

Q&A with Jen Hatmaker, author of FOR THE LOVE: Fighting for Grace in a World of Impossible Standards

- 1. *For the Love* is a markedly different format than all of your other books—and just about everyone else's, for that matter. You cover so much ground, and it works beautifully. How did you come up with the concept?**

I started with the format. It was so liberating to write separate essays, ranging from serious to hilarious. I loved being able to explore all kinds of ideas instead of being pigeonholed to one theme—to be able to dip into all of the things that matter to me and to my friends.

Because the thing is, my readers and I are all over the place. We're moms, wives, and professionals, and we're juggling church and service. We care about the world, but we also care about dinner. We're not just one thing. It's actually really helpful to just sit down with one book and have somebody speak to all the areas of your life.

So, in *For the Love*, I get to talk really seriously about ethics in global community development, and then you can turn the page and I'll talk about fashion concerns.

- 2. Yes, fashion concerns! You devote an entire chapter to some of contemporary culture's most upsetting wardrobe trends. Let's talk about a few of those.**

In the book, I say this is both a manifesto and a confessional. I'm not just pointing fingers—I'm an offender, too.

For example, I talk about Leggings-As-Pants/Tights-As-Leggings (LAP/TAL). I think we can agree that LAP is okay if your privates are covered by a shirt. Otherwise, please don't do it. Just don't. Unless you are Jessica Alba, your underwear-region is not your best zone. I am just shopping in Target, and there you are, rocking your LAP, and I feel like I just got to second base with you. The world is hard enough without making everyone circumnavigate our baby-makers.

Tights-As-Leggings (TAL), on the other hand, is never okay. Look. Tights are not opaque. That means we can see *everything*. TAL is sometimes the result of actual leggings having been stretched over our thigh meat one too many times. Not sure about TAL? Ask a trusted friend. It's a test of both pants and friendship.

I also talk about baby couture. I live in Austin, and the kids in the parks look like mini-Anthropologie ads with a side of inner torment. I am all for cutely dressed babies, but there is a place for Garanimals. That's all I'm saying.

3. Speaking of Garanimals, you offer some awesome parenting advice in the book. You divide families into two camps: spicy and sweet. The names are somewhat self-explanatory, but what is the difference, and why does it matter?

My husband Brandon and I have five kids. And I say that we seven Hatmakers are spicy people. We're sarcastic and loud and love obnoxious humor, and whenever I get around what I'd call a sweet family, sharing and being so gentle with one another, I have a crisis. In the book I write that nothing makes me diagnose my family as "catastrophic" quicker than another family behaving.

The bigger issue I'm addressing is our tendency to focus on our failures and ignore our successes as parents. Humans are funny: we judge one another mercilessly, but we also decide others are perfect and that we're just hopeless. Social media (Hello, crazy Pinterest projects! Hey, angelic moments enshrined on Instagram!) has only worsened our inclination to think everyone else has it so together while we so do not.

I want to say to all parents: You are probably doing a much better job than you think. Self-criticism is awfully powerful. It can be used to help us improve, but it can also totally debilitate us in ways that are just not healthy or ultimately, productive. I write that every parent blows it, every kid comes unhinged, and every family goes off the rails. And we tend to focus on our off-rail moments instead of our good ones.

Extend a little compassion to yourself—the same compassion you'd offer a friend who is feeling overwhelmed. Parenting is mind-numbingly hard. No one is perfect at it. Moms (and dads!): you are doing a wonderful job.

4. You encourage your readers to build up one another and to truly try to establish a sense of community. Why community?

We're kind of an interesting generation because none of us live at home anymore. Once upon a time, you lived where your parents lived—where you grew up and where your friends were. You had a real sense of home. But we're all over the place now, and while that's exciting on one level because it means we're chasing dreams and experiencing new places, it can also lead to feeling disconnected and really alone.

I write in the book that loneliness can be a prison, but the good news is, we have the keys—you don't have to wait for someone to open the bars for you. Set yourself free! Here's what that looks like: If you can make a pot of chili and use a phone, then you can create community. If you want to wait until your house is perfect and you aren't nervous, then just forget it.

Stop waiting for someone else to create a space and find friends for you. Make it happen yourself. Just look around you and reach out. Invite a couple of people or couples over for some comfort food and wine. Sparks may not immediately fly—building relationships takes time—but oh is it ever worth the effort and risk.

5. You say that developing your own sense of community has been really important for your marriage. In fact, you offer a lot of great advice about marriage in general—like your 10 “hard-won insights.” Can you list them?

