

The background of the cover is a photograph of a red brick path. In the upper right corner, a portion of a black bicycle tire and its spokes is visible. Long, soft shadows from trees or bushes stretch across the bricks from the left. In the bottom right corner, there are three pink tulips with green leaves.

# THE CHRIST-CENTERED WOMAN

***Finding Balance  
in a World of Extremes***

*A Women's Bible Study Based on Ephesians 3*

*Kimberly Dunnam Reisman*



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THE CHRIST-CENTERED WOMAN:  
FINDING BALANCE IN A WORLD OF EXTREMES

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## *Introduction*

The search for balance has always been at the heart of my spiritual journey. I thought that might change over time—that maybe the feeling that life was a whirlwind was simply the nature of my particular stage in life, whether I was a young mother or a graduate student or a novice minister—but that has not proven to be the case. It seems that life has spun me at every stage, which is why discovering a calm center—a place of balance—has been crucial. There have been many moments when I felt as though I was teetering dangerously, weaving and wobbling and unable to maintain my balance. Many times I’ve frantically groped for stability and strength. So I understand the need to feel balanced, not because I’ve always achieved it, but because I know the difficulties I’ve encountered when I haven’t!

When I was in college, I envied those women who knew exactly where they were headed and went directly there. Law students, medical students, and graduate students—they were motivated to achieve their goals and did just that. For me, the only predictable element of my journey has been that it has never been predictable. Marriage, work, motherhood, seminary, ministry, and post-graduate study have dovetailed and overlapped, often in surprising and unexpected ways, as I’ve journeyed through the winding path of my life. There have been detours and pit stops, slow meanderings and all-out sprints, dead ends and unanticipated turns, boring stretches and astonishing scenery—all of which would have been disastrous had I not discovered a calm center and nurtured it over time.

This Bible study has grown from my own need to discover a calm center from which to handle the distracting forces of life that seek to move us away from what is truly important—a need that I’m confident many women share.

### *The Merry-Go-Round of Life*

When my children were young, we spent a lot of time at the playground, and one of their favorite things was the merry-go-round. You don't see merry-go-rounds anymore, but they were a playground staple years ago that provided my children great joy. Granted, these contraptions are likely quite dangerous and children growing up today are probably much safer without them, but my kids loved them. They would hold on and push hard with their feet. As more children were attracted to the spinning and began pushing, the merry-go-round would turn faster and the children's laughter and squeals of delight would grow louder.

I was always amazed that Nathan, Maggie, and Hannah could spin and spin without a hint of nausea, while just watching was almost more than I could bear. But there they would be, hanging on to this whirly device that seemed to be spinning out of control, leaning way out with their heads flung back and hair flying, enjoying the speed. After awhile, they would tire of the effort required to hang on and scoot toward the center where the force of the turning decreased and their stability increased.

That's a great metaphor for life. The many and varied commitments of our lives often spin us at a dizzying rate. We live at such a pace that we feel we are either about to be flung off the whirling merry-go-round altogether, or we teeter dangerously close to losing our sense of balance.

At one time or another, all of us know the feeling of holding on with all our might while wishing for stability and balance. Just as dizzy children move to the center of the merry-go-round where the force of spinning is less powerful, we need to move to a place of centeredness, a place of steadiness, strength, and guidance for sorting through the responsibilities of our lives. I am not talking about a literal place, but a state of being—a way of thinking and living—that results when Christ is at the center of our lives. This study is both a call and a guide to find this center of balance and strength in Jesus Christ.

### *The Starting Point for Our Journey*

Jesus is not popular culture's solution for finding balance. In fact, much of our current culture approaches balance in the way that the classical Greeks did. They believed that the root of evil is ignorance and, therefore, the mind can surmount all problems. Reason, they said, is what saves us, and temperance or balance is the rational ordering of our souls that comes through exercising our minds. Similarly, much of what we read today about balance encourages the exercise of the mind. If we organize ourselves, the experts suggest, make lists



and stick to them, read enough self-help books, and learn enough techniques, then we will be able to balance all that life throws at us.

In contrast, the biblical notion of balance focuses on the heart. The root of evil is not the ignorance of our minds but sin, the distortion of our hearts. Reason can alleviate the problem of ignorance, but it can do nothing about sin. Only Christ can do something about sin. Balance, then, doesn't occur because we exercise our minds and will it to happen. Balance occurs when we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts through our relationship with Jesus Christ. Balance is living a Spirit-filled, Christ-centered life.

This is the starting point for our journey to find balance: following Christ. It is through Jesus that God becomes real for us. When we look at Jesus, we can see who God is and what God is like, and it is through our relationship with Jesus that we are able to gain an understanding of our truest selves and find the source of wholeness and balance.

You may be on a quest for balance but have yet to fully embrace the idea that it can actually be found in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have a relationship with Christ but have not yet made that relationship an integral part of your interior life. Or you may be a long-time Christ follower who is looking for continued depth in the journey. Wherever you are on life's road, I hope that as you engage in this study you will open yourself to the possibility that God is reaching out to you through Jesus and that God desires you to find wholeness and balance for your life in him.

As my own search for wholeness and balance unfolded, I discovered an especially meaningful insight in Scripture about what we experience when we commit ourselves to living a Spirit-filled, Christ-centered life. This Scripture serves as the foundation for this study:

*When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

*Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope.*

Balance occurs when we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts through our relationship with Jesus Christ. Balance is living a Spirit-filled, Christ-centered life.



*May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen.*

Ephesians 3:14-21

As these words became more and more real for me, I realized that this wasn't simply Paul's prayer for the Ephesians; it was his prayer for all who follow Christ—that we might experience Christ at home in our hearts; that we might experience the inner strength and fullness of life that come when we place Christ at the center of our lives. When Christ is at the center, we're able to tap into the power available to us through the Holy Spirit. As we begin to trust Christ, we become more and more aware of how great his love for us actually is. This enables us to experience the fullness of life and power that comes from God, a fullness that provides the stability we need as we navigate the whirling merry-go-round of life.

### *A Vision of the Christ-Centered Woman*

Once we understand that balance can be found in Christ, it's important to have a vision of what the Christ-centered woman looks like. Contrary to what our culture (even our church culture) may tell us, being balanced is not dependent on our marital, education, or economic status, nor does it depend on what (if any) career we have chosen, how old we are, or whether we have children. The life of wholeness and balance that God desires for our lives transcends all those distinctions. Let me offer this picture of the Christ-centered woman:

- She has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that makes a daily difference in her life.
- She knows herself and is comfortable with who she is.
- She has established what is important to her, and she sets priorities and goals.
- She is willing to make sacrifices for what she wants. Delayed gratification is a real and acceptable concept to her.
- She makes wise judgments about how to achieve her goals; she seriously attempts to discern what to do and not do as she works toward her objectives.
- She is not easily upset by changes and new challenges.
- She is ready to make choices and commitments because she has tackled the task of ordering her soul.

It's usually easy to discern whether or not we've found the balance that comes from living a Christ-centered life. We're blessed when we have it and burdened when we don't. When Christ is at the center, we have a sense of stability that allows us to negotiate the challenges of life with grace and perseverance. We're able to continue to ride the merry-go-round without falling off or tiring from the effort of holding on.

When we're imbalanced, on the other hand, our lives exude chaos and frustration. We make impractical choices or none at all. We're easily upset by changes and challenges. We can't stick to any plan for long. We're weary or worn out.

If you recognize yourself in the latter description or find yourself there from time to time—as all of us do—you will benefit greatly from this study. Be assured that a better method of coping is within your grasp.

### *The Framework of Our Study*

As we move toward this better method of coping, we need to discover a new framework on which to build our lives. Let me introduce a new metaphor: a wheel. If Christ is to be the center, we need strong, reliable spokes leading to the wheel surface that actually hits the road of our lives. The imbalance and chaos we've experienced reveal that we've been relying upon uncertain spokes. We need to replace these uncertain spokes with reliable new spokes.

In the weeks that follow, we'll explore seven spokes—or biblical tools—for living a Christ-centered life:

1. "Good Enough"
2. Temperance
3. Self-discovery
4. Authenticity
5. Calling
6. Power and Purpose
7. Flexibility

Each week you will explore one (or more) of these spokes through five daily readings. Each of these readings includes the following segments:

**Read God's Word**  
**Reflect and Respond**

A focus Scripture passage for the day.  
A guided reflection and study of the Scripture with space for recording your responses.  
(Boldface type indicates write-in-the-book questions or activities.)

