

## Honoring the Unseen Work of Unsung Mothers

Romans 16:13

Recently, I heard a Puerto Rican stand-up comedian from New York, (Gina Brillon), share some funny and serious stories about motherhood. She talked about how parenting today feels so different, especially for Latinos. As she explained:

“We’re having these different conversations that I feel are so important... We’re talking about things like toxic parenting, right? We never heard that growing up. And let me tell you something — I’m Puerto Rican. I guarantee you nobody’s cornered the market on [so-called] toxic parenting like we have.” She’s talking about things like getting spanked with a chancla, which in Spanish means, whatever kind of sandal mom was wearing when you were misbehaving. If you ask me, I think we might need to bring back a little more of that strong Latino love, chancla and all!

She also joked about the old-school “therapy” many Latinos grew up with...like the rhyme *Sana, sana, colita de rana. Si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana*. Although the English translation still won’t make much sense, it goes something like: “Heal, heal, little frog’s tail. If you don’t heal today, you’ll heal tomorrow”). Gina says, “I cannot *sana sana* away depression. Not how that works!” When she explains it to her Anglo husband, who doesn’t speak Spanish, she called it “passive aggressive witchcraft.” As a fellow Puerto Rican, I can totally relate. Not to mention that Vicks cures everything.

So, when I was sick as a little boy and came to my mom, her version of anointing me with oil and praying the prayer of faith, was rubbing Vicks on me and praying, *Sana, sana, colita de rana. Si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana*.

On a more serious note, she then talks about the parenting advice she received. She found herself getting frustrated at people who would give parenting advice even though they don’t have kids. “If you’re not living this life, how do you know what to tell me to do?”

Until she realized: “The reason why I should listen to these people is that they may not have kids, but they are coming from a perspective of a person who experienced a certain type of parenting.”

She adds with a laugh, “Not all of it. Some people are dumb. Don’t listen to everyone.”

But here’s the helpful perspective she landed on: Even people without kids can still carry wisdom from how *they* were parented. Their perspective has something valuable to say.

Let me add that deeper still, we as Christians realize, that there is an even greater source, namely the love of Christ. That is the place from which all true security and satisfaction comes from. And that’s where mothers and spiritual mothers draw their deepest strength and where all effective, transformative ministry flows from and spills over unto others.

In Romans chapter 16, where our main text is found, Paul is closing his letter to the church in Rome with a long list of personal greetings. It’s not dry theology. Rather it’s warm, relational, and full of real people. As David Guzik notes, this section demonstrates that the Letter to the Romans “was a letter to real people and, as far as we can see, ordinary people; it was not written to professional theologians.”

Charles Spurgeon captured it powerfully: “They were most of us, commonplace individuals; but they loved the Lord, and therefore as Paul recollected their names he sent them a message of love which has become embalmed in the Holy Scriptures. Do not let us think of the distinguished Christians exclusively so as to forget the rank and file of the Lord’s army. Do not let the eye rest exclusively upon the front rank, but let us love all whom Christ loves; let us value all Christ’s servants. It is better to be God’s dog (or humble servant) than to be the devil’s darling (or shining star).”

Now tucked right in the middle of this honor roll of ordinary saints, we find verse 13:

*“Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me too.”*

That one phrase, *“a mother to me too”* is the heartbeat of our message today.

**Main Idea:** God not only honors the often-unseen work of unsung mothers, (biological and spiritual), who carry the cross in quiet, behind-the-scenes ways, but that very work rules the world.

Church, a mother’s labor of love is often invisible to human eyes, but it is never unseen by the One who matters most. And because one of the greatest apostles in history—Paul, who wrote nearly half the New Testament—openly highlighted the profound impact this mother had on his life, we see just how vital their role truly is in God’s kingdom.

First, notice something striking about this verse: Paul *chooses* to highlight this woman’s “role” as a mother. In a chapter that honors many saints *by name*, God immortalizes her *function*. That tells us something profound—**what you do in love for Christ matters more than any title or spotlight.**

This is what I call “Lily-work.” Remember the temple in 1 Kings 7? Solomon’s craftsmen shaped ornate lily blossoms with fire on the tops of the massive bronze pillars—beautiful, intricate work high above the worshipers. Most people never noticed the details up there, but God saw every petal. Jesus also exhorted His disciples to consider the lilies. Why? Because they bloom gloriously under the Father’s loving care whether any other human eye would ever see them.

Lily-work is the hidden, sacrificial service done in love and primarily for the pleasure of the Lord, not the applause of people.

