudice against the Jewish people, Esther didn’t reveal her ethnicity. She kept it a secret at the advice of her cousin Mordecai.

In 2:15 we read that the turn came for Esther to be brought into the king. Esther had God’s blessing and in Vs 17-18 we read that she wins the favor of the king and becomes the queen. All the time the king doesn’t know that his new queen is one of the Jewish exiles.

In 2:19 Queen Esther’s cousin Mordecai discovers a conspiracy to assassinate the king. Mordecai reports the conspiracy and the attempted assassination of the king was thwarted. But they soon forget Mordecai.

What a story. Yet another piece of the drama unfolds. In 3:1 the king honors a nobleman by the name of Haman and gives him a seat of honor higher than any other noble. The king commanded everyone to give honor to Haman and bow before him as Haman passes by. Queen Esther’s cousin, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Haman is outraged against Mordecai. Haman learns that Mordecai is one of the Jewish exiles. Haman in his rage wants to not only get even with Mordecai, Haman uses this positional authority to plot against the Jewish exiles. In 3:6 we read that Haman devises a plan of ethnic cleansing to “destroy all of Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.”

Haman suggests a plan for this ethnic cleansing to the king and the king issues a decree to “destroy them”. Esther’s cousin learns of the plan and persuades Queen Esther to speak up for her people. But to do so puts Queen Esther at risk (4:9-17 - Read).

Let’s go to the rest of the story. In Ch 5 Queen Esther goes to King Xerxes and is received by him. The plot is revealed. Haman is condemned to death by the king. The king issues a new decree on behalf of the Jewish exiles. And finally the king raises Queen Esther’s cousin Mordecai to a place of authority in the kingdom. And they all lived happily ever after.

Truly Esther was a woman of significance. What are some of the lessons that we can learn from her life and story? I want us to consider three lessons:

1. Women of significance draw their strength from spiritual disciplines.
2. Women of significance draw their strength from spiritual disciplines practiced in community.
3. Women of significance stand for what is right even at the risk of self sacrifice.

Let’s look at each of these. First, women of significance draw their strength from spiritual disciplines. We can see this in 4:15-16 as Esther called for a time spent in prayer and fasting.

Now, we need to ask at least a couple of questions. First, what is a spiritual discipline? A discipline is something that we practice or engage in on a regular basis. We do it so often that it becomes a habit or a pattern in our lives. Some people practice such disciplines in their diet or their exercise. A spiritual discipline is a pattern in our lives that brings us back to God and helps us to better hear what God is saying. It is designed to help us keep a close relationship with Jesus. Spiritual disciplines help us identify anything that gets in the way of being more like Jesus.

Richard Foster in his book Celebration of Discipline, identifies three categories of spiritual disciplines. There are inward disciplines: meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. There are

outward disciplines: simplicity, solitude, submission, and service. And there are corporate disciplines: confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

One of the inward disciplines is fasting and it is mentioned in our story of Esther. What is fasting? Fasting is a choice to abstain from food for a period of time. It can be a partial fast when choosing to abstain from certain foods but not all foods. For Esther it was a total fast of both food and water lasting for three days (4:16). Fasting can be a choice to abstain from other behaviors or activities, such as: television, computer games, chocolate, etc.

As we read through the Bible we see that fasting is a biblical practice. In the Old Testament on at least two occasions, Moses fasted for forty days. In the New Testament we read that Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness as He was launching His ministry. Fasting has never been a command required of Christians. Rather, fasting is a resource available to us. As we look at Matthew 6:16 it seems that Jesus assumed His followers would fast: “*When you fast ...*”.

Fasting is focused on God. It helps us keep our life in balance. And fasting is a season when our hearts are more in tune with God’s heart and voice. This was one of the spiritual disciplines that helped Esther develop significance in her life.

Our second lesson, women of significance draw their strength from spiritual disciplines practiced in community. In 4:15-16 we see that Esther spent time in prayer and fasting, not only alone, but in community.

For some reason women seem to intuitively better understand the need for community. I recently read a news article on line about why women in politics and business don’t seem to get caught up in the sex scandals that embroil so many men. One of the suggestions is that women are strengthened by the sense of community that they more naturally seem to seek out.

We see this in the life of Esther. Look with me again at 4:16: "... gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me ... I and my maids will fast as you do." Can you hear the sense of community? "Gather together ... fast for me ... and I and my maids will do the same."

This is a reminder to all of us, male or female. There is no lone ranger Christianity. We should beware of those who say they can be like Jesus without the church. The Bible is very clear that we are called to be the Body of Christ with an emphasis on love for one another and unity with one another. Many times those who claim to be a "lone ranger" Christian are simply masking a fear in their own lives by trying to avoid community.

Jesus Himself lived in community as a part of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus sought out community as He went to the temple each Sabbath day even though He was the Son of God. In John 1:14 we read that Jesus moved into the neighborhood. Jesus lived among and with His disciples.

