



IN THE  
ORDINARY

WHY YOUR WORK IN THE HOME  
MATTERS TO GOD

*Courtney Reissig*

“*Glory in the Ordinary* is a needed reminder of the beauty and blessing of work within the home. Courtney Reissig reveals how serving others in small ways builds a lifetime of glorifying God. The simple tasks of cooking a meal, taking out the trash, fixing a car, or washing laundry might seem mundane, but offered to God, these daily tasks have kingdom significance.”

**Melissa Kruger**, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Uptown Church, Charlotte, North Carolina; author, *The Envy of Eve*; Editor, The Gospel Coalition; blogger, *Wit’s End*

“Have you ever considered the significance of your work at home? Everyone needs encouragement in his or her work, and in *Glory in the Ordinary*, Courtney Reissig provides just that. Reissig shares honestly and humbly about the various temptations and struggles of at-home work, reminding us that our work—from cleaning dishes to wiping runny noses—is good and meaningful work, ultimately because it’s meaningful to God.”

**Trillia Newbell**, author, *Enjoy, Fear and Faith*, and *United*

“Living in daily life what an author writes in a book is the sure mark of authenticity, and Courtney passes that test well. She invites God into every area of her life, especially her home. I love seeing young women choose the often lonely and thankless road of mommy-land knowing the rewards will come one day, if not from grownup children, from a Father who sees all and is pleased with her sacrifice and service in his name.”

**Barbara Rainey**, Cofounder, FamilyLife; author, *Letters to My Daughters: The Art of Being a Wife*

“From the invigorating depths of theological reflection as well as personal life experience as a stay-at-home mom, Courtney Reissig opens our minds and captures our hearts to the messy grandeur of noncompensatory work. *Glory in the Ordinary* adeptly maintains gospel-centricity and cultural relevance while making a persuasive case that neighborly love begins in the place we call home. Whether you are presently a stay-at-home mom or your workplace is outside the home, *Glory in the Ordinary* will help you better connect Sunday to Monday with a more integral, coherent, and seamless gospel faith. This is a book that needed to be written, one I have been waiting for. I highly recommend it.”

**Tom Nelson**, author, *Work Matters*; Senior Pastor, Christ Community Church, Overland Park, Kansas; President, Made to Flourish

“*Ordinary* is a word that perfectly describes my life and the lives of most women in my church and community. Each day presents a fresh to-do list that looks remarkably like the one from yesterday—and the one from last year: lunches and laundry, dishes and dusting, gardening and grocery shopping. But with warmth and wisdom Courtney Reissig opens our eyes to God’s glory in this ordinary. Exploring questions of identity, community, service, and rest, Reissig sets work in the home in its historic and biblical context and gives meaning to our mundane. Whether your priorities include gleaming windows or PB&J for six, this book will help you to value your work in the home because God himself values it. That dirty floor can wait. Read and be encouraged.”

**Megan Hill**, writer; speaker; pastor’s wife; author, *Praying Together*; contributor, The Gospel Coalition and CT Women; editorial board member, *Christianity Today Magazine*

“As one who never expected to work in the home, this book is refreshing, gospel-saturated encouragement for all of us who are knee-deep in laundry, childcare, and dishes. Be prepared to see your work in a whole new way: with joy, for the kingdom, and with eternity in view.”

**Christina Fox**, writer; speaker; author, *A Heart Set Free: A Journey to Hope through the Psalms of Lament*

“I’m thankful Courtney has joined the generations of wise women who build their homes (Prov. 14:1). Her book affirms the dignity and worth of homemaking and homekeeping, even as it reminds us that such work is faithfully loving our closest neighbors: the ones who live under our own roofs.”