**Pray About It**

A prayer suggestion to guide you into a personal time of prayer.

**Act On It**

Ideas to help you act on what you have read. (Boldface type indicates write-in-the-book questions or activities.)

You will be able to complete each reading in about 20-30 minutes. (You will need a pen or pencil and your Bible.) Completing these readings each week will help to prepare you for the discussion and activities of the group session.

Once a week you will gather with your group to watch a video in which I share additional insights on each spoke or biblical tool and its application in our lives. I encourage you to discuss what you're learning and to share how God is working in your own life. You will find that sharing with one another will help you to encourage and pray for one another.

Friend, be encouraged as we begin this journey together. Though finding balance in life comes with challenges, it is a journey that God will aid and bless. You see, God isn't "put off" by our imperfection in this area. God doesn't wait for us to have our spiritual acts together before reaching out to us and seeking relationship with us. Instead, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 NRSV). This should be a point of great relief and freedom for us.

Though we may strive for a sense of balance and wholeness, our relationship with God is not dependent upon our success. God's love will remain steadfast regardless. This is a great motivator for us as well. For as we become less focused on our own abilities, performance, skill, or mastery, we will become more and more focused on Christ and Christ's leading in our lives.

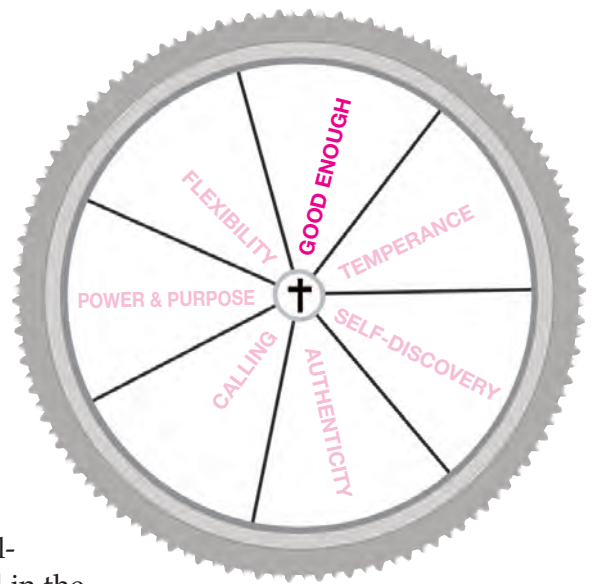
With Christ as our center, the merry-go-round will *not* fling us off. The wheel we ride upon in life will provide a steady ride, despite speed bumps, potholes, and detours. We will be able to stand firm—balanced and ready to face the challenges of our lives!

Peace,

King

## Week 1

# Breaking Stereotypes and Embracing “Good Enough”



As we begin our journey together, it is important to acknowledge that we all do not begin at the same place. As I mentioned in the Introduction, some of us may be searching for our center—our place of balance in life—but have yet to fully embrace the notion that it can actually be found in Jesus Christ. Others of us may have a relationship with Christ but have not yet made that relationship an integral part of our interior lives. Still others of us may have been following Christ for a long time and are looking for continued depth for our journey. Perhaps many of us are somewhere in-between.

Regardless of where we begin our journey, however, each of us is bound to encounter obstacles along the way. This is the nature of the spiritual process. These blocks can come both from within ourselves and from without; and though the details of our stories may be different, many of the obstacles are common to us all.

I want to begin our journey together by focusing on the outer means that hinder us from moving toward being centered in Christ. These are ways in which our culture, specifically American culture, works overtly and covertly to move us away from our true center, which is found in Christ, and toward the distraction of the superficial. Although this is not a study about how to get organized, a great deal of what distracts us has to do with our responsibilities in the world and the expectations the world has for us. Because of this, it is impossible to work toward Christ-centeredness without spending at least some time discussing the issues of ordinary life—motherhood, careers, vocations, household responsibilities, and societal expectations.

We will begin this week by looking at Proverbs 31:10-31 and discussing two specific myths that secular and religious culture offer us that, if believed, hinder us from experiencing Christ “at home in our hearts” as Paul describes in Ephesians 3. As the week progresses, we will see that Scripture offers us alternatives to these myths and moves us closer to the wholeness God desires for our lives, and we will explore the first of our six spokes—“Good Enough.”

Let’s begin by looking at two myths I call Susie Homemaker and Superwoman. You will probably recognize these amazing women quickly.

## Day 1: The Myth of Susie Homemaker

### *Read God's Word*

- <sup>10</sup> Who can find a virtuous and capable wife?  
She is more precious than rubies.
- <sup>11</sup> Her husband can trust her,  
she will greatly enrich his life.
- <sup>12</sup> She brings him good, not harm,  
all the days of her life.
- <sup>13</sup> She finds wool and flax  
and busily spins it.
- <sup>14</sup> She is like a merchant's ship,  
bringing her food from afar.
- <sup>15</sup> She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household  
and plan the day's work for her servant girls.
- <sup>16</sup> She goes to inspect a field and buys it;  
with her earnings she plants a vineyard.
- <sup>17</sup> She is energetic and strong,  
a hard worker.
- <sup>18</sup> She makes sure her dealings are profitable;  
her lamp burns late into the night.
- <sup>19</sup> Her hands are busy spinning thread,  
her fingers twisting fiber.
- <sup>20</sup> She extends a helping hand to the poor  
and opens her arms to the needy.
- <sup>21</sup> She has no fear of winter for her household,  
for everyone has warm clothes.
- <sup>22</sup> She makes her own bedspreads.  
She dresses in fine linen and purple gowns.
- <sup>23</sup> Her husband is well known at the city gates,  
where he sits with the other civic leaders.
- <sup>24</sup> She makes belted linen garments  
and sashes to sell to the merchants.
- <sup>25</sup> She is clothed with strength and dignity,  
and she laughs without fear of the future.
- <sup>26</sup> When she speaks, her words are wise,  
and she gives instructions with kindness.



- <sup>27</sup> *She carefully watches everything in her household  
and suffers nothing from laziness.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Her children stand and bless her.  
Her husband praises her:*
- <sup>29</sup> *"There are many virtuous and capable women in the world,  
but you surpass them all!"*
- <sup>30</sup> *Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last;  
but a woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Reward her for all she has done.  
Let her deeds publicly declare her praise.*

Proverbs 31:10-31

## *Reflect and Respond*

Our Scripture focus for today and tomorrow is found in Proverbs 31. No doubt you've heard of the Proverbs 31 woman. Sometimes she's called the virtuous woman. Today we might call her the "really good" woman.

What does it mean to be a "really good" woman today? What attributes do you think are characteristic of a "really good" woman? Professor, writer, and lecturer Mary Ellen Ashcroft often begins her workshops by asking just that question. Drawing from a variety of settings—from small, radical liberal arts colleges to gatherings of conservative women—comprised of women of all ages, denominations, and backgrounds, she has compiled a surprisingly homogenous description of this "really good" woman. This woman seems to live all over the country, is a member of almost every church, knows no economic boundary, and inhabits both the countryside and our cities. We all seem to know and love her. Who is she? I will let Ashcroft introduce her to you:

Her children are clean and neatly dressed.

. . . She bakes for her kids' lunches and for after-school snacks. The smell of dinner is usually wafting around an hour or so before hubby comes in. Often concerned that there might not be enough, she cooks more than she needs to. After everyone is seated, she keeps scurrying around, making sure everyone has what they need.

She's the one who is usually waiting to pick up the kids in the van after school.

She worries quite a lot about her weight. It would be bad if she put on too much and became unattractive to her husband. She exercises a bit to keep her weight down.

She hates to keep people waiting. For her the feeling of causing even the smallest inconvenience for someone is very hard. She apologizes a lot, as if even her existence is a nuisance. "I'm sorry," she says. "Excuse me." "I seem to be in the way." "Can you see okay?"