Mothers, that’s you. The late-night prayers no one hears. The meals cooked, the laundry folded, the tears wiped away. The encouragement you gave when you were exhausted. The faith you modeled when no one was watching. Much of it goes unnoticed by human eyes, but never by the eye of the One who matters most. And Paul, writing

under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, stops to say, “She has been a mother to me too.”

Now here’s something else that’s not readily known about our text. Many scholars believe this Rufus is the son of Simon of Cyrene who the Roman soldiers forced to carry Jesus’ cross on the way to Calvary (Mark 15:21). They suggest this because in Mark 15:21, Mark indicates that Simon was the father of Rufus who apparently was known to Mark’s audience. If that’s the case, then this unnamed woman was Simon’s wife. Her husband bore the physical cross of Christ and she spent her life bearing spiritual burdens by mothering the church.

She poured out tender, practical love on Paul, (warm meals, a safe place, motherly encouragement), when he was far from home and perhaps rejected by his own family.

One of the greatest apostles who ever lived, the man who planted churches across the Roman Empire and wrote thirteen books of our New Testament, openly credits a mother’s influence on his life. That alone demonstrates their vital, irreplaceable role in the kingdom of God. Paul didn’t have to say it. But he did, because her Lily-work shaped him.

This is why honor is not just a nice Mother’s Day tradition, it’s a biblical imperative. Romans 12:10 says, “*Outdo one another in showing honor.*” Romans 13:7 adds, to give “Honor to whom honor is due.” On Mother’s Day we’re not just following culture; we’re obeying Scripture. We honor moms, because God does. Showing honor is such an important practice because it expresses genuine gratitude to others and keeps us from taking for granted the people and gifts that God highly values.

And here’s where the gospel gets subversive and beautiful: In a first-century world that often treated women as second-class, Paul names and celebrates many women as co-laborers in the gospel—women like Phoebe the deaconess and benefactor, Priscilla who risked her life for Paul, Junia who was outstanding and well known to all the

Apostles, and Mary who worked tirelessly for the church. The love of Christ levels the ground and unites us all.

That brings us to a timely challenge for our church: **We desperately need spiritual mothers today.** Not every woman here is a biological mom, but every woman can be a spiritual mother. The comedian was right, even those without kids carry motherly wisdom passed down to them.

How much more when that wisdom flows from abiding in Christ! Spiritual mothers' pray without ceasing, mentor the next generation, nurture young believers, and provide the tender strength only a motherly heart can give. Men, we need you to honor and support them. Church, let's raise them up.

Finally, remember where all this strength comes from. Our deepest security and satisfaction must be found in the love of Christ. Moms, (biological or spiritual), you cannot give what you have not first received. When you feel unseen, exhausted, or overlooked, run back to Jesus. He is the One who calls Rufus "chosen in the Lord," and He calls you the same. From that secure place, your Lily-work will flow with fresh power.

**Tim Keller** said it powerfully:

"To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God... Only Jesus knows us to the bottom and loves us to the sky."

Mothers, this is the love you can rest in, the love that sees every unseen act and says, "I know you fully, and I love you completely." When we know that love deeply, we can love others as we are loved by God.

Let me share with you a powerful historical example. Susanna Wesley (1669–1742) was the mother of John and Charles Wesley, two of the most influential Christian leaders in history. John founded the

Methodist movement, which sparked revivals across England and America and transformed society through visiting prisoners, caring for the poor and sick, and fighting slavery and child labor. Charles wrote over 6,000 hymns, including classics like “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Their impact still echoes today.

Susanna herself had 10 children and ran a busy, often chaotic household. Yet she was determined to meet with God daily. Because she had almost no privacy, she developed a simple but profound habit: she would sit in her chair, pull her long apron up over her head, and pray for two hours a day. Her children knew, when the apron was over Mom’s head, she was with the Lord and not to be disturbed unless it was a true emergency.

Under that apron, Susanna poured out her heart in worship, interceded for each child by name, and found the strength to keep going. In the hidden place, she was fully known and deeply loved by God, and from that place of rest, her Lily-work helped shape two sons who changed the world.

## **Key Takeaways & Principles We Can Apply**

As we close, let these biblical principles from the message take root in our hearts:

### **1. Honor is not optional; it’s an essential Christian Practice.**

Scripture commands us to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). Beyond Mother’s Day, make it your practice to intentionally express gratitude, respect, and practical love to the mothers and spiritual mothers in your life.