**Candice Watters**, Cofounder, Boundless.org; author, *Get Married: What Women Can Do to Help It Happen*

*Glory in the Ordinary*



# Glory in the Ordinary

*Why Your Work in the Home  
Matters to God*

COURTNEY REISSIG

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Glory in the Ordinary: Why Your Work in the Home Matters to God*

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To my parents, Rick and Deb Tarter  
For showing me the value and dignity of  
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# The Changing Nature of At-Home Work

Last year, I had the rare opportunity to travel without kids. I was attending a conference and, for the first time, leaving my children for longer than twenty-four hours. Because I was traveling alone, I looked like just about every other passenger on the plane. I had a book. I was dressed in clothes that I wore only if I could ensure sticky toddler fingers wouldn't stain them. And I was relaxed.

“So, what do you do for a living?” the woman sitting next to me asked. Not an uncommon airplane question—I could tell the woman was interested in small talk. I like small talk, except this time fear bubbled up inside me as I pondered how to answer. She was clearly a professional woman. I knew that because I used to be one of those women, before I had my twin boys and decided to stay home with them. Suddenly, my pride

in my at-home work dwindled, and I struggled to find an answer to her question.

*It's a simple question, Courtney. Just answer her honestly. You are a stay-at-home mom.*

*Or maybe I should tell her I'm a writer,* I thought. That wouldn't have been a lie, since I had just sent in the manuscript for my first book. I am a writer. But I'm also a mom.

Since I was teetering on the edge of crying from having just left my sons for my first long trip away, it seemed fitting to go with the obvious.

"I'm a stay-at-home mom," I said nervously.

Of course, I love my kids and I love my work as a mom. I just know how it can be perceived when I actually put my vocation out there for public judgment. Not wanting to feel like a failure as a woman, I often struggle with how to respond to such a question in less conservative circles. I know that being a stay-at-home mom can be confusing to some people at best, and perceived as a waste at worst. True to my expectations, she wondered at my choice to stay home.

"I don't know how you do that all day long. I would get so bored," she said emphatically.

*Should I tell her that I actually do get bored sometimes?* I asked myself. But rather than starting a dialogue on how repetitive and tedious it can be to wash dishes, wipe noses, and train children, only to do it all over again the next day, I simply smiled and nodded.

## **True Confessions**

I have a confession. I never wanted to be a stay-at-home mom—at least not when I was younger. When I hear women say that's all they ever wanted to do, I marvel. The truth is, I didn't really

understand what a stay-at-home mom did. My mom stayed home with us, and I have fond memories of our time with her. She was there whenever I needed her, but to be honest, I never paid much attention to what she actually did for my brothers, my dad, and me. I viewed her work from a selfish perspective—she existed for me. And I wanted a little more for my life than servitude. While I have always loved children, I've disdained cleaning bathrooms. I've always been the one to volunteer to hold the baby, but have never been able to muster the love of baking and cooking that I assumed characterized a stay-at-home mom. What I've always loved is writing. *That* I could see myself doing.

I'm not unlike many women today who have found themselves as stay-at-home moms after not giving it much thought in their younger years. I grew up in a time when girls could be anything they wanted to be. Women now have choices and options never afforded to them before. Women can work from home while staying at home with their children. They can work outside the home while their children receive quality care from someone else. Women can stay home while still retaining their dreams and aspirations through part-time work at nap time, like I do as a writer. Women can stay home and still be praised for their choice.

So I dreamed big. A lot of other women did, too. But even with all of our high aspirations, many of us are still “opting out” of promising careers when children come along—even if we never saw ourselves doing so prior to bringing home our babies.

Journalist Louise Story tracked the career aspirations of women at elite colleges over the course of forty years.<sup>1</sup> Through in-depth interviews and questionnaires with current female students and faculty, and through surveying alumni, she found that

many modern women, unlike their predecessors, actually aspire to stay home. More than that, even women who said forty years ago that they didn't want to stay at home, in fact, did for a period of time. In her initial article in *The New York Times*, Story noted that among graduates of Yale University and Harvard Business School, the number of women who were still working full time later in life was only around half—compared to 90 percent of their male classmates.<sup>2</sup> Other research confirms her findings.<sup>3</sup> On average, 43 percent of women will likely exit their careers for a time.<sup>4</sup> The reality that women end up working in the home may not have changed, but the aspirations have shifted drastically. One generation's liberation can be another generation's bondage.