... She is very sweet. She tries not to lose her temper. Just under the sweet exterior is an air of anxiety, of distraction. Where did I put that recipe? Where should I buy the pork chops? What if Joey has forgotten his homework? Should I serve the salad before the main course or with it?<sup>1</sup>

I have met this woman. Haven't you? You might think that the uniformity of our perceptions of this woman and the command they have over us stem from Proverbs 31—or some other biblical teaching. Certainly it would make sense. Strangely enough, this isn't the case. This woman, who embodies the Susie Homemaker myth, is not the result of Old Testament Scripture; she did not arrive on the scene in biblical times. Rather, she was born in the Victorian era, and she's been with us ever since.

**What do you believe are the qualities of a "really good" woman?**

**Why do you believe these qualities are so important?**

**Reread Proverbs 31:10-31. What similarities and differences do you see between the woman described there and the myth of Susie Homemaker?**

**Similarities**

**Differences**

The power of Susie's myth has not diminished over the years. Television, movies, books, magazines, cartoons, and commercials have enhanced her

perfection and solidified her power over us. Rachel Held Evans is one of many popular Christian women writers and bloggers who have recognized Susie's continued hold on us. Commenting on how the media perpetuate this myth, Evans writes this:

The magazine aisle dazzles us with photo shopped images of super-skinny models, next to impeccably arranged place settings, next to actresses praised for losing their baby weight in five minutes, next to Martha Stewart holding a perfectly frosted chocolate cake.<sup>2</sup>

Evans goes on to direct her critique at Christian culture as well, asserting that many Christian books and conferences emphasize the details rather than the message of Proverbs 31. I don't believe Evans' critique applies to all of Christian culture; however, I agree that this emphasis gives the impression that many Christians believe the media is correct—that fitness, domesticity, beauty, and success *are* the ways women earn the favor of God and men.

Though I've finally reached a point where I can filter the messages the media sends, I know all too well not only the feeling of falling short of the media ideal but also the pain of watching my daughters struggle with those feelings as well; and I find it discouraging that Christian culture does not offer more to counter-act such messages.

**Do you agree with Evans' comments? Why or why not?**

**What messages about being a woman have you experienced or observed in secular culture?**

**What messages about being a woman have you experienced or observed in Christian culture?**

Because of Susie's continued presence both in secular and Christian culture, it is important to understand her myth and the power it holds. We can do that by looking at how society generally viewed men, women, and work before she was born. This may seem like an unnecessary history lesson, but I assure you

**Extra Insight**

With the rise of the home as a haven came the rise of the idea of the sexes as polar opposites, each existing in a completely separate domain. The male realm was the dog-eat-dog world of work.... The home front was naturally an opposite type of environment from the working world, a place of peace and refuge from the rat race that raged outside.<sup>4</sup>

it is extremely relevant to our study and to gaining a right understanding of the challenges and hindrances we face when living as Christ-centered women. I believe you will discover some surprising insights that may change your view of Susie Homemaker and perhaps help to set you free from the unrealistic expectations of her myth.

Before the industrial revolution, the focus of work for both men and women was the household. This was where things were made and used. Work was hard for everyone; there was always a lot of it, and men and women worked side by side to get it done. The Protestant traditions especially supported the idea that each person's hard work was a virtue and was intimately connected with salvation. Our term "the Protestant work ethic" originated from this outlook.

Over decades, however, things began to change. Separate spheres of work began to replace shared work. The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century is the most obvious marker in this process of change. This revolution, which began in Britain, not only created gigantic advances in technology; it also led to immense changes in lifestyle, not the least of which was the birth of the middle class. In a culture that had always been characterized by a rigid class separation, societal anxiety began to arise as money and possessions blurred the distinctions between business owners and the aristocracy.

According to historians, the anxiety caused by class mobility as well as other factors is central to understanding Victorian culture. Anxiety highlights the Victorian response, which was to search for secure footing in the face of rapid change. The rock on which British (and later American) society began to stand for security was the home.<sup>3</sup>

Home as a focus was not a new idea in and of itself. The home had long been the center of life, the place where you slept and ate and worked and lived.

**Read Deuteronomy 6:6-9. What significant activity was to take place in the home? Make notes about what you find here.**

In contrast to the biblical notion of the home as a place of teaching and spiritual growth, the Victorian age focused on the home as a refuge amidst the storms of life, and one person in particular belonged there: the wife. Susie Homemaker had arrived, and with her came the creation of separate spheres of life and a new sense of "otherness" between the genders. Like Susie Homemaker herself, the idea of men and women being polar opposites with separate domains—as opposed to co-laborers with a variety of gifts—has been with us for so long we often mistakenly believe it's biblical. Actually it's another Victorian concept that has a stranglehold on our consciousness.



**Look up the story of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2. What was God's desire for the man?**

**Even after all the animals were brought to the man, none of them was "just right" for him. What does that indicate about the relationship between men and women?**

**Read Genesis 2:23. What does the man say when he awakens?**

**Does this indicate a sense of opposition or connectedness? Why?**

It may seem as though Susie Homemaker was created alongside Eve in the garden, but it helps us to recognize that she actually arose in Britain from the Victorian belief that God had authored an unequal dependency between the sexes that resulted in division—as opposed to the biblical idea of an interrelatedness that results in unity. We gain strength through the realization that God is not at the heart of Susie's myth; Victorian thinking is. And though Susie may have originated in Britain, she was not limited by geography. She quickly departed for America, where she took hold of our collective consciousness as well.

Is it any wonder guilt has plagued women over every choice and decision they make? Is it any wonder that we often feel responsible for everything within our realm of experience?

**Which of these two beliefs describes your own view of the differences between men and women?**

**How would you explain the difference between an unequal dependency that results in division and an interrelated dependency that results in unity?**

### **Extra Insight**

According to an influential writer of the Victorian era, Susie may have been gentle and motherly, but she also was instrumental in influencing men. She carried the responsibility of raising morally superior children because she herself was morally superior: "So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation."<sup>5</sup>



**Extra Insight**

"Now we can talk about self-fulfillment, career or profession, now we can have ambitions, disappointments, economic responsibility.... Then we had only vicarious accomplishments, vicarious triumphs and failures. We had limits on our growth, limits on our potential, limits everywhere."<sup>6</sup>

Now that we understand Susie's origin, let's consider her impact on society. Both men and women suffered from her stature as a middle-class ideal. For example, a woman's status as a "lady" depended upon her not working. Men became pressured to work longer hours to solely provide for their families, causing them to see their families less. Unmarried women had an especially raw deal. If they missed out on marriage, they couldn't even take up meaningful work without sacrificing their image as "good women." This led to the "spinster's" marginalized role in society and a child's game named in her honor: Old Maid.

In reality, few women beyond the upper classes could achieve the Susie Homemaker epitome of womanhood. Living on a single income was as distant a dream for most families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as it is for many families today. The poor especially were excluded from the ideal, but as in our own time, few voices were raised in defense of those who were too poor not to work.

Despite this reality, the myth of Susie Homemaker remained the standard for women, especially in the mid-twentieth century in the West. The "traditional" family, which originated in the fifties and sixties and was led in the home by Susie Homemaker and in the work force by her husband, took its toll on women. As astounding as it may seem now, society largely viewed women as unable to comprehend—or at least to be completely disinterested in—the arenas of the mind, of intellect and ideas, of soul and spirit.

We shouldn't be surprised, then, at the stir Betty Friedan caused when she wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Researching, interviewing, and writing for five years, Friedan simply wanted to answer the question: Why are so many women unhappy when they supposedly have it all? According to the media, happy housewives abounded in America; women everywhere were content to stay at home, tending the house and children while their men were away at work. Though this may have been true for some, Friedan found many housewives suffering from everything from simple boredom to depression. She witnessed a "nameless aching dissatisfaction" among the women interviewed. As a result, Friedan's book exposed the myth of Susie Homemaker and its power over women, highlighting the fact that trying to live up to her myth often cost them personal growth and robbed them of the opportunity to explore their interior selves—their minds and their spirits.<sup>7</sup>

Susie's mythical power placed limits everywhere for women, even in the area of Christian service. Susie was so ingrained in our religious consciousness that even today many Christians believe that to be like her is the God-given calling of all women. What has actually happened is that these Christians have swallowed hook, line, and sinker the Victorian cultural artifact of Susie Homemaker and accepted her image as gospel truth when in fact secular culture created this image, not biblical teaching.



