



LEADER'S GUIDE

Who Am I?

Pull off your labels and become the woman God designed you to be.

During the turbulent 1960s, many women scorned the traditional roles of homemaker and at-home mom, leaving an indelible mark on our perceptions and attitudes. Women today have more choices than ever before, but this doesn't necessarily mean that women are more fulfilled. The greater freedom comes with added pressures and stress, even confusion. Many of us still struggle with the way we see ourselves, often second-guessing our decision to pursue a career or to dedicate ourselves solely to caring for home and family.

Author Caryn Rivadeneira struggles to pinpoint the source of her identity crisis and to understand why, even though she loves being a stay-at-home mom, she hates "being identified as one." She notes that within the church, such transparency is often countered with the admonition to find your identity as a child of God. So why doesn't every woman find that answer satisfying?

Lesson #1

Scripture:

Judges 4:4–10; Ruth 1:6–18; 2:2–3; 3:1–6; 4:13–17; Proverbs 31:10–31; Luke 10:38–42

Based on:

"Identity Crisis," by Caryn Rivadeneira, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, April 27, 2007



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Identity Crisis" from GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, included at the end of this study.

"I am woman, hear me roar ..." sang Helen Reddy in 1972. Many women would prefer the chance to just sit down and enjoy a few minutes' peace and quiet. Our culture's image of the superwoman juggling career, home, family, and a personal life—and doing it all flawlessly—can make us feel as though we'll never measure up no matter how furiously we work. Even when we do manage to keep things running fairly smoothly, the nagging thought that something is missing may creep in.

Stay-at-home wives and moms often feel that their work is devalued since they don't bring home a paycheck. They may suffer condescending attitudes from friends and family members who wonder why they are not using their education or skills. Career women often wrestle with guilt over the decision to not have children, or fear that they are shortchanging their families.

Sadly, some churches heap more pressure on women rather than supporting them in their various roles. But God doesn't want us to go through life feeling like failures because we can't meet someone's expectations of what a woman should be. It's only when we focus on his agenda for us that we discover our true identity and the fulfillment that brings.



Discussion starters:

- [Q] Have you ever felt pulled in too many directions, trying to fill all the different roles in your life? How did you deal with the pressure?
- [Q] Do you struggle with guilt that you are failing in one or more of your roles? What do you think is the source of this guilt?
- [Q] Share how you have been affected by other people's stereotypes of a wife or mother's role.
- [Q] Have you ever resented or been offended by the way someone labeled you? How did you handle it?
- [Q] Rivadeneira says that leaving a full-time job to become an at-home mom triggered her identity crisis. Have you ever had a similar experience?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Other people's labels may not fit us.

Stereotypes and other people's expectations can become heavy burdens hanging around our necks. We may suppress our personal desires and neglect our own needs as we try to fit the image of a perfect wife, mother, and Christian leader. Then we wonder why we lack the fulfillment that we're supposed to find.

Our church environment may not encourage openness about the identity issues many women struggle with. If a woman wants something more than to be a full-time wife/homemaker/mother, certain Scriptures may be quoted about a woman's duty to her family. Or, in contrast, some churches want as much volunteer help as they can get, even at the cost of a woman's family.



Instead of trying to mirror someone else's image, God wants us to focus on the designer label that he has prepared for us. Just as he created each one of us with unique personalities, abilities, and strengths, he has crafted a special combination of roles and opportunities to allow us to exercise those gifts. Our path will not look exactly like the next woman's, but it will lead to the greatest fulfillment in our life and the greatest impact on God's kingdom.

- [Q] Rivadeneira admits that she hates being labeled an at-home mom "because it conjures up images that don't mesh with how I see myself—or how I am, actually—at all." What images associated with women's roles bother you the most?
- [Q] Discuss ways that your church family supports women in their varied roles. How could this be done more effectively?
- [Q] Have you ever encountered disapproval within your church over a lifestyle decision or your failure to accept a specific role? How did you deal with it?

Read Judges 4:4–10.