But doing stay-at-home work means something completely different for me than it did for my mother and my grandmother. And in a lot of ways, that's owing to the shift in how we view the nature of at-home work itself.

### **From Production to Consumption**

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, everyone did at-home work—even children. Because much of society was agrarian, the father often worked in the fields or cared for the livestock, while the mother often created, cleaned, and cooked. Bread needed baking, chickens needed plucking, and laundry needed mending. *All* work—for men and women—was at-home work, and it was hard work too. (This is still the reality, of course, for many men and women living in agrarian areas throughout the world.)

The Industrial Revolution, though, shifted productivity from the home to the marketplace and factories. As filmmaker Carolyn McCulley and entrepreneur Nora Shank write in *The Measure of Success*, this shift brought about “separate spheres” for men and women—men in manufacturing and business and

women in the home embracing the domestic life. This became known as the Golden Age of Domesticity.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1950s and 1960s, a single-income family with a housewife was a status symbol, and much of the laborious at-home work—by hand and from scratch—became optional for those who could afford it. With the creation of the vacuum cleaner, washer and dryer, and other modern appliances, the time it took to do traditional housework was suddenly cut in half. Bread could be bought. Clothes could be washed and dried in half the time. The home became primarily a place of consumption, not productivity.<sup>6</sup> For women of my grandmother's generation, the home was a place of entertainment and enjoyment of the shiny new things the post-World War II economy could buy. The housewife who used the newest cleaning products, appliances, and cooking gadgets was an aspiration to be envied. The work of the home was suddenly simplified in ways never seen before. It simply didn't take as long to cook, clean, and care for the daily tasks of the home. With children at school during the day, women had a lot of extra time on their hands. Add to this the increasingly professionalized nature of the home in the form of TV dinners, housekeepers, and even cooking shows with professional cooks, and women began to feel their amateur status and long for something different.

That extra time meant more opportunities for leisure, consumerism, and—for many—boredom. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Freidan talks about a woman who wonders what to do with her newfound free time but has no options to move out of her domestic sphere. She sees her as trapped in her own home. What the Golden Age of Domesticity tried to answer about at-home work by making it a status symbol, Freidan tried to fix by making it irrelevant and beneath women. She saw the modern-

ization of at-home work as an opportunity for women to put such menial tasks behind them. Friedan encouraged women to find their identity outside their husbands, children, and home.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Mommy Wars**

By the 1980s, Friedan's clarion call to freedom launched an unexpected war between women. Since staying at home was now optional, women—especially mothers—felt the need to explain their personal decisions.

The mom who chose to stay at home felt compelled to justify her work as the best (and most sacrificial). Her orientation shifted from her husband (“housewife”) to her children (“stay-at-home mom”). She was now expected to be a “full-time-playmate-for-little-kids,” a provider of endless hours of entertainment.<sup>8</sup> She justified her work as the best choice for the kids.

The mom who chose to work outside the home felt compelled to justify her work as worthy, meaningful, and important enough to leave her children. She felt that this is what her mother fought for—her own career advancement. She focused on her talents and how to impact society, not just her 2.5 children. She quoted studies showing that working moms spend just as much time with their kids as their own mothers spent with them.<sup>9</sup>

Welcome to the “mommy wars.” The term was created in the late 1980s by *Child Magazine* to highlight the tension between working moms and stay-at-home moms.<sup>10</sup> In 1990, *Newsweek* chronicled the shift from women fighting men in the 1970s with the women's movement, to mothers fighting mothers in the late 1980s into 1990.<sup>11</sup> At the time, 56 percent of mothers worked outside of the home, while 44 percent were stay-at-home moms. In a near fifty/fifty split, the mommy wars were a full-on battle.

And there's still been no cease-fire. The truth is, moms are

tired. I know. I am one. Moms are weary of the pressure to live up to expectations and ideals that no human being could ever attain. Either we hear that our work at home is the pinnacle of greatness (leaving the mother who works outside of the home feeling inferior) or we hear that we are letting down women everywhere by staying home instead of taking advantage of the strides women have made in the workplace (leaving the mother who stays home feeling inferior). The mommy wars pit women against each other in a failed attempt to boost our pride over our own accomplishments. Instead of looking at our work through God's eyes, we look at it through our own—and wonder if we measure up.