**Read Acts 16:11-40. What do you notice about Lydia's role in these verses?**

**Read Romans 16:1-16, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Philippians 4:2-3, and 2 Timothy 4:19-22. What do you notice about the lists of people Paul names? What do these verses say about the role women played in the early church?**

Scripture clearly shows that Jesus called both women and men to follow and become disciples. Women were an integral part of Jesus' ministry, and the Bible paints a picture of the early church as one where gifts and callings took precedence over gender. Yet Susie's myth was pervasive enough to infiltrate church teaching and create a tradition where women regularly confront gender prejudice regarding their abilities. We are still fighting this myth in many churches.

As a woman who came of age in the eighties, I haven't experienced the extent of the limits Susie Homemaker created during earlier years. The astonishment and offense I feel when I read books like Friedan's is a testament to how far we have come in separating ourselves from Susie's image. My daughters are now a generation removed from the hardest edges of this myth, taking for granted that their abilities will be treated seriously. Yet cultural debates about issues affecting women and ongoing tension about women's choices regarding work and family (even among women themselves) attest to the fact that Susie's image lingers in the background of our collective psyche.

When, as a young mother, I felt solely responsible for my children's problems, I sensed her out there. When I feel guilty for not having a spotless house or for "letting" my husband cook dinner (he likes to do it more than I do anyway), I know she's lurking in the corner of my mind. Fortunately, because of a lot of history and a decent amount of social upheaval, I understand that Susie is not as remarkably balanced and happy as her image would have me believe and is, in fact, a myth that blocks my way toward a life that is centered in Christ. On the heels of that understanding is the recognition that, contrary to the messages of society and sometimes the church, there is no one "right" way to be a woman. What we need is not a myth of an ideal woman but a strong, biblical foundation out of which each of us can determine what kind of woman we will be.

*And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.*

Galatians 3:27-29

### *Pray About It*

Ask God to open your heart to the lessons awaiting you in this study. What are you hoping to learn or gain? Share with God your expectations, needs, and apprehensions in prayer.

### *Act On It*

Throughout this book, some Act On It ideas appear in bold and others do not. Those highlighted in bold are to be completed in your book. All others are things to think about during the week.

- **Reflect on whether society's Susie Homemaker ideal has limited your personal growth—and if so, how. Make some notes about your thoughts here.**
- **Despite the overall damage done by the myth of Susie Homemaker, there are some valuable elements of her persona. List the traits you feel are valuable.**
- **Have you ever experienced a disparity between what you feel God is calling you to do and what your local church is encouraging you to do? If so, make some notes here about that experience of tension.**
- During this week, be aware of the ways that society's Susie Homemaker ideal lingers in our collective consciousness. Identify instances where you or other women are struggling to meet that ideal. Be aware of the ways that ideal affects men's expectations as well.

## Day 2: The Myth of Superwoman

### *Read God's Word*

- <sup>10</sup> Who can find a virtuous and capable wife?  
She is more precious than rubies.
- <sup>11</sup> Her husband can trust her,  
and she will greatly enrich his life.
- <sup>12</sup> She brings him good, not harm,  
all the days of her life.
- <sup>13</sup> She finds wool and flax  
and busily spins it.
- <sup>14</sup> She is like a merchant's ship,  
bringing her food from afar.
- <sup>15</sup> She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household  
and plan the day's work for her servant girls.
- <sup>16</sup> She goes to inspect a field and buys it;  
with her earnings she plants a vineyard.
- <sup>17</sup> She is energetic and strong,  
a hard worker.
- <sup>18</sup> She makes sure her dealings are profitable;  
her lamp burns late into the night.
- <sup>19</sup> Her hands are busy spinning thread,  
her fingers twisting fiber.
- <sup>20</sup> She extends a helping hand to the poor  
and opens her arms to the needy.
- <sup>21</sup> She has no fear of winter for her household,  
for everyone has warm clothes.
- <sup>22</sup> She makes her own bedspreads.  
She dresses in fine linen and purple gowns.
- <sup>23</sup> Her husband is well known at the city gates,  
where he sits with the other civic leaders.
- <sup>24</sup> She makes belted linen garments  
and sashes to sell to the merchants.
- <sup>25</sup> She is clothed with strength and dignity,  
and she laughs without fear of the future.

- <sup>26</sup> *When she speaks, her words are wise,  
and she gives instructions with kindness.*
- <sup>27</sup> *She carefully watches everything in her household  
and suffers nothing from laziness.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Her children stand and bless her.  
Her husband praises her:*
- <sup>29</sup> *“There are many virtuous and capable women in the world,  
but you surpass them all!”*
- <sup>30</sup> *Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last;  
but a woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Reward her for all she has done.  
Let her deeds publicly declare her praise.*

Proverbs 31:10-31

### *Reflect and Respond*

Today we are revisiting Proverbs 31, but we will view it through a different lens. Though society continues to have strong messages about what women can and can't do, women have more choices today than ever before. For this we can thank the Women's Movement. As conflicted as some of us may feel about the movement's current status, few of us would want to backtrack. Most of us take for granted that we can vote, that we can offer evidence in a court of law, that we have recourses for sexual harassment, or that we won't be denied a higher education because of our gender. Whatever our political stance, we owe a debt of gratitude to the courageous women who went before us.

As much as we have gained over the years, we must also admit that our lives are much more complicated as a result of the many choices we have available to us. Along with that complexity came a new untouchable role model: Superwoman. Where my mother's generation had to contend with Susie Homemaker, this is the myth that haunts my generation—and I believe will continue to haunt that of my daughters. You can probably imagine her based on her name: Superwoman. She's the woman who has it all together all the time, juggling home, career, family, hobbies, and volunteering. You name it; she does it, and does it well.

All of us have encountered the Superwoman myth in one way or another, feeling we have to be all and do all. As with Susie Homemaker, we strengthen our understanding of Superwoman and our ability to confront her when we look at the history that led to her creation. And let's be honest—confronting her isn't something we can avoid if we're serious about becoming a Christ-centered



woman; so we'll spend just a bit more time with history before we move more deeply into the Scriptures.

While I am not a social scientist, the myth of Superwoman appears to me to be a backlash against a backlash. First came the rejection of the constraints of Susie Homemaker. As the fifties faded into the sixties and women heard the distant rumblings of the Women's Movement, a great sigh of relief went up all over the country, which might be generalized like this: I am a person—with hopes and disappointments and passions and abilities. And I am ready to express them all.

As exciting as this new concept appeared, and as true as it felt to women everywhere, it quickly ran head-on into the reality of motherhood. With the dawn of the seventies, home and family virtually became dirty words among many women. Motherhood was increasingly viewed by many as capitulation to an Old World order. In this environment, many women rejected the roles of the past and headed off to the workplace. They entered the male-dominated world of work in droves, and many excelled. Women began to move up the corporate ladder and many experienced financial success independent of men for the first time. Yet more and more, women were placed between a rock and a hard place. Motherhood and the call of the "traditional life" seemed to be diametrically opposed to the feminist commitment, which insisted on "attention being paid to the self, to the full humanity, wishes, desires, capacities of the self."<sup>8</sup> The very nature of motherhood, on the other hand, is the activity of caring for another, placing the needs of another ahead of your own.

**Read Exodus 2:1-10. This story takes place in Egypt where the Israelites are slaves. Pharaoh has ordered that all male Hebrew babies are to be thrown into the Nile. What risk does the baby's mother undertake by hiding him?**

**When she realizes that she can no longer keep her baby safe, what does she do, and how do her actions reflect her care for him?**

**What do the actions of Pharaoh's daughter say about her character?**

**What does this story say about this mother's balance of her own needs and those of her son?**

**How can we attend to the needs of others without neglecting our own?**

**What are the characteristics or evidences of that kind of balance?**

Despite the apparent conflict between motherhood and feminism, women continued to get married and have babies. Understandably, the total rejection of men and children didn't ring true in the everyday life of women outside the university walls. If the Women's Movement was a backlash against the power of Susie Homemaker, then the myth of Superwoman was a backlash against the all-or-nothing attitude of the Women's Movement.