- [Q] Deborah filled unusual roles for an Israelite woman when she served as the nation's judge and later rode out with the army general to muster the forces for war. How do contemporary women fill roles that are similar to Deborah's (e.g., giving godly advice, encouraging others, spiritual warfare)?
- [Q] In Deborah's song, recorded in Judges 5, she refers to herself as "a mother in Israel" (v. 7). Why do you think she did this? What might this reveal about attitudes toward motherhood in her culture?

Optional Activity:

Use slips of paper to jot down all the roles you currently fill: wife, mother, grandmother, church leader, daughter, friend, etc.

- Rank these according to how well you feel you are doing in each particular role.
- How might each of these roles be different next year? Five years from now? Ten years from now?
- Rivadeneira confides: "Even after the best times with my kids, I'll poke back into my office to ... do a bit of work to feel like myself again." Which of your roles make you feel most like yourself? Which ones cause the most stress?

Teaching point two: God will give us what we need for any role he assigns us.

Playing the comparison game can kill our joy and make us feel inadequate or even worthless. We may demand perfection from ourselves, but God doesn't; he just asks for an obedient and teachable spirit. God offers to give us wisdom when we need it (James 1:5). He promises to give us strength to do everything we need to do (Phil. 4:13). And his power at work within us will allow us to do things that we never even imagined before (Eph. 3:20).

Smith Wigglesworth said, "God doesn't call the equipped; he equips those he calls." Every day we make the choice whether to try to accomplish something in our own strength, or to depend on our God's promised provision and empowerment. We may not feel like mothering comes naturally to us, but our Father will help us care for our children. We may feel inadequate to fill a leadership role at church, but he will guide us as we go about his work. Our part is to ask him for what we need, and then trust him to help us fill the roles that he gives us.

- [Q] Rivadeneira sees herself as coming up short "compared to other moms who seem so naturally adept at motherhood." In what ways are you tempted to compare yourself with other women? How does this make you feel?



[Q] What do you think might be the source of our drive for perfection?

Read Proverbs 31:10–31.

[Q] How do you feel when you read this passage? Inadequate? Overwhelmed? Just plain tired?

[Q] Why do you think God included this description in the Bible? How does it relate to the rest of the Book of Proverbs?

Leader's Note: *The character traits and habits praised in the Proverbs 31 woman are the same ones encouraged in the rest of Proverbs: wisdom, time management, hard work, planning ahead, giving godly advice, compassion for others, etc.*

[Q] The Proverbs 31 woman combines homemaking with business ventures. List some ideas that allow women today to do the same thing.

[Q] Discuss the Proverbs 31 woman's secret, found in verse 30. How does her attitude toward God affect her other roles and relationships?

➤ How does this verse contrast with our culture's values?

Teaching point three: God wants us to embrace each season of life.

As women, our roles inevitably change as we progress through the different stages of our lives. In order to enjoy the life that God has given us to the fullest, we must embrace each season and situation that he places us in. Paul wrote that he had “learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Phil. 4:12). We will find contentment more easily when we recognize that every role involves some type of sacrifice, but also offers special blessings.

Another way to embrace each life stage is to remember that we are ultimately serving the Lord (Col. 3:24), and he will reward our efforts. We may find ourselves in a position where our work seems to be relatively unimportant, or even like drudgery. But in each season, God works to prepare us for the next one. Whether we're supporting a husband in his career, nurturing an infant, managing a family with growing children, or caring for aging parents, these times may be shaping us for our most important assignment. If we remain faithful to the everyday tasks, God will entrust us with further work for his kingdom.

[Q] Discuss the sacrifices and blessings inherent in different stages and lifestyle choices in a woman's life.

[Q] Why do you think contentment is so hard for us to learn? Share ideas on how we can cultivate this attitude.

[Q] Looking back on the past, tell about a time that God prepared you for a role which would come later.

Read Ruth 1:6–18; 2:2–3; 3:1–6.

[Q] What character traits did Ruth display in her relationship with her mother-in-law? How can these character traits play out in women's roles today?

[Q] Ruth moved to a strange land and went to work in the fields to support herself and her destitute mother-in-law. What temptations and struggles do you think Ruth might have faced during this season of her life?

[Q] What sacrifices did Ruth's decision force her to make?



Read Ruth 4:13–17.