Moms who stay home now are mostly doing so because of their own choice. But not all are.<sup>12</sup> Some are staying home because of the economic downturn, some because of the difficulty of juggling home life and work life, and others because of inflexible work schedules. What used to be a status symbol is now embedded with complex stories and life circumstances.

When we look at the mommy wars in the context of a culture that has far more moms choosing to stay home—not because of a lifelong ambition, as Story's research shows, but because of things like financial constraints, changes in perspective over a newborn baby, and pressures over work/life balance—it muddies the waters in our discussion about the value of at-home work itself. And it brings us back to the same questions our mothers and grandmothers had—questions about meaning and identity.

## **The Face of At-Home Work**

Our search for meaning and identity has also led us to spend endless hours debating who's doing the at-home work—women

or men. With the increase of mothers in the paid workforce, the percentage of stay-at-home moms has gone down from 49 percent in 1967 to 29 percent in 2012.<sup>13</sup> In families where Mom works outside of the home, some still sense the need for a parent, family member, or caretaker to be at home. Stay-at-home dads, though a small number, are growing. Current research says that 3.6 percent of at-home parents are dads.<sup>14</sup> At-home workers are not simply moms and dads, though. For households in which both parents work outside the home—either because of choice or necessity—grandparents, nannies, and at-home day-care workers are another group of people who spend their days in the mundane realities of childcare, housework, and creating order out of chaos.

Regardless of where we stand on who should be the face of at-home work, everyone is engaging in it on some level. My husband changes diapers. Sometimes he does laundry. We both clean up the same toys every night. My friend who is a nurse makes dinner for her kids at the end of the day. Her husband takes them to the doctor. They both help them brush their teeth and get ready for bed at night. There is no room for the mommy wars when your son gets sick in the middle of the night or your daughter needs an emergency trip to the dentist.

The majority of at-home work falls on the one who stays home, but it is for everyone. The mommy wars have no place in our discussion of at-home work because they distort it. They keep us fighting over the very work we are all doing, just in varying degrees. And in war we lose the value of the work that we all have some stake in. While we can spin our wheels endlessly debating who stays home, the reality is moms and dads everywhere wonder about the work itself. *Does it matter? Is it simply a way to survive? Is there something more to see in*

*the dirty diapers, temper tantrums, dishwashing, and repetitive nature of housework?*

### **The Frazzled At-Home Worker**

The “having it all” conversation, of course, doesn’t help us answer these questions. The mommy wars planted the seed in our minds that we could have a growing career and family without missing a beat. While many are now debunking “having it all” as a myth, the impact on how we view at-home work still lingers. Far from giving us more freedom, the false promise of “having it all” has entrapped us even more. Now, women are expected to do everything—at-home work in the form of mommy bloggers, Pinterest boards, and child-centered living, plus work outside the home as well. Depending on our particular context, we either have a subculture that’s telling us at-home work is our ultimate identity or one that’s heaping disdain on the very nature of the work. In addition, we have a steady stream of television shows and networks (HGTV, Food Network), magazines (*Real Simple*, *Better Homes and Gardens*), and entertainment personalities (Martha Stewart, Rachael Ray) that glorify the work of the home, but that make it more about the business or consumption aspect of the work. In all this, we are losing sight of the work itself—why it matters and what purpose it serves.

In the 2011 movie *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, stay-at-home moms are portrayed as privileged, judgmental women who spend their mornings at the gym and their afternoons dishing about school gossip, while the main character (an overworked professional mom) simply tries to remember what she is doing from day to day. She can hardly keep up with the work of her home, while her fellow moms who stay home can’t find enough things to fill their mundane days. This portrayal of at-home

work as an endless vacation for the brainless, wealthy white woman is not uncommon. A recent article even goes so far as to say that while at-home work is a gift and a privilege, it's hardly a job.<sup>15</sup> A job takes effort and skill; playing with your children all day does not. Again, with our consumption and leisure-focused society, we are missing the point of at-home work.