For the most part, women in my generation absorbed the feminist message that we were capable and independent and able to pursue any career we chose. We agreed with the need for equal pay for equal work. But most of us still wanted to marry and to have children. We didn't want to give up everything to pursue a career—we wanted it all. And because of the feminist message of independence, we were confident that we could have it.

Superwoman arrived to save us all from the burden of choice. We could be Susie Homemaker and a Liberated Woman at the same time! The American media quickly latched on to this new myth and continue to emphasize it today. Women's magazines began to include guidelines for choosing the right day care, tips to help organize chaotic mornings when the whole family was trying to get off to school and work, fashion sections emphasizing wardrobes that could take you from home to work to evening, and articles on the value of "quality" time—as opposed to quantity of time—spent with children.

Many women (with a surprising amount of support from men) have embraced the myth of Superwoman and have launched into exciting careers while continuing to hold down the fort at home. Others have entered the workforce more reluctantly—whether full-time or part-time—out of necessity to help make ends meet. And the Superwoman myth has assured them that they can have it all. Yet the freedom to "have it all" has not come without a price.

In 2012, *Time* magazine did a feature story on attachment parenting which included a now infamous cover photo of a beautiful woman, standing provocatively while breast feeding her nearly four-year-old son as he stood on a chair beside her. There was a question printed beside the picture: Are you mom enough? It created quite a stir, not least because it exploited most women's deepest insecurities. Rachel Held Evans offered this assessment:

The way I see it, TIME gave us a something of a gift. By stripping that cover of all pretense, it revealed in plain language the lie behind so much of the media's messages for women: If you aren't a sexy, put-together, powerful, super-mom, who breastfeeds her kids until they're four while baking apple pies, making crayon art, and investing in a successful career, then you're a failure. You will always fall short. You will never be enough.<sup>9</sup>

**Reflect on the kinds of images you have seen and the messages you have received regarding the roles and expectations of women today. How do these images and messages make you feel?**

While a danger of the Susie Homemaker myth is that it limits us to only one outlet for self-expression, a danger of the Superwoman myth is that it assumes we have unlimited energy and resources in pursuing self-expression, personal growth, and fulfillment. The reality is quite the opposite, and it is not because we are failures or inadequate. The truth is, our resources are always limited. While there are men who share the burden of home responsibilities, a more common reality is that Superwoman finds herself essentially working two full-time jobs. When her shift at her paying job ends, her shift at home begins.

Of course, the pressure to be a Superwoman is not limited to married women with children. Unlike Susie Homemaker, Superwoman is truly inclusive. Unmarried women have often experienced their career climb to be a soul-draining experience that consumes precious time and blocks opportunities to develop healthy relationships. Single mothers know all too well the limits that a twenty-four-hour day can bring. And women with lower incomes have always been struggling to be Superwomen, quietly juggling jobs and home for lack of any other choice.

We simply can't be all things to all people. Somewhere along the line someone is going to get the short end of the stick. It may be us, it may be our families, or it may be our work; but someone is bound to be disappointed.



A danger of the Superwoman myth is that it assumes we have unlimited energy and resources in pursuing self-expression, personal growth, and fulfillment.

**How have you experienced the pressure to be Superwoman—to be “all things to all people”?**

**What do you do to counteract this pressure? What resources do you draw upon?**

**Are these resources working? Why or why not?**

If Susie Homemaker is dangerous because of her limitations, Superwoman is dangerous because of her expansiveness. No one can do it all, at least not at the same time, and not always successfully or long term. I learned this firsthand during seminary when I became pregnant with my second child, Maggie. As a surgical resident, my husband, John, was gone most of the time, so I bore the lion's share of responsibility for our life as a family. Thoroughly swayed by the Superwoman myth, I believed that I could do it all. I had worked while pregnant before. I'd been in school when I had a small child before. But I had never gone to school, cared for a small child, and been pregnant at the same time. The reality was that my body wouldn't allow me to do it all.

I ultimately contracted pneumonia and withdrew from seminary. Yet when I buckled under the strain of trying to be a bona fide Superwoman, I questioned myself rather than questioning the validity of the myth. I believe many women do that. Rather than recognizing the mistake of trying to do it all, we doubt our own abilities. Why can't we handle it? Other women don't seem to be having any trouble. Why aren't we stronger? Why don't we have more energy? The secret that Superwoman hides is that no one can actually be her. Just like Susie Homemaker, Superwoman exists only in our minds. But our minds can really deceive us!

**Reread Proverbs 31:10-31. These verses describe a woman who works late into the night weaving and sewing but is still able to rise before dawn each day and provide food for her family, make a profit trading fine linens, and invest in real estate.**



**What are your thoughts about the Proverbs 31 woman?**

**How do you think church teaching and culture have contributed to a glamorized, westernized version of the “ideal” woman described here?**

I will discuss Proverbs 31 in greater detail in the video component of our study, but for now a few words are in order. Most scholars believe the Hebrew phrase in verse 10, *eshet chayil*, is best translated “valorous woman.” Using this phrasing highlights the fact that this poem is a song of praise for women rather than a “to do” list. The poem is actually directed toward men, instructing them to honor their wives “for all that [their] hands have done” (v. 31 NIV). Interestingly, Orthodox Jewish men commit this poem to memory and recite it—many sing it—to their wives every week at the Sabbath meal: *Eshet chayil*—woman of valor! These words are at their core “a blessing—one that was never meant to be earned, but to be given, unconditionally.”<sup>10</sup>

**Look one last time at Proverbs 31:10-31. How would your response to this passage change if you were to view it as a song of praise?**

We live in an age of unprecedented workaholism and burnout. Businesses continue to downsize, leaving fewer people to do more work. Economic realities create greater burdens. Superwoman was tailor-made for these conditions because she lulls us into thinking that we can do it all, and that everyone else already is doing it all. She convinces us that there are no boundaries. She entices us with the belief that everything is possible if we just work hard enough. But living with the Superwoman myth is living in a dream world—a nightmare, actually. In that world we are destined not only for exhaustion but also fragmentation. We will never be able to move toward wholeness if we fail to set boundaries for ourselves, and we will explore how to do that later in our study. For now, we need to soak in this truth: we cannot experience the balance God intends for us if we falsely believe we can do it all.

We cannot experience the balance God intends for us if we falsely believe we can do it all.



### *Pray About It*

As you enter into a time of prayer, reflect on the path that you have taken to arrive at the point where you now stand. Recall what influenced you to make the choices you have made as your life has unfolded. Bring those influencers and choices before God in prayer and allow God to minister to your need.

### *Act On It*

- Look at your calendar of activities and commitments for the next several weeks. Are you being urged to take on more than is appropriate? What is the source of the demand? How are you responding? Make notes here.
- Despite the danger of the myth of Superwoman, there are some valuable elements of her persona. List the traits you feel are valuable.

## Day 3: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah

### *Read God's Word*

<sup>1</sup> In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him.

<sup>2</sup> The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion.... And when they reached Moab, they settled there.

<sup>3</sup> Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Then Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland. <sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.

<sup>8</sup> But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back to your mothers' homes. And may the LORD reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the LORD bless you with the security of another marriage." Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept.

<sup>10</sup> "No," they said. "We want to go with you to your people."

<sup>11</sup> But Naomi replied, "Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? <sup>12</sup> No, my daughters, return to your parents' homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? <sup>13</sup> Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD himself has raised his fist against me."

<sup>14</sup> And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clung tightly to Naomi. <sup>15</sup> "Look," Naomi said to her, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same."

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, “Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back.

<sup>17</sup> Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!”

<sup>18</sup> When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more.

<sup>19</sup> So the two of them continued on their journey.

Ruth 1:1-19

### *Reflect and Respond*

The problem with the two myths we have explored is that they are impractical ideals wrapped up too neatly to exist in the real world. Our lives are bigger, fuller, and packed with more potential meaning than any of these myths can handle. Blindly accepting them without regard for what is valuable and what needs to be jettisoned derails us from our journey toward a life centered in Christ.

Although the myths we’ve discussed are harmful if believed in their entirety, it’s important to recognize that each contains a grain of truth for our journey toward balance. Saying no to Susie Homemaker does not mean we abandon our homes or our families. Rejecting Superwoman does not mean we relinquish our desire to pursue more than one avenue with our talents. Rather, we must find a better way to live our lives than these stereotypes allow. We must find a way to move beyond the myths to the balance and wholeness that Christ offers us. How do we do that? For me, the story of Ruth has been a very helpful tool.