[Q] How did God bless Ruth for her faithfulness and godly attitudes?

Leader's Note: Point out that even though Ruth came from a nation despised by Israel (see Deut. 23:3–6), she received the privilege of being an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Although women were not typically included in Jewish genealogies, Ruth is one of five women named in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 (v. 5).

Teaching point four: Don't neglect your most important role.

It's easy to get overwhelmed by all the responsibilities demanding our attention and the people relying on us. We want to do the best we can for our families, our friends, and our church ministry, but some days we wonder how to fit it all in. And sometimes the thing that's easiest to neglect is what we need the most—time spent with our Heavenly Father.

Our Creator wired us to find our greatest joy and fulfillment in communion with him. When we live out our role as a child of God through worship, prayer, and Bible study, we also receive guidance, wisdom, and strength to help us meet the demands of our other roles. But when serving God crowds out a daily time to hear his voice, every area of our life suffers. Carving out some time to simply be God's child meets our deepest need and frees us to truly love and serve others.

Read Luke 10:38–42.

- [Q]** Describe the sisters' contrasting approaches toward Jesus' visit. How do these reflect our attitudes toward him today?
- [Q]** How had Mary "chosen what is better" (v. 42)?
- [Q]** What did Jesus mean when he said that "it will not be taken away from her" (v. 42)?
- [Q]** How do you think this conversation might have changed Martha and her relationship with Jesus?
- [Q]** Share creative ideas on how women can nurture their relationship with God in the midst of a busy life.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Women today are bombarded with images of what a woman should look like in each of her roles. This pressure comes from many sources: television and other media, our church environment, other people's expectations, and even our own preconceived ideas, experiences, and family background. Some women suffer disappointment or resentment in one or more areas of their lives. Others feel like a failure. God wants us to learn the freeing truth that we will never do a perfect job at anything, yet he delights in us just as we are.

We may not be happy with how other people label us, but what we do and how we perform does not define us. Our core identity is found in our relationship with Christ, the only role that is eternal. Being a child of God doesn't look the same for every woman. We all receive salvation from the same source, and God's goal for each of us is to grow more Christ-like. But in between are many different paths involving a vast range of gifts, desires, opportunities, and choices. When we feel as though we don't know who we are, we can remember whose we are. And we can ask him to show us our true identity.

Action Point:



If you didn't do the Optional Activity, do it this week. Save your slips of paper for a special time of prayer and meditation. Prayerfully consider each role that you listed and your attitude toward that responsibility: Do you need to request wisdom for that area? Do you need to ask God to provide needed resources, strength, or power? Do you need to learn contentment in that role? Do you need to accept the fact that you cannot do a perfect job? Close by thanking God for the responsibilities and relationships that he has entrusted to your care.

—Dianne Neal Matthews is a freelance writer and the author of *The One Year Women of the Bible* (Tyndale House Publishers). She and her husband have three grown children and a granddaughter.

Additional Resources



ChristianBibleStudies.com
-Balancing Work and Family Life
-Soul Care for Women Leaders
-Six Principles for Women Leaders



Longing for More: A Woman's Guide to Transformation in Christ, Ruth Haley Barton and Lynne Hybels (InterVarsity Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0830835065)



The Woman I Am Becoming, T. Suzanne Eller (Harvest House Publishers, 2007; ISBN 978-0736920308)



Seasons of a Woman's Life, Lois Evans (Moody Publishers, 2000; ISBN 978-0802485922)



The Confident Woman: Knowing Who You Are in Christ, Anabel Gillham (Harvest House, 2003; ISBN 978-0736912402)



The 500 Hats of a Modern-Day Woman: Strength for Today's Demanding Roles, Joyce K. Ellis (Pleasant Word, 2003; ISBN 978-1579216726)



Identity Theft: Reclaiming Who God Created You to Be, Mike Breaux (Zondervan, 2008; ISBN 978-0310277651)



Soul Satisfaction: For Women Who Long for More, Debra Evans (Crossway Books, 2001; ISBN 978-1581342840)



ARTICLE

Identity Crisis

I love being a mom, so why do I hate being labeled as one?

By Caryn Rivadeneira, for the study, “Who Am I?”

