

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules

Episode 54: How to Clear the Motherhood Muddle

Cheri:

So, Amy, when you were a brand new mom, what were some of your favorite parenting books?

Amy:

Because of my teaching years, I had a favorite author named John Rosemond and he wrote a book called *Parenting Power* that I just kept on my nightstand. And then later, I read *Teen Proofing*. How about you?

Cheri:

Well, I loved Jane Nelson — she had a book called *Positive Parenting*. And then when it turned out that our kids who were supposed to be spaced five years apart were going to be spaced twenty-one years apart, I quickly bought *Siblings Without Rivalry*. But my absolute favorite one to read during those years was called *And Then I Had Kids*. And it was written by an author who confessed that she had been an "expert" on parenting in her mind ... and then she had kids.

Amy:

Oh, that sounds just like me! From the time I turned twelve, to the time I left home, I baby-sat probably 60 hours a week. And then I became an elementary school teacher. And I just thought *I knew kids*. And man, if you were a parent, I could tell you all about it. Until that baby came home from the hospital with me, and I said to my husband one day — I just wailed when he got home, "How come I could manage a classroom of 30 kids and now I can't take care of one?!?"

Cheri:

Well, this is Cheri Gregory...

Amy:

...and I'm Amy Carroll...

Cheri:

...and you're listening to "Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules."

Amy:

Today, we're reflecting on what we learned from our conversation with Lynn Cowell, author of *Magnetic: Becoming the Girl He Wants*.

Cheri:

And although we are specifically talking about mothering, everything we discuss applies to *all* of our relationships.

Amy:

So when we talked to Lynn, she was just so terrific. I had a hard time picking out the bad rule and the good rule for this episode because she gave us a lot. But the bad rule that I think stood out was, **"I can use the facades of perfectionism and judgment to protect my family."**

Cheri:

Wow. I like that bad rule because it's got a positive purpose behind it. Now, I know it's still a bad rule. But that instinct to protect ...

Amy:

Yeah. Perfectionism is always holding people at arm's length so they don't see your imperfections — or your children's imperfections.

Cheri:

You know I don't think I realized what a perfectionist I was until my kids got old enough to make their own choices.

Amy:

Mercy! Oof! That turns up the heat!

Cheri:

And that's where I realized how bad things had gotten.

Amy:

I think you had a specific thing with one of your kids, right?

Cheri:

Yeah. This is one of those that the hero of the story is definitely not me. The hero of the story—which is still in process of being written—is really what God has done in my own heart over the years.

As you know and maybe some of our listeners know by now, boy I don't remember the date. It's at least I think we're going on three years ago, I started writing a blog series called, "How To Love Your Daughter When You Hate Her Tattoos." And it's a blog series I never dreamed I would write because in my picture perfect world, my "picture of perfection", it never even occurred to me either of my kids would get tattoos because...of course, we aren't...that...kind of...people!

Not that I ever meant anything by "that kind of people" of course ... it's just, tattoos just weren't part of our family anything!

And so you know the story of me going on Facebook and thinking, *My, that individual has so many tattoos!* and then realizing that's my daughter and then learning the term "full sleeve" tattoo. And you know I look back now at how viscerally I responded to that. I mean it had physical effects on me, the anxiety, the stomach churning, the fear...

And since I do live on a Christian boarding school, one of my first thoughts was, you know *What are other people going to think?* Because of course, that's such a helpful parenting strategy!

I think I found it right about the time that another prominent family had sent their children off as student missionaries. And, you know, there's nothing quite like the contrast—and there's nothing quite as USELESS as contrasting my child with other people's children and wishing...and you know if you would ask me, "Cheri, do you wish you had their children instead of yours?" I would've said, "No, not in a million years."

Amy:

Absolutely. Sure. Right.

Cheri:

But it was a tough place to be. And I'm not there anymore but I remember what it felt like.

Amy:

Oh yeah. Well let me ask you: Did you have any negative reactions in your friend world to her tattoos?

Cheri:

That's a great question. And the answer is **No**. Because, I ran away. And I hid.

Amy:

I was like, wow! You really do have really great friends! But you didn't give them the chance.

Cheri:

You know I...you're now making me start do the math. And I may need to pray-cess this. There may be some conviction yet happening here!

This may "conicidentally" be when I quit going to women's group...."coincidentally"! Because I did – I shared with the women's group and they were very supportive and they were very caring and they listened to me and I pretty much didn't go back again. Not because of them. Mostly...I was busy, there's no question. Listen to me babbling Amy. Do you hear me babbling? I'm babbling.

<LAUGHING>

Listen to the rationalization!

Amy:

We're going to redo all of this. This is USELESS!

<LAUGHING>

Cheri:

Thank you for permission to not let anybody else hear that this is the thoughts that go on in our heads! No I have been back now and then. But I suppose that's what it is. But you know, I know what it is. I know what it is.

I have a habit of rejecting first. I'll reject you before you reject me. And even though nobody rejected me, they were kind, loving, supportive, they even emailed me, and texted me. It was easier to just stay home. Then go back again.

Amy:

Just in case.

Cheri:

Just in case.