Many of us know the story; it’s one of great love and commitment. But my focus today may surprise you. Ruth is rightly the hero. We have lifted her up over the years as a model of courage and loyalty, and her decision to follow Naomi was crucial to the line of David, which eventually led to Jesus. Orpah, on the other hand, is the mystery character in the drama. As quickly as she enters the picture, she leaves it. But her presence is important. It makes the story richer and deeper, which is why it has come to hold such meaning for me.

Women in Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah’s time were in a precarious position. They depended upon men for their security and well-being. Widows were particularly vulnerable. They had virtually no rights. No one was obligated to care for them. If a widow were fortunate, her family would take her in after her husband died and provide for her. If she had no family, however, she was cast out of society and left to fend for herself. That was quite a frightening prospect then as it is now.

When Naomi was widowed, she remained secure even though she was in a foreign land because her sons were able to care for her. When the sons died,

however, all three women were placed in a difficult situation. Naturally, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. There was no one in Moab to care for her, and the famine in her homeland was over; so it was a wise decision to return to the protected environment of her family. The same reasoning that compelled Naomi to return home led her to urge Ruth and Orpah to return to their families as well.

**Reread Ruth 1:8-12. What reasons does Naomi give in these verses for her daughters-in-law returning to their families?**

If Ruth and Orpah did not follow Naomi's advice and went with her to Bethlehem, there was no guarantee that they would be accepted. Instead, they would become the foreigners, widowed and alone, and their well-being would not be assured.

**Look up Deuteronomy 24:19-22 and answer the following questions.**

**What are your thoughts on this instruction?**

**Does it seem fair? Does it seem generous?**

**What does it tell you about the life of a widow?**

**Why do you think such a command was necessary?**

It's important to remember that neither Ruth nor Orpah wanted to leave Naomi. Both had such love for their mother-in-law that they wanted to stay with her. All three had already started the journey to Judah—the conversation that we witness in Ruth 1:8-18 occurred on the way. It was a heart-wrenching scene: they were sobbing and clinging to each other. The decision was not made easily. They talked and cried and talked and cried.

**Reread Ruth 1:14-15. What decision did Orpah make?**

Finally, Orpah decided to return to her family. In the midst of the weeping, she kissed Naomi good-bye and departed.

It was after Orpah left that Ruth so beautifully expressed her commitment to Naomi.

**Reread Ruth 1:17 and fill in the blanks:**

*"Wherever you \_\_\_\_\_, I will \_\_\_\_\_; wherever you \_\_\_\_\_, I will \_\_\_\_\_. Your \_\_\_\_\_ will be my \_\_\_\_\_, and your \_\_\_\_\_ will be my \_\_\_\_\_." (NLT)*

Ruth made the courageous choice to leave the safety of her homeland and journey to a foreign land. It was a wonderful testament to loyalty and love, and Naomi quickly realized that Ruth would not be deterred.

**Take a few moments to read Ruth 2. As you read, look for hints about the life of a widow.**

**How does Ruth respond to Boaz's kindness? (vv. 10, 13)**

**What challenges might Ruth have faced if Boaz had not been so generous?**

**Reflect on your feelings about Ruth. What aspects of her character do you admire most?**

**Now reflect on your feelings about Orpah. Is your opinion of her positive or negative? Why?**



I have always admired Ruth and her courage. I frequently look to her for inspiration when I have difficult decisions to make. Yet I believe we can learn from Orpah as well—that seemingly insignificant character who disappeared, never to be heard from again. From the perspective of life choices, I believe Orpah made a good and right decision to return to her family. As admirable as Ruth’s choice was, Orpah’s decision was based on solid reasoning. In light of the lack of status and security widows experienced in those times, it made sense for Orpah to return to the security of the only family she had. It was a tremendous risk to go to Bethlehem as a foreigner with no guarantee that Naomi’s family would care for her.

Orpah made a wise decision, but Orpah did not follow. Ruth followed. There is obvious tension between these two choices. There was no middle option. Our lives often feel the same way. We often feel that between two opposing choices, only one of them is right. Society and the church often encourage us to think that way. Just as our culture would have us believe various myths, it also would have us believe that sometimes there is only one “right” decision among many. All too often the church, either directly or indirectly, supports this position, leading us to believe that Ruth made the “right” choice and Orpah made the “wrong” one. If you don’t choose to be Ruth, the message from all the Ruths out there is that you are completely misguided. If you don’t choose to be Orpah, the message from all the Orpahs out there is exactly the same.

I do not believe God intended our lives to be made up of such extremes. The value we gain from the story of Ruth and Orpah is not that Ruth made the right choice and Orpah did not, but that both women made choices that were right for them individually. We don’t hear from Orpah again, but we can probably assume that after she returned home, she led a secure life.

At the end of the Book of Ruth we learn that Ruth went on to be an integral part of our salvation story; she gave birth to Obed, who became the father of Jesse and grandfather of King David, from whose line Jesus descended. Both women made right choices, choices that were good enough for their individual circumstances.

### *Pray About It*

As you enter a time of prayer, reflect on the way in which we sometimes polarize our choices, with each person or group feeling that those who choose differently are misguided. Ask God to enter into your decision making process, enabling you to see each choice God leads you to make as good enough for your individual circumstances and the plan God has for your life.

The value we gain from the story of Ruth and Orpah is not that Ruth made the right choice and Orpah did not, but that both women made choices that were right for them individually.



Act On It

- Have you ever experienced circumstances in which you felt that of two opposing choices, only one of them was right? Make some notes about that experience.
- In our culture today, it often appears that women are in opposition to one another on a variety of issues. Reflect on the choices you have made regarding the issues below and how you have felt in response to other women’s reactions to your choices. Make notes below the heading “Choices I Have Made.”

Now reflect on women who have made different choices regarding those same issues. How have you responded to them? Record your thoughts below the heading “Choices Others Have Made.”

	<u>Choices I Have Made</u>	<u>Choices Others Have Made</u>
Marriage		
Having children		
Breastfeeding		
Working outside the home		
Other Choices:		

## Day 4: The Spoke of “Good Enough”

### *Read God's Word*

<sup>15</sup> So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. <sup>16</sup> Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.

<sup>17</sup> Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.

Ephesians 5:15-17

### *Reflect and Respond*

Yesterday we saw that both Ruth and Orpah made right choices, choices that were good enough for their individual circumstances. The words “good enough” are key as we seek to find balance and to live according to God’s plan for our lives.

We live in a world of competing and often conflicting demands, as well as seemingly limitless choices. Whether we realize it or not, all of these choices, even the small ones, are intertwined with our faith. Our faith determines what we value and what types of commitments we are willing to make. These commitments then affect the growth of our faith. The necessity of making choices in a world of competing demands emphasizes our need to understand the concept of “good enough.” Using the metaphor of a wheel to represent our life, the first spoke that is vital to being centered on Christ is this understanding of “good enough.”

We need to be careful to avoid misunderstanding at this point. As we saw during our first two days, the world has plenty of messages about how to be a “really good woman.” Most of the messages frequently make us feel that we don’t measure up. We aren’t pretty enough, or domestic enough, or successful enough, or as the *Time* Magazine cover suggested, mom enough. In the world’s eyes, there are many ways in which we may not be “good enough.” But that is not what I am pointing to when I offer the idea of “good enough.” The concept I’m pointing toward is determined not by outside forces but by internal ones. God determines what is “good enough,” and we’re able to discern that when God’s Holy Spirit speaks to our spirit, guiding us to an understanding of what God desires us to do—what choice is the right or “good enough” choice for us to make. That is the point of our passage for today. Because there is no universal “good enough,” each of us must be open to the Holy Spirit’s leading so that we can “understand what the Lord wants [us] to do.”



God determines what is “good enough,” and we’re able to discern that when God’s Holy Spirit speaks to our spirit, guiding us to an understanding of what God desires us to do—what choice is the right or “good enough” choice for us to make.

“Good enough” shifts our focus from a performance or works-oriented mentality to a mindset of grace.

**Reread Ephesians 5:15-17. How do you determine what God wants you to do? What resources do you draw upon?**

Let’s unpack this idea of “good enough” a bit further. One of the valuable cultural messages we receive is the importance of pursuing excellence. Whether it is in the world of sports, education, or the workplace, society rewards excellence. Scripture strengthens this message as well.