Women of significance draw on the value of community. Many of the problems men face in general are lessened as men overcome the perceived need for individuality and embrace community as Jesus did. As I have already said, too many men try to go at it alone. Women more often seem to be "wired" to seek out community. Consider the example in Luke 24 after the resurrection. It says "the women" (plural) went to the tomb. Not a woman and not one at a time, but together – in community.

Women of significance have strength because they seek out community. In Ecclesiastes 4:12 the Bible says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken". Can a cord of three strands be broken? Yes. But is it harder to break? Yes.

As I was praying and studying this past week for today's message, I was reminded of our need to give better care to the young mothers entrusted to our Deer Flat family. Pastor Doug and I want to invite you to specifically pray with us that the Lord would raise up a leader for a ministry to young moms and to young women. We invite you to pray with us that God might begin tugging

at some one's heart for this very important ministry. And if the Lord puts this on your heart, contact us. Our Deer Flat family must do a better job of providing opportunities for community for the young moms and young women entrusted to us.

Our third lesson from Esther, women of significance stand for what is right even at the risk of self sacrifice. Here again the words of Esther from 4:16, "When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish". These aren't the words of someone resigned to fate. These are the courageous words of a woman full of incredible strength, willing to do whatever is necessary for the right and the good.

Women often demonstrate this incredible strength and courage with a willingness to do what is right even at risk to themselves. I found a story this week:

There were 11 people hanging onto a rope dangling from a helicopter.

Ten were men and one was a woman. They all decided that one person should get off because if someone didn't, the rope would break and everyone would die.

No one could decide who would go, so finally the woman gave a really touching speech, saying she would give up her life to save the others, because women were used to sacrifice for their husbands and children, giving to men, and not receiving anything in return.

When she finished speaking all the men applauded.

Women can be fierce protectors speaking out for justice, especially when it comes to family. Even as one observes the animal kingdom it is easy to see the fearless courage of a mother defending her young. And from time to time in the news we hear of a mother who risks even her own life to protect her family and children. Our world and our society today desperately need women of significance who will stand up for what is right.

Last night I heard an excellent presentation for a charity designed to care for the poor around the world. The Catholic priest making the presentation had been a missionary in Bolivia. He told of the story an orphanage there ... how a young mother was in anguish at the cries of her children because of their hunger. She knew her children were suffering. She loved them so much and wanted to end their suffering and so she brought them to the orphanage and asked and pleaded that they be taken in. Ellen and I have been to orphanages in other places like Haiti and Ethiopia. We have heard similar stories and met some of the children of these stories. These are the stories and this is the heart of self sacrifice.

Let's go back to our Bible story ... even though his cousin that he had raised from a child was now the Queen, Mordecai spoke boldly to her. Look with me at 4:14: "... And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

I know that it is a stretch exegetically, but I think our world would be a better place if every woman was treated as if she was in "a royal position". I think women would be better positioned to find their God ordained place of significance if they were given the honor and respect that God intended. For such a time as this ... we live in a world and a society where perhaps more than ever we need women of significance. One of the marks of a woman of significance is a commitment to pray.

Let me close with this. What happens when women pray? I have some powerful personal memories. When I first went to the altar at eight years of age to pray and when I stood up the first person I remember seeing was my mother who was walking across the back of that little sanctuary with tears in her eyes as she was holding a baby from the church nursery. I remember as a little boy my mom would tell my two brothers and I to play together for a few minutes as she would be in her bedroom on her knees at the bed praying for us. My mother had her challenges and struggles as we all do, but I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for her heart and prayers.

I have some powerful personal memories of our family and of Ellen praying for our children: releasing them as they first went to school, praying for them in school and the challenging

situations and moments they faced, praying for their teen years as each of them began to choose their own path and journey to Jesus, praying for their spouses while they were still teenagers, praying for our children even after they are grown and married and with their own children, praying for our grandchildren and now repeating the same cycle and pattern of prayer for them as she did for our children.

In Matthew 6:6, Jesus said that a part of our prayer life should be alone and in private – that when we pray we should go into our room and close the door and pray. We often refer to this as “going into our prayer closet”. Women of significance have a place of prayer that they regularly go to. But I would suggest that it is time to come out of the closet. It is time for women to boldly pray with and for their families and friends. Children need to hear the heart and voice of their mothers in prayer for them. Young women need to hear the prayers of faith of older women.

I found a quote this week. “Some women have made fools out of men, others have made men out of fools.” I thank God for the women of the Deer Flat family who are making men out of us fools. The heart of the Deer Flat family is to be like Jesus. We cannot be like Jesus unless and until we live in the community of love and unity that Jesus calls us to. And we do the most to help others be like Jesus as we invite them to share life with us on the journey to be like Jesus.

And one of the important ways we help others be like Jesus is to care for the families entrusted to us. We want our Deer Flat family to be full of families that our kids love. Families that kids love. Families that help our children, our neighborhoods and communities, our society and our world – to become like Jesus. To the women of the Deer Flat family – we love you, we honor you and we thank God for you. Take time to pray, build deep and strong friendships, and remind us if we ever waver on what is right.

Closing prayer for the continued infilling of God’s Spirit helping our women to know ever increasing significance.