Amy:

Oh girl I've done that a thousand times. Yeah. It's really, really hard.

You know I got a phone call one day from a friend and this was such a hard circumstance because she was passing on information about one of my children to me that had come second hand. So she hadn't ... another child had told her child and she told me. I just didn't deal with that well at all. So at first I listened and was okay but then when I investigated it and found out it wasn't true, I might have called her back and told her she should be more concerned about the gossip that was happening with her daughter instead of my son.

Cheri:

You did not! Oh, no!!!!

Amy:

Yeah. It wasn't the best reaction.

Cheri:

Tit-for-tat!

Amy:

Later I had a mentor mom that said, "You know, any time I start to get high emotion about my parenting it is a red flag and it's an indicator that I need to step back." And take some deep breathes and do some pray-cessing before I react. And I did not do that.

So I had to go back about a year later after my mentor friend told me that and I went back to my friend and said, "Hey, I'm really sorry that I handled it that way. I was very defensive."

Even though – well yeah. There's lots of layers to that story.

<LAUGHING>

Cheri:

I love it! Even though – wait!

<LAUGHING>

I love you Amy Carroll!

But here's the thing! And I don't know about all of the other women who might be listening, but for me, motherhood was the area where I actually felt like I was doing pretty well. Like there were other areas in my life that I felt like I've completely messed up or I have no control over or I just kind of limp along and do the best I can. But I really felt like I was doing pretty well in the motherhood department.

And so part of what was so hard for me with this was like I went from "I'm doing good! The kids are out of the nest, and they're both still in college!" ... standards I had set by which I judged myself – making that clear I was judging myself – you know I just felt like they all fell apart.

And, you know as perfectionists and recovering perfectionists and people pleasers, we do this – we take one area of our life and we let it expand to take over everything. Like, my entire life wasn't Annemarie's tattoos but I let it become that for quite a bit of time. Like everything I did was about her tattoos like, I was grocery shopping and her tattoos were right there with me. They weren't! They really weren't! And as she's explained a hundred times, they were about her and not me.

But that was really hard to even begin to process. How can anything about my child not be all about me? Really now?

Amy:

Yeah. Well it really does get complicated because for nine months they really are part of us.

Cheri:

Yeah.

Amy:

And then as they grow up that separation becomes greater and greater and that's hard to process as a mom. But you know I think the point here is that you know in my story and in yours, gosh, we want to be women who extend grace to their friends when their kids are especially publically really flubbin' up.

I always want to figure out cause and effect. It's part of my perfectionism. You know?

Cheri:

Yeah.

Amy:

Why did that happen? And it's not helpful. And I don't need to figure it out. It's not my job to figure it out. It's my job to reach out to my friend with love and grace and prayers, you know? And beyond that? Not my business, unless I'm invited in.

Cheri:

Well and you know you make such a good point that for nine months they're with us. They need us. It's 24/7. They're dependent on us, they're so close to us, and we specialize in getting to know them better than they can know themselves so that for the first years of development we kind of teach them who they are.

You know when they're young, what are we doing? We're busy telling stories about the latest thing they did, the latest thing they said. And when they're little, it's perfectly appropriate for us to be so involved and telling everybody about everything about – and there comes a time when we really shouldn't be telling their stories anymore. And you know nobody gives us guidance on this. At least nobody sat me down as a mom and said, "You know Cheri, your kids are 20 and 22. Stop talking about them!"

How about you? How have you experienced this whole talking about your kids and then realizing they have their own lives and they need their privacy?

Amy:

Right. Well I think one of the things that has been helpful for me is to think about who's story is this? You know? And how do, who gets to define the story?

Well personally, I want to tell my own story. And I want to tell it my way. And you know it might not be completely right cause it's from my perspective. But goodness knows, I don't want some stranger telling my story. And I don't even really want my parents at this point — as close as I am to them, as much as I love them, I don't want them telling their version of my story. Beyond the happy facts, you know?

And so I have to give that same respect to my adult children because I have a 23 year old and a 20 year old too. And it's their story and they get to tell it their way. Now, they have given me permission—in my speaking—to tell some of their pieces of their story and some of the struggles we've had as a family so that people can see, "Gosh everybody deals with these things."

But there was even something I was going to share on the podcast today that I felt like this morning God said, "Nope." Because this is a much wider audience. It's not as intimate of a setting. And I just felt like that wouldn't honor my son to tell that story, and so I have to listen to that still small voice in me as God directs us. 'cause I think God will direct us too.

Cheri:

Sure. Sure. It was so easy to make Annemarie's tattoo issue all about me. But there were multiple other perspectives, like how her friends dealt with it and how her boss dealt with it. As she shared other perspectives, it was educational. And as I blogged about it, and other people commented, and I read their perspectives, I thought, oh, it really *isn't* about me. Who would've thunk?!

Do I have a slice of the story? I do. But it really shrunk it down into a much more manageable size. And the thing I was missing ... I was missing out on listening to her. On asking her, on having her tell me her perspective. Because the more she has told me about why she got her tattoos, what they mean to her, and the reaction she's had from people...

We were actually at a graduation last summer walking together and this woman starts staring at her. And I give the woman a stink eye, and she's still staring.