Even as I talk to my friends about their perceptions regarding at-home work, the ones who stay home are thankful for the opportunity, but wonder about it being on the same playing field as the careers they left behind. One friend confesses that she is reluctant to leave her work partly because she fears that she would get bored at home. Another says that, like the woman I met on the airplane, she doesn't know what she would do all day. It's simply too mundane.

Who hasn't wrestled with those issues? *Does at-home work really matter? Does it have value? Does it serve a greater purpose? Or is it too mundane? Too daily? Too frustrating? Too inefficient?*

Our answers to these questions don't come from pitting ourselves against one another in the mommy wars or endlessly debating who does the at-home work. It doesn't come from drawing firm lines about "separate spheres" and creating new technology to give us more free time.

The way forward to find meaning in at-home work is by seeing how it fits in the larger scheme of community, culture, and life. And that can be done only by going to the One who makes effective all that we do.

### **Finding Meaning in At-Home Work**

Remember my conversation with the woman on the airplane? I struggled to talk with her about my work. This internal struggle

is one I battle regularly when asked about what I do for a living. And while I didn't always aspire to the work I now do, I do enjoy it.

Like all major changes, my early days as a stay-at-home mom rocked me to the core. I had gone from days filled with fruitful conversations to days filled with crying and blank stares from two needy babies. Over time I began to see that being home had inherent value, but what I couldn't immediately see was how the work of the home had value as well. It was not merely about staying home to take care of the children (which made sense to my exhausted brain); I had to learn that there was value in the laundry and cleaning too.

To be honest, I'm still learning what it means to find purpose in these things. In a lot of ways, this book is born out of that internal struggle. The questions I asked myself in those early days of motherhood were no different from the questions I asked when I worked a job I found mundane and meaningless many years earlier. *What am I doing with my life? Does this matter? Can I have purpose if I'm not doing something great for God? Can I find meaning in the most mundane tasks? Can my work really be good if I don't always see it as good work?*

What I've learned is that God is glorified in the mundane work as much as he is in the magnificent. In fact, it is the mundane moments, the moments where we live each and every day, where we come to see the true greatness of God and his love for us. For most of my adult life I had been living for moments of grandeur, and when I transitioned to being primarily at home, I had to reconcile my deep aspirations for meaning and greatness in my work with a dirty microwave that needs cleaning and two babies that won't sleep through the night. Maybe you can relate. The culture tries to give at-home work meaning in our

accomplishments or who has done the hardest thing, but honestly, most days the most spectacular thing we do is remember to brush our teeth or make the bed. Paul David Tripp says, “Our lives are comprised of 10,000 little moments and maybe only three or four dramatic ones.”<sup>16</sup>

Doesn’t that sound like at-home work to you? The work of the home is filled with thousands of little moments that make up our very existence. The kiss on a skinned knee, the special birthday meal for your daughter, the mopping of a floor that will only be walked on with muddy shoes as soon as your son gets home from soccer practice, the lesson about sharing after breaking up a sibling fight—all of these mundane moments shape a family and shape a culture. For all humans, when we engage with these little moments, we are imaging our Creator, who is the author of even the most mundane moments. For Christians, it’s an even greater opportunity to increase the fame of Christ by becoming less, in the form of a servant (Matt. 20:26–28; John 3:30; Phil. 2:7). But it’s not always as readily obvious to us as the more grandiose visions of Christianity and ambition we are accustomed to. While we appreciate at-home work, we—like many in our culture—have a hard time seeing it on the same playing field as the woman who manages an office or the man who operates on a dying patient.

But something profound is happening in the midst of our mundane at-home work. Such work is actually very God-like. Eugene Peterson, in the context of Psalm 121 says, “The same faith that works in the big things works in the little things. The God of Genesis 1 who brought light out of darkness is also the God of this day who guards you from every evil.”<sup>17</sup> He is not just a God of big moments (like speaking the entire universe into existence or bringing dead people back to life). He is also a God of

little moments (like protecting you from illness, providing unexpected income, and giving you food to sustain you). This should encourage us as we work in the seemingly mundane moments of working in our homes. God is working in the little moments, too.

