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Chapter 1

LET GO OF EXPECTATIONS

I hadn't seen our youngest for several months. It was his freshman year of college and I was still adjusting to not being part of his everyday life. When he came home with his hair long enough to be pulled back into a “man bun” I was caught off guard. No longer was I privy to the decisions he made about his appearance. It may seem silly, but I felt left out.

Expectations will get us in trouble every time. They set us up for disappointment and leave us feeling disconnected. Being part of our kids' lives for nearly twenty years paves the way for certain expectations. We're accustomed to knowing specific things about their life and even chiming in on some of those things. However, when our kiddos leave the nest, those expectations have to change. With our direction from Ecclesiastes 3:6 that there's a time to hold on and a time to let go, let's take a

look at four parenting expectations we need to let go of as we move into this new season of life.

Let go of expecting to know things

It was Jordan's first year at college. Attending school two hours from home, he and his parents were all adjusting to this new season of life. Jordan had played high school football, so his parents were accustomed to attending football games every Friday night throughout the fall. Even though Jordan was away and his parents had no one they knew playing on the team, they decided to go to the home game to keep up their tradition. As they settled into the bleachers, Dad snapped a picture of the team on the field and sent it to Jordan. "*Thinking of you tonight. Miss you,*" was the message he sent along with the picture. About twenty minutes later came Jordan's response. It was also a picture of the same football field with the message, "*LOL . . . I'm here too!*"

Mom and Dad weren't sure what to think. On one hand they were frustrated that their son had made a road trip home they didn't know about. On the other hand, they were relieved they actually knew where he was. And if they were really honest, they felt a little bit left out. Welcome to Reality 101 of empty-nesting: You have to let go of expecting to know things you would have known about in the past.

Your son or daughter is now making decisions independent of you. They're deciding how to spend their time apart from you. They're deciding how to spend their own money. They're

making decisions about things you would have weighed in on in the past. Jordan's parents were in the middle of the muddle of empty nest transition. They decided to not make a mountain out of a molehill, but did ask that Jordan let them know when he would be making any major trips away from campus since the car he had on campus was theirs.

Sometimes it's not road trips but silly things like appearance that bother us. When my friend Marci's son sent a picture of himself and his girlfriend, Marci was so surprised her boy was sporting facial hair. Her son had never grown a beard before. This was new, and seeing the picture made him feel a bit unfamiliar to her. She admitted feeling a little left out of his life.

You and I have to let go of expecting to know things we used to know. We have to let go of expecting to be able to weigh in on their decisions. Of course, if they're going to school on your dime, you can still call the shots on some things, but if they're out on their own, paying their own way through life, you no longer have a vote. Even if you're still supporting them in some way, you still need to adjust your expectations to give them much-needed independence as they learn to spread their wings and fly.

Let go of expecting their priorities to be the same as yours

As our kids launch their own lives, they now have the freedom to determine their own priorities, too. You've laid the foundation for their life, but they get to determine what kind of house they'll build. I love what our pastor's wife, Sara, says.

“If they decide to build a shack on the foundation you laid for them, your job is to pray they’ll eventually tear down the shack and build the beautiful castle you laid the foundation for.”

Indeed, one of the hardest things to learn to let go of is determining their priorities for them. For nearly twenty years, you tried to help them make good decisions and set sound priorities. Now they need to do this on their own and it’s entirely possible you won’t agree with those priorities. This may happen gradually as they’re entering adulthood and still under your roof, and it may happen when they’re living on their own and starting their own family.

Several years ago, I coauthored the book *Got Teens?* with Pam Farrel. In our research, we found an interesting study concerning brain development. According to Dr. Jay Giedd at the National Institute of Mental Health, “the very last part of the brain to be pruned and shaped to its adult dimensions is the prefrontal cortex, home of the so-called executive functions—planning, setting priorities, organizing thoughts, suppressing impulses, weighing the consequences of one’s actions. In other words, the final part of the brain to grow up is the part capable of deciding, I’ll finish my homework, and take out the garbage, and then I’ll [message] my friends about seeing a movie.”¹ Studies indicate the brain isn’t fully developed until the age of twenty-five. Yes, that means that our kids are now setting their own priorities when they’re not actually fully equipped to do so.

Even without brain development being part of the picture, our young adults are simply different people than we are.

What's important to us may not be important to them, or it may take time for those priorities to kick in for them. For instance, family may not be a priority for them until they become parents themselves.

Our job is to give them the freedom to have different priorities and to resist the urge to shame or blame them for being different than we are. Our responsibility is to communicate the things that are important to us, but not to take it personally when our priorities clash with their priorities. This isn't the time to lament, "Where did we go wrong in raising this kid?" but rather staying steady with, "I know he's trying to figure out life and I'm going to give him the space and the grace to do so."