Amy:

Yeah! Cause you cannot like them but everybody else better leave Annemarie ALONE!

<LAUGHING>

Cheri:

Oh my goodness! I was! Oh! I had to physically restrain myself! So we get past the woman and I look at Annemarie and I was like, "You know, I'm about ready to go back and ask that woman and ask her if she wants me to go pick her jaw up off the floor and tape it back up to her skull!"

Amy:

WOOO! Mama bear!

Cheri:

My goodness! And she looks at me and says, "Who are you?!"

<LAUGHING>

But you know for me realizing that yes, while my perspective had validity, seeing her perspective and realizing that she made her choice to get tattoos having no idea – like she had zero idea of what tattoos meant to me. She's artistic – they were just a fun thing to do and she's always wanted to do, and boom, she did it.

And so to hear her stories of how people have treated her and things people have said to her, it really broke my heart. And to realize I was in that category of people as her mother. That was very convicting as well.

Amy:

Oh yeah. Well with these stories I think we really have to assess motive in our own hearts. What is the purpose of telling the story about our children? And you know sometimes, truthfully, I have realized it's just gossip. You know we justify cause it's our kids, we can't gossip about our kids, right? Well, I think we can. So there are friends that I will confide in that I know that will lead me to scripture or give me great advice based on their experience or whatever. But that's different.

Just "yack, yack yack" that we tend to do about our kids is a whole different thing.

Cheri:

You know this reminds me of the conversations we've had about complaining about our marriages. I think there's parallel here. They're both similar in that it's just venting trying to feel better and it's not actually building us or our relationships up in any way. In fact it's just tearing down the integrity of the relationship with our husband or with our children, when what we really need is – we don't need the details. We just need to be able to share with someone else, "I'm hurting, I'm struggling, I don't know what to do, I think I'm a terrible mother."

And I think we go down the rabbit hole of details, and that turns so quickly into gossip because we're struggling. And the details often aren't going to actually help. The details aren't where the answers are going to be found.

I don't really need the details to pray with you. I don't need all of the nitty gritty to be able to hold some space with you and remind you that you care about your kids, that you're a great mom, that you're doing a great job.

Amy:

Yep. Well this idea of personal sin and my struggle with gossip that I have talked about on the show makes me think about the point that Lynn made that I absolutely loved, about making sure our children know that we personally struggle with sin. And how she talked about how a lot of her sins didn't show up externally. So she decided that she needed to start telling her kids what was going on internally in her.

That was fantastic!

I do think that's something I'd kind of subconsciously had started doing—more in their teenage years. There's a time I think when they can understand that better but I just loved that point.

Cheri:

I wanted to ask her if she would be my mother. Cause I'm like, my first thought was, *what does that even look like?* What a freeing concept? Instead of putting time and effort into putting up the facade of *everything's fine! Everything's fine! No, no mistakes here!*

Amy:

Well yeah cause her follow up was always what God wants work was in that. And I think back to Cindy Bultema who started to tell us a little bit more details of her story, and she kind of stopped herself and said, "The details of my story don't bring God glory." And I was like, *oh, that is good!*

And so Lynn in telling these details of her inner life—her thoughts, her feelings—it was still not to point to herself. She was using some of her brokenness as a vehicle to say, this is how God is making me whole. It's a process, of course.

Cheri:

We started out by talking about the bad rule from these episodes – **I can use the facades of perfectionism and judgment to protect my family.** I think we're really clear that these are false protection. That the instinct to protect our family is God-given but the methodology of perfectionism and judgment are false. What would you say is the fact to focus on instead of that bad rule?

Amy:

Vulnerability creates the deepest connections with our kids and friends.

Cheri:

So the goal here is connection.

Amy:

Always.

Cheri:

So protection and connection go together. I like that. That's a good thing to remember. So what do you feel is the grit in all of this?

Amy:

I really for me, the grit is in revealing my inner struggles to my children because that is ... it flies in the face of my former perfectionism. That wants to appear like I've got it all together.

But we do have a big joke at our house. Like, every time I make a mom fail, and it's fairly often, I'll go, "UGH! Lost Mother of the Year again!"

Sometimes the kids will say it and I'm like, "No, no, no. You're not supposed to say it, just me."

<LAUGHTER>

Cheri:

No that's a mom only! I love it. I love it.

Well and I think that's where the grace comes in. I just forget that the kids aren't mine they're his. And so in order to show them God's work in me I have to let God work in me. And not be trying to do it all on my own. Just constantly reminding myself, *No, it's not me, it's Him!*

Head over to GritNGraceGirls.com/episode54 .

Amy:

You'll find links to this week's Digging Deeper Download, Bible verse art, and transcript.

Cheri:

If you've enjoyed Episode #54 of Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules, would you share it with your friends? You'll find super easy "share" buttons on the web page for every single episode.

Amy:

Be sure to join us next week, when we'll be talking with Amy Lively, author of How to Love Your Neighbor Without Being Weird.

Cheri:

For today, **grow your grit ... embrace God's grace ...** and when you run across a bad rule, you know what to do: go right on ahead and

Amy 'n' Cheri:

BREAK IT!