This book is not going to give you the secret to being the best mom. But it is a book about the at-home work we do. The way our society thinks about this work is hardly biblical, whether we are trying to do it all, turning our nose up at it, or idolizing it. In order to find meaning and value in the mundane realities of at-home work, we are going to need to do some digging to find out the overarching meaning for our work as image bearers and the reason for the frequent disillusionment. That is where we are headed in the next chapter.

### **Getting Practical**

My goal is for every chapter to apply specifically to real people in real situations. I hope to drive the point home that our work has value by seeing it through the life of another.

You will meet a variety of women at the end of each chapter. The three women here represent this changing face of at-home work.

Emily is a homeschooling mom of three. She also works for a small business part time from her home (as naps and sleeping children allow). Her mornings are spent juggling teaching her daughter the alphabet, helping her son with a math problem, and keeping her toddler entertained, all while trying to clean up from breakfast. Nap time and rest time usually allow her to recharge, prepare for dinner, respond to e-mail, or tackle any other household task that she is falling behind on (which lately feels like a lot). At night, after her kids are in bed, she pulls out her computer to start another type of work—bookkeeping.

Miriam is a stay-at-home mom of four. Her kids' ages vary from school age to an infant. Her days consist of getting the kids ready for school, preparing meals, folding laundry, helping with homework, playing with a toddler, and nursing a baby. She has a PhD in mathematics, so in order to bring in some extra income while her husband is in residency, she edits math journals. Even though she spends the majority of her time at home, she struggles to call herself a stay-at-home mom in the most traditional sense because she is bringing in some income.

Rachael is a teacher and mother of two. Like most working moms, she feels pulled in many directions. But there is one thing that is always waiting for her, even after that last paper is graded—the work of the home. From the bedtime stories to the dishes from the morning that she couldn't get finished, the work of the home is always waiting for her. She doesn't check her home responsibilities at the classroom. They follow her, and she often feels overwhelmed by it, but also is thankful for the time she gets with her daughters.

These women have more in common than the mommy wars lead us to believe. They are all contributing to the work of the home. They are the face of this changing at-home work. The work they are doing is good work, no matter how many hours a day they do it.

How has the changing face of at-home work changed the way you view your work? Do you value it more or less now?



Folding laundry. Weeding the garden. Cooking dinner. Changing diapers. Work in the home can seem so *ordinary*. Does any of it matter? Is there meaning in our most mundane moments at home?

When the work of the home fills our days, it is easy to get disillusioned and miss God's grand purpose for our work. As image bearers of the Creator who made us to work, we contribute to society, bringing order out of chaos and loving God through loving others—meaning there's glory in every moment. In this encouraging book, Courtney Reissig combats the common misconceptions about the value of at-home work—helping us see how Christ infuses purpose into every facet of the ordinary.

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“*Glory in the Ordinary* is a needed reminder of the beauty and blessing of work within the home.”

**MELISSA KRUGER**, Women's Ministry Coordinator, Uptown Church, Charlotte, North Carolina; author, *The Envy of Eve*

“Reissig shares honestly and humbly about the various temptations and struggles of at-home work, reminding us that our work—from cleaning dishes to wiping runny noses—is good and meaningful work, ultimately because it's meaningful to God.”

**TRILLIA NEWBELL**, author, *Enjoy*, *Fear and Faith*, and *United*

“Living in daily life what an author writes in a book is the sure mark of authenticity, and Courtney passes that test well. She invites God into every area of her life, especially her home.”

**BARBARA RAINEY**, Cofounder, FamilyLife; author, *Letters to My Daughters: The Art of Being a Wife*

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**COURTNEY REISSIG** is a wife, mother, and writer. She has written for numerous publications, including the Gospel Coalition and *Christianity Today*, and is the author of *The Accidental Feminist: Restoring Our Delight in God's Good Design*.

WOMEN / MOTHERHOOD