This past winter, when I was eight months pregnant, my husband and I attended a retreat for “thoughtful” Christians on the snow-covered dunes of Lake Michigan. We had a great time and met wonderful, interesting people with whom we enjoyed great conversations. But one man marred my trip a bit: Whenever he saw me, he insisted on calling me *mama*.

You don’t have to know me all that well to realize that there are exactly three small people on this planet who can call me *mama* and expect a warm reception. While I’m sure this man meant no harm—he seemed decent enough otherwise—suddenly every essay I had read or written in college lambasting sexist language came flooding back into my memory and fueled an anger I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Back in our room, I quietly raged (the walls of our old hotel were quite thin!) against this man to my husband. When he offered to kick his sexist butt for me, we both laughed at that thought and my anger toward the man was pretty much over. But the anger toward myself wasn’t.

I knew the reason it upset me to be called *mama* by someone other than my kids had much less to do with the comment’s sexist nature and much more to do with my own identity crisis—one I have suffered since leaving the full-time work world to become an at-home mom five years ago.

Truth is, while I love *being* an at-home mom, I hate being identified as one. I hate it because it conjures up images that don’t mesh with how I see myself—or how I am, actually—at all. Don’t get me wrong: This isn’t because I dislike being a mother or am ashamed of the institution. I love my kids like crazy and am grateful that I’m home with them. For the world, I wouldn’t trade being able to snuggle with my kids on lazy mornings, to shuttle them to preschool and play dates, to bake with them in the afternoons, to wander with them through forest preserves on beautiful days. But as much as I love all this, it’s not what charges me. Even after the best times with my kids, I’ll poke back into my office to check email or do a bit of work to feel like myself again. And that is the essence of my identity crisis.



So is this because as a child I didn't play with dolls and dream of being a mommy, but instead played office and school and library and dreamt of being a "career woman"? Is it because when I look at my own giftedness and natural abilities, rearing children doesn't rise to the top of that list? Is it because I come up so short compared to other moms who seem so naturally adept at motherhood? Is it because I fear getting so wrapped up in an identity as Mommy that when my kids are grown and the daily tasks of motherhood are over I'll no longer know who I am?

The answer to each of these: yes, probably. And while the reasons for the identity crisis may vary, I know I'm not alone in this, especially among women who juggle several roles (and what women don't?) or who once led a team toward their vision at work, and now find themselves struggling to lead a couple of toddlers toward the car. I know I'm not alone because this topic is common in parenting magazines and in moms' groups.

In Christian circles, the standard solution to a mom's identity crisis seems to be this: You are a child of God, and that's your identity. I've seen other women nod and smile in agreement at this statement, which makes me wonder, *Am I a terrible Christian because I've never found this solution satisfying?* While we Christians may all be one in Christ Jesus, we're certainly not all the same. Christian women may all be "princesses"—daughters of the King!—but this doesn't mean he didn't give us each unique skill sets with which we're to transform his kingdom.

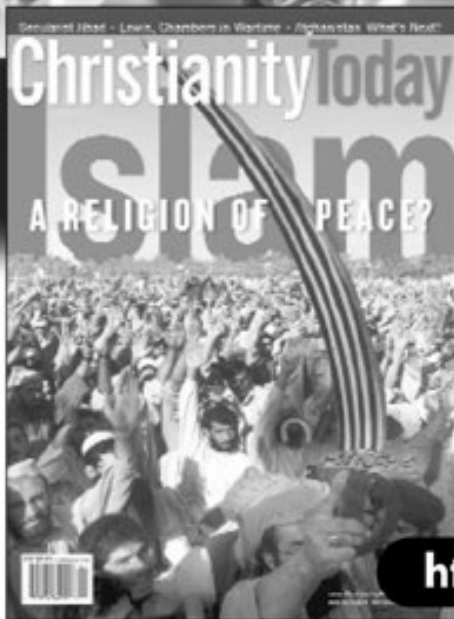
So how does that help me and my crisis? Since I feel called—and blessed—to be home with my kids, I need to embrace that. I need to get over my issues (my ego) and rejoice in each of the areas in which I'm gifted and able to practice those gifts.

—Caryn Rivadeneira

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