Let go of expecting them to communicate with you like you want them to

I have five young adult kids and they all communicate with me differently. Two of them I talk with almost daily. Either I call or text them or they call or text me. I know what's going on in their world most of the time. Child number three I hear from about once a week and number four and five I hear from about once a month. The pace of all those conversations is normal.

This is also true of their communication with their siblings. You may desire that your child has a close relationship with their siblings. However, they have to forge those adult relationships themselves. You laid the groundwork, but they will determine how much they'll invest as adults.

By the way, for most of us with more than one child, the

nest empties slowly. When the first child leaves, the supper table suddenly has an empty chair. You may be tempted to talk about the pain of that empty chair often, forgetting that the children who are still at home need you too. Be careful about sending an unintentional message to your kids still at home that they matter less by making frequent comments like, “I miss Madison so much; this house isn’t the same anymore.”

Every kid is different. Their need to connect with you and other family members varies as well. Some you’ll only hear from when they need something. Others loop you into nearly every part of their life. Your job is to adjust to the pace they set.

You might be thinking, “Wait, how about my preference? What about my need to connect with my child?” Sure, you may

want to communicate that you’d love to talk once a week, but if their desire is to connect once a month, you’ll need to find a compromise that works for both of you. Your job is to communicate your desire directly (“I’d love to chat once a week”) rather than indirectly in a passive-aggressive way (“I sure would love to hear from you more than once a year”). No guilt trips, no sarcastic comments, no underhand manipulating to get your way. Straightforward,

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Let go of expecting to change them

Mamas are experts at seeing where our kids need to grow. We could identify it when they were under our roof and we can still see it after they move out and on with their life. Though we can keenly see changes that need to be made, the hard part is that we are no longer the authority to address the needed growth points unless they ask. If they ask, we can certainly offer our wisdom and share our concerns. If they don't ask, we need to keep our comments to ourselves, and commit our concerns to prayer.

My friend Becky says that when she's tempted to address something with her adult son, she tries to think of how she would address it with a friend. Most of the time she realizes she wouldn't address it with a friend at all! This helps her find self-control and pray instead.

Prayer isn't a second-rate option for us. In fact, it should be our first option. After all, God is far more powerful than either you or me! *Why, oh why do we get that turned around?* Our desire to control raises its head more often than we care to admit. Not only that but we try to force *our* timing. It comes down to trust: *Do I trust God to really put my children and their needed changes into His hands?*

This is also where we need to grieve what isn't and accept what is. If you raised your kids in a faith-filled home, but they've walked away from God, grieve that disappointment. Pour your broken heart out to God and then accept the reality that right now, you may be the only Jesus your child sees. Accept the

reality that he or she is on his or her own journey of faith. Trust that God is pursuing them and loves them even more than you do. Pray and intercede for them each day.

Whatever the disappointment is, or the unhealthy parts of their life or relationships are, grieve what isn't that you wish was. Don't minimize it in your heart. Don't sweep it under the rug and not address the pain and disappointment. Shed tears. Admit the disappointment. Express your anger about this loss. Pour your feelings out to God. Once you've allowed grief to happen, move to acceptance. Ask for wisdom on how to be accepting of your child's reality. Remember, accepting isn't agreeing with. It's recognizing the reality of your child's struggles.

What is your disappointment with your adult child's life? What would you like to see changed but you know it's no longer something you can address? What do you need to grieve and then accept?

Change Your Expectations to Better Match Reality

Expectations get us in trouble in all our relationships. In fact, if we want to increase the joy in our life, we really need to stop having expectations of others. We can pray, dream, and hope, but not expect. We've focused on expectations as it relates to our adult children in this chapter. We can apply the same principles to expectations we have in marriage, with extended family, in our work environment, about our changing body, and more. In fact, we'll talk about most of those in the coming pages.

If we can learn to identify expectations and let go of them, we'll be better able to walk in love and grace. If we stop expecting to know things we would have known in the past, we'll be able to embrace something new when we see it. If we stop expecting our kids' priorities to be the same as ours, we won't be offended when our differences clash. If we stop expecting our kids to communicate as often as we would like, we'll better be able to appreciate the moments we get to connect with them. And if we will stop expecting to be able to change them, we'll be able to accept who they are and embrace the work God is doing in their life (even when it seems to not be at the speed we desire!). As you adjust your expectations to better match reality or let go of expectations of others completely, you'll find your contentment will increase, your love will expand, and your relationship with your imperfect kids will be strengthened.

Truth for Today:

“For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”

Philippians 4:13 (NLT)

Take the Next Step:

Pay attention to your expectations (hint: they’re usually revealed when you’re experiencing disappointment or frustration). Begin to release others from your expectations so you can increase your sense of contentment and joy in this new season of life.

Talk with God:

Lord, I confess that I’m filled with expectations. Some are unrealistic, some unknown, and most are unspoken, but they’re there. I know with Your help I can begin to let go of expectations so I can see the blessings right in front of my face. More than anything, may I always expect You to be at work in my life and in my kids’ lives. In Jesus’ name, amen.