**Read Philippians 4:8 and fill in the blanks:**

*If there is any \_\_\_\_\_, and if there is anything worthy of \_\_\_\_\_, think about these things. (NRSV)*

Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to focus their minds on things that are excellent and praiseworthy—things that are honoring to God. Excellence is a noble aspiration. I believe it pleases God when we strive to be the best we can be, using the gifts God has placed within us to their fullest potential. However, just as the idea of excellence can be motivating, it also can be damaging when taken to the extreme. Many families have suffered the pain of being ignored by a workaholic striving to be the best employee. Many women have damaged their bodies and their spirits attempting to attain an ideal, “excellent” body shape. Both men and women have approached the point of sheer exhaustion trying to be all things to all people. As valuable as the notion of excellence is, there is also a desperate need for a notion of “good enough” to provide a healthy balance.

Embracing an understanding of “good enough” doesn’t mean we reject excellence. On the contrary, it can often lead to excellence. However, from the outset it involves not a blind commitment to “excellence” but discernment through prayer and an openness to the Holy Spirit’s guidance to determine what is acceptable and right in a given situation or season of our lives. It is about establishing what actions and behaviors will bring the balance and wholeness God desires for us. In this way, “good enough” shifts our focus from a performance or works-oriented mentality to a mindset of grace.

I confronted my own need to understand and accept the concept of “good enough” during seminary. When I began my coursework, I was extremely stressed and had great difficulty finding the rhythm of academics that I had so often experienced in the past. During my college years, I had become accustomed to hard work and excellent grades, so I instinctively reverted to those study habits and expectations. Unfortunately, the academic pattern didn’t



fall together the way it had for me in college. What I overlooked was the fact that the current circumstances of my life in no way resembled those of my college years. I was married, I had an infant, and John was in the midst of a time-consuming surgical residency.

As I struggled to juggle the demands of home and school, I quickly realized that I couldn't give all my time and energy to both school and my son. That also meant I couldn't be the "ideal" mother or student of my dreams. The challenge I faced was to find balance, a way to be a "good enough" seminary student (acceptable grades, adequate mastery of the subject matter) and a "good enough" mother (providing a healthy and loving environment for my son). For me, finding that balance meant compromise. To protect my family life I determined that I could only be gone three days each week, which meant that I had to forego classes that met on the other two days. On the other hand, my house was never as tidy as it might have been and Nathan learned that there were times when he had to entertain himself. As I implemented this compromise, I realized that excellence was not necessary at this point; simply being "good enough" at both of those aspects of my life was. Discovering the notion of "good enough" had an ironic outcome in my personal life: once I recognized it, I found the rhythm that had been missing and began to do well in school while maintaining a happy life at home as well.

I still strive for excellence in most pursuits. But I'm thankful that my family continually reinforces the importance of "good enough." I recall a Mother's Day card my middle daughter, Maggie, made me when she was about seven. On the inside she wrote, "My mother knows about God and cooking." She didn't say I knew all there was to know about God and cooking, but I obviously knew enough about both to satisfy her need for spiritual nurture and good health. Years later, when my youngest daughter, Hannah, was a teenager, I had to miss a couple of her soccer games one weekend. I had worked late into the night and so was still sleeping when she left that Saturday morning. I awoke to find a long note telling me not to worry about missing her games and thanking me for all that I did to support her in soccer.

In Ephesians 5 Paul admonishes us to be careful how we live, to not act thoughtlessly but to understand what God wants us to do. Through prayer and discernment, we are able to do just that and make choices that are "good enough" for our individual circumstances.

**Review the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah (Ruth 1:1-19) and reflect on Orpah's decision in light of the discussion of "good enough." Has your opinion of Orpah changed in any way, and if so, how?**

It is unrealistic to believe that we can be excellent in every area of our lives at the same time. Thus, “good enough” enables us to discern the proper balance we need in order to experience the wholeness God intends for our lives, a balance that will change over time as the seasons of our lives unfold.



My experience in seminary is an example of how pursuing excellence can sabotage us when we pursue it without prayerful discernment about the details of our lives. Without balance, my attempts to be an “excellent” student disrupted my life at home. In the same way, my attempt to be an “excellent” mother undermined my ability to perform adequately in school. It is not that we reject the pursuit of excellence, but that pursuit is tempered by our understanding of what is “good enough” in the various arenas that make up our lives. It is unrealistic to believe that we can be excellent in every area of our lives at the same time. Thus, “good enough” enables us to discern the proper balance we need in order to experience the wholeness God intends for our lives, a balance that will change over time as the seasons of our lives unfold.

**Has pursuing excellence in one or more areas of your life ever sabotaged you, keeping you from experiencing balance and wholeness? If so, how?**

I like to think that Orpah understood “good enough.” She made a very difficult decision—one filled with the pain of separation and loss, but one that was “good enough” for her. As we look for a new framework on which to build the structure of our lives, a first step is to claim the concept of “good enough” for ourselves. As we practice being “good enough,” we create a strong spoke for the wheel of our lives, a spoke that leads from Christ at the center outward toward the many decisions and choices we face every day.

This notion has countless applications. We all need to make choices that help us become “good enough” mothers, children, siblings, workers, volunteers, and friends—choices about how we spend our time and what commitments we are willing to make. The “Good Enough” spoke moves us one step away from the Susie Homemaker and Superwoman myths that threaten to confine and confuse us, and one step closer to our center in Christ. It enables us to look at the choices that lay before us not from the world’s perspective of what is appropriate, but from our own prayerful discernment about what is right for us in light of what God desires for our lives.

### *Pray About It*

In our Scripture reading for today, Paul encourages us to “understand what the Lord wants [us] to do.” During your time of prayer, allow God to speak to

you regarding your choices and commitments, recognizing that God may have words of validation and comfort as well as words of challenge and change.

### *Act On It*

- Think about the various responsibilities you currently have and complete the following sentences:

I can be a “good enough” . . .  
mother as long as I \_\_\_\_\_.  
wife as long as I \_\_\_\_\_.  
employee as long as I \_\_\_\_\_.  
friend as long as I \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_ as long as I \_\_\_\_\_.

I do not have to \_\_\_\_\_  
in order to be a “good enough” mother.

I do not have to \_\_\_\_\_  
in order to be a “good enough” wife.

I do not have to \_\_\_\_\_  
in order to be a “good enough” employee.

I do not have to \_\_\_\_\_  
in order to be a “good enough” friend.

I do not have to \_\_\_\_\_  
in order to be a “good enough” \_\_\_\_\_.

- At the beginning of today’s reading, I commented that we live in a world of competing and often conflicting demands, as well as seemingly limitless choices. All those choices, even the small ones, are intertwined with our faith. Our faith will determine what we value and what types of commitments we will be willing to make. These commitments then affect the growth of our faith. On the next page, make a list of the various commitments you have made recently.



**My Recent Commitments:**

**How has your faith entered into your decision-making process? How will these commitments affect your faith walk?**

**Reflect on whether each commitment on your list above hinders or energizes your faith development. Beside each commitment, write an H or E to indicate its influence. Determine how you can remove yourself from those commitments that negatively affect you, and begin to do so.**

- Keep the concept of “good enough” in the back of your mind as you go through this next week. When you face choices, remind yourself of this concept as you work through your decision.

## Day 5: A Difficult Journey, But Not a Lonely One

### *Read God's Word*

<sup>16</sup> I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources [God] will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. <sup>17</sup> And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him.  
Ephesians 3:16-17

<sup>28</sup> Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.  
Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV

### *Reflect and Respond*

As we close this week, I want to emphasize that achieving balance, developing a centered life, will not happen in the same way for each of us. As I've mentioned, achieving balance will not even happen the same way over the course of a lifetime for any one person. At certain times favoring one area of our lives over another brings us balance, as I experienced during the years when I was focused on raising my children. At other times, however, that same favoring may be what causes us to lose equilibrium, as I discovered when I realized that it was time to focus more intently on my career. That is why it is so important to recognize that our choices do not have to be as polarizing as society would have us believe—often there really is more than one “right” choice. That is also why the concept of “good enough” is so valuable, for it is impossible to be all things to all people at all times.