### **2. Lily-work matters most to God**

The hidden, sacrificial service of mothers—late nights, unseen prayers, daily faithfulness—may be invisible to people, but it is beautiful and eternally valuable in the eyes of the Lord. Keep serving

for His applause alone. Whatever we do, whether seen or unseen, we do it with all our hearts as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

### **3. Mothers help carry the cross of Christ.**

Just as Simon of Cyrene carried the physical cross, this unnamed mother carried spiritual burdens that strengthened Paul. Your everyday mothering advances the gospel in ways you may never fully see. Trust that what you do in secret, God will reward openly in time and eternity.

### **4. A mother's influence can shape even the greatest leaders.**

The Apostle Paul publicly acknowledged this woman's impact on his life and ministry. Never underestimate the long-term power of faithful mothering—biological or spiritual. One mother's quiet investment can ripple through generations. The seeds you plant today may take time to grow, but they will bear lasting fruit.

### **5. The church urgently needs spiritual mothers.**

Every believing woman can pour wisdom, tenderness, and strength into the next generation. If you're not a biological or adoptive mom, you can still be a spiritual mom—step up and say yes. The church and its leaders grow stronger when spiritual mothers rise up.

### **6. All transformational and lasting motherhood flows from Christ's love.**

Our deepest security and satisfaction are found in Jesus alone. When you feel unseen, exhausted, or empty, return to Him first—then your love and strength will overflow to others. As wonderful as motherhood is, it must never be the source of your ultimate identity. You are chosen in the Lord.

The old hymn says it best: *There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God...*

Beloved, make time to wait before Him. Let Jesus be your refuge and the place of quiet rest and renewal. From His heart, you will pour into others with fresh overflowing joy and eternal impact.

## **Conclusion**

So today we honor the unsung mothers who carry the cross. We thank God for every mom who gave us life and love. We thank Him for every spiritual mom who has mothered the church.

Let us all follow their example and commit ourselves to Lily-work — that faithful, often invisible service done for His eyes only. Because that quiet, behind-the-scenes work truly helps rule the world.

If you're a mom feeling unseen today, hear this: God sees, He honors, and He rewards.

If you need nurturing or encouragement, reach out to the spiritual mothers around you.

If you're being called to step into spiritual motherhood, say yes. The church needs you.

Let's outdo one another in showing honor, not just today, but every day.

Before we close, I want to share something personal with you. In my book Lily-Work, I wrote a tribute to my own mom, Hilda David. Allow me to read it to you and my mom who is present:

To my mom, Hilda David.

Thirty years ago, a preacher pointed to bronze lilies no one would ever climb to see. Today I point to the living lilies I have watched bloom my whole life, right in front of me.

Mom, you never drove a car. Dad worked long hours, even Saturdays. Yet somehow the clothes were always clean, the table always set with a home-cooked meal, the doctors' appointments never missed, even when it meant pushing a grocery cart a mile to the store and back, or riding the bus with a sickly boy in your arms.

You absorbed every blow from an abusive husband and shielded us the best you could. You loved us when loving cost you everything. You never preached a sermon, never stood behind a pulpit, never saw your name in print.

But the God who sees saw. He saw every tear he bottled (Psalm 56:8), every sacrifice that left you exhausted, every mile walked in the snow for groceries, every prayer whispered over fevered brows in the dark.

You showed us Jesus long before we knew his name as Savior. Your hidden life was bronze lilies hammered in the secret place—thirty-five feet above the noise, blooming for an Audience of One. Great is your reward in Heaven.

One day soon the fog of Alzheimer's will lift forever. You will remember everything—and you will be remembered perfectly. The Father who watched every unnoticed act will lean in close, wipe away every tear you once cried for us, and whisper the words you lived for before even knowing it:

“Well done, Hilda. I saw every single lily.”

This book is for you, Mom.

The garden is blooming because of you.

I love you.

**Now, as I get ready to close, come with me to the foot of the cross in John 19:25-27:**

*“Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”*

Church, this is one of the most tender and powerful moments in all of Scripture. Jesus is not being morbid. In the midst of His greatest suffering, He is saying to His mother, “Behold the greatest act of love the world has ever seen — this is why I came.” And to John He says, “Behold your mother.”

Some people wonder why Jesus didn’t entrust Mary to one of her other biological sons. The answer is simple and profound: at this moment, His brothers did not yet believe in Him. John, on the other hand, was present, faithful, and a committed follower.

So, Jesus is showing us that the cross creates a new family, one bound not first by blood, but by faith and love.

**Would all the mothers please stand (and come forward)?** We would like to give you a small gift as a token of our appreciation and pray over you.

Mothers...Jesus says to you from the cross, behold your Son—your Lord and Savior. You are greatly loved.

Church...Behold your mothers. Honor them. Love them. Care for them. Receive the motherly care and wisdom they carry. Just as Jesus did from the cross, let us outdo one another in showing honor.