That being said, however, there is a common denominator in our striving for Christ-centeredness. For all of us, at every point in our lives, it involves prayer for discernment and intentional work to balance and order our souls. No matter who you are, this journey is not an easy one. Society holds out many avenues

"When Christ is the Lord of our lives, nothing else can be; when Christ is not Lord of our lives, anything and everything else will be."



toward centeredness. Many of them focus on self as healer, teacher, and guide. Many of us wander unaided and unguided, searching within ourselves for the center that will provide us with lasting stability and equilibrium.

As Christ followers, we are fortunate that our quest is not unaided. It may be an inward journey, but it is not an isolated one. We do not have to search high and low for a source of our centeredness; we have been given a center for our lives.

**Reread Ephesians 3:16-17 and fill in the blanks:**

*I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources [God] will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will be more and more at home in your \_\_\_\_\_ as you trust in him. (NLT)*

When we first come into relationship with Christ, we place him at the center of our hearts; and as our faith matures, his place at the center of our lives becomes more and more secure. As the strong center of our lives, Christ is the one to whom we look to provide order for our souls. He is the one who guards us against imbalance. "When Christ is the Lord of our lives, nothing else can be; when Christ is not Lord of our lives, anything and everything else will be."<sup>11</sup>

Christ at the center places all our demands and obligations, all our responsibilities and commitments, all our hopes and desires into perspective. When our lives are focused on Christ, we become open to the Holy Spirit's power to keep us balanced. This is part of what Paul is hinting at in Ephesians when he prays that we would receive "mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit" (3:16). As God's Spirit speaks to our spirits, we are able to recognize that balance is not a matter of following special rules or mastering a particular technique; nor is it a matter of being a Superwoman or a Susie Homemaker. Rather, true balance is a matter of discovering our truest self, the whole self that God created us to be. When Christ is our center, we are empowered to make decisions based on what is right for our true self, not necessarily what is right for anyone else. This kind of centeredness allows us to lead more relaxed, ordered lives and move confidently toward the abundant life that God intended for us.

**In John 10:10, Jesus says that his purpose is to give us "abundant life." The New Living Translation uses the phrase "a rich and satisfying life." What do you feel are the components of a rich and satisfying life?**

Scripture emphasizes that the Christian life is not necessarily a life free of struggle, difficulty, or suffering. In fact, Jesus predicted that there would be times when Christians would be persecuted because of their belief in him (Matthew 24:9). Yet, Jesus never waivers from his promise of abundant life. Therefore, a rich and satisfying life doesn't mean the absence of struggle. On the contrary, God desires that we experience balance and wholeness even in the midst of life's struggles. Placing Christ at the center of our lives is integral to that experience.

**To what or where do you turn when you need to regain a sense of balance?**

**Have you looked to Christ as a “centering force” in your life—a help for finding balance? If so, how? If not, why not?**

Jesus has invited us to learn the kind of balance that comes when we discover the whole self that God created us to be.

**What does Jesus invite us to do in Matthew 11:28-30?**

**What does he promise he will do in response?**

The reality of living in a world dominated by the myths of Susie Homemaker and Superwoman is that our lives scream independence, the pursuit of freedom. We either crave it because of the constraints of the myths or because the myths hold it out as the ultimate goal of human existence. And apart from the myths, an overarching message of our culture is that achieving independence is a necessary component of happiness and fulfillment. It is the benchmark of growing up as well; at each stage we gain just a bit more freedom. By the end of high school our children cannot wait to leave home, when they are in college, they cannot wait to get a job, and on and on from one milestone to the next.

### Extra Insight

Yoke (noun): a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals (as oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together...a frame fitted to a person's shoulders to carry a load in two equal portions

Yoke (verb): to attach a draft animal to; also: to attach...to something...to join as if by a yoke...to put to work<sup>12</sup>



We take a major step on our journey toward balance and centeredness when we realize that rather than experiencing freedom, each milestone is simply the process of trading one harness for another. We may be excited to leave the restrictions of our parents' home behind, until we realize we now have to pay for everything ourselves. I recall being so excited to stay home with my children—no more constraints of work; I wouldn't have to answer to anyone—ha! That is the lie of our culture; we think we are getting out of one harness only to find ourselves strapped into another one.

This tendency we have to allow ourselves to be strapped into ill-fitting harnesses is why Jesus' words are so important on our journey toward centeredness.

**Read his words in Matthew 11:28-30 again and fill in the blanks.**

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take \_\_\_\_\_ yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For \_\_\_\_\_ yoke is easy, and \_\_\_\_\_ burden is light.*  
(NRSV)

The emphasis here is on *my*; take *my* yoke upon you. Jesus understands that we already have a yoke on us; we just don't realize it. However, rather than struggling with harnesses that don't fit, Jesus offers a yoke that fits perfectly.

Yokes are a means of attachment. They connect things, usually to spread the burden more evenly—between animals pulling heavy loads or across our shoulders—so we can carry greater weight. When you are yoked, you are fastened in a significant way to the burden you are carrying, pulling, or bearing.

We are all harnessed to something, to myths of ideal womanhood or to viewing our choices and decisions as polarized and narrow. Yet Jesus says choose your harness, hook yourself to my harness, do it on God's terms not the world's. Trading the ill-fitting harnesses of Susie Homemaker and Superwoman for the easy yoke and light burden Jesus offers is not always easy. It requires prayer for discernment to recognize our current harnesses. It requires a willingness to view the world through the lens of Christ and a determination to make intentional choices that reflect that commitment. Yet when we take Christ's yoke upon ourselves, we begin to experience mighty inner strength through God's Holy Spirit. Christ becomes more and more at home in our hearts as we trust in him, and we are able to attend to the vast array of choices and commitments of life with balance and grace.

## *Pray About It*

Reflect on the harnesses that you have worn or are currently wearing. What are they? What are the heavy burdens you bear?

As you enter into a time of prayer, picture yourself removing the burden or burdens you are bearing from your shoulders and open yourself to the power of God's Holy Spirit to fill you with inner power.

## *Act On It*

- We have discussed a new spoke for our wheel of balance, the spoke of “good enough.” List below the spokes that have made up your wheel of balance so far—spokes such as striving for excellence or the images and messages you have received about being a “really good” woman.

**Are these spokes working to ensure a smooth ride? Why or why not? What spokes do you need to replace?**

- Over the next few weeks, be aware of the issues or demands that threaten your sense of balance. Identify their sources, and begin thinking about some possible healthy responses to them.



## Week 1 Video Viewer Guide

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be \_\_\_\_\_.  
I will make a \_\_\_\_\_ who is just right for him."

Genesis 2:18 NLT

So the LORD God formed from the ground all the wild \_\_\_\_\_ and all  
the \_\_\_\_\_ of the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would call  
them, and the man chose a name for each one. He gave names to all the livestock, all the  
birds of the sky, and all the wild animals. But still there was no \_\_\_\_\_  
just right for him.

Genesis 2:19-20 NLT

ezer ke-negdo – helper \_\_\_\_\_ for man

God is looking for a \_\_\_\_\_ helper, a \_\_\_\_\_  
helper...who helps like \_\_\_\_\_ helps.

"At last!" the man exclaimed.

"This one is bone from my bone,  
and flesh from my flesh!

She will be called ' \_\_\_\_\_,'

because she was \_\_\_\_\_ from ' \_\_\_\_\_.'"

Genesis 2:23 NLT

God created us in an environment of \_\_\_\_\_ to be a source of corresponding and reciprocal \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

Understanding ourselves as *ezer ke-negdos*—remembering that we were created by God to be a source of mutual and reciprocal strength and power, and remembering that this God called all of creation, including \_\_\_\_\_, very \_\_\_\_\_—is crucial to experiencing the \_\_\_\_\_ God intends for each one of our lives.

Proverbs 31:10-31 is a \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_, not a \_\_\_\_\_ list.

“Good Enough”—Discerning through \_\_\_\_\_ and an openness to the Holy Spirit’s guidance what is \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ for us in any given situation or any season of life

Following Jesus is about being open to ways in which the \_\_\_\_\_ is leading us to make choices that are “\_\_\_\_\_” for us in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

*eshet chayil*—woman of \_\_\_\_\_