Yes, I say “hard-won” because, as most everyone says, marriage is work. Brandon and I got married in college. It was 1993, halfway through my sophomore year—Brandon was a senior. And we were just the two dumbest kids that have ever walked on the planet. But it worked out. We've been married 21 years, and I've learned some things—mostly the hard way.

Here's a little of what I now know to be true:

1. We are not good at the same things and this is okay.
2. I'm all for honesty, but pretending has its place.
3. I'm all for pretending, but honesty has its place.
4. Find best couple friends.
5. Lighten up.
6. Be nice.
7. Stick together spiritually.
8. Stop trying to change each other.
9. Have fun.
10. Have lots of sex.

I go into more detail for each point in the book. I think all together, the insights ultimately support a few of the book's larger themes, like embracing individual quirks, resting in truth, and offering grace, both to others and to yourself.

6. *For the Love's* Jimmy Fallon-inspired thank-you notes are going to be everyone's new favorite thing to read over and over. Do you just write these all of the time? How did you compile enough for four chapters that never stop being laugh-out-loud funny? Do you have any favorites?

I love Jimmy Fallon. I would like to kidnap him and lock him in my closet. I value humor so much. It is so restorative and necessary.

So, I found myself writing my own thank-you notes in a funny way. And I put it out on Facebook a couple of years ago, like, hey -- I'm writing thank-you notes, a la Jimmy Fallon. Does any body have any funny ones? I think I had a thousand replies with thank-you notes in them. My readers are so funny.

So the thank-you notes in the book are from me, and some are from readers. They're relatable reality checks.

As for favorites? A few:

"Thank you, Four-Year-Old, for keeping my vanity in check with constant reminders about my 'fat tummy' and 'old skin.' These tragic conditions are your doing, but I appreciate your keen powers of observation. I can't be walking around acting like Gisele when I have important things to attend to, like cooking a meal for you to hate. Sincerely, Your Old Fat Mom."

"Thank you, Autocorrect, for making me appear simultaneously like an English professor and a perverted gangster."

"Thank you, Skinny Jeans for Men, for making guys believe they look like Justin Timberlake when most of them more closely resemble Gru from *Despicable Me*."

"Thank you, Pre-Mixed Mango Margaritas, for helping me get through middle school again as a thirty-eight-year-old mom. It's the only way. If you have any other friends, send them."

7. You're hilarious when you take advertisers to task, too, but there is also a serious message underpinning that entire chapter. Why is your message about not listening to the ads, magazines, and other media that tell women we're not good enough so important?

I think primarily because we're just assaulted with these messages of inadequacy every single day. Fifty different sources will try to tell you what to look like, what to wear, how to lose weight, what to buy, how to get through the day, what is acceptable, what is unacceptable. It's just crazy, the amount of influences that are trying to exert themselves on our choices.

Collectively, when you put it in one bucket and take a look at it, it's all crap. And it's impossible. It also vilifies a lot of things that shouldn't be vilified, like getting older or struggling. There's nothing inherently wrong with struggling.

I just see a lot of women trying way too hard. Like whoa, I mean *way too hard*. Throughout *For the Love*, I feel like I'm a freedom banner waver. Let's just free ourselves. There are a lot of things we can't control, but we can control what we listen to and how much we take it to heart.

So even though that essay about the lunacy of the marketing world is funny, I really mean it. I hope that women will be confident enough to stand on their own two feet in their own space with their own people and just own their life and not bow to every little thing that somebody else says we should be.

8. You are really trying to empower women specifically, aren't you?

Yes. But the way to becoming empowered is somewhat counterintuitive. We have to be vulnerable first. We have this idea of being self-sufficient and self-sustaining. You know, "Everything's great: the kids are great, the marriage is great, the house is great, we're all fine"—this projected image that's not actually true of anyone.

Vulnerability tears down that entire image. It really dismantles the farce, and not everyone's willing to do that. So many women are so afraid to be real. But those who are willing to be transparent, humble, truthful, and honest—vulnerable—in a safe space with friends are the women who can create true community and gain incredible strength.

We really are capable of lifting one another up and of being lifted up. We just have to open ourselves up to the possibility.

9. You tackle global interactions in the book—and the often problematic relationship between those who want to help and those who need help. What is poverty tourism and how can we avoid it?

We always need to start with the local community we wish to serve. It seems obvious, but the fact is, it's just not where so many well-meaning groups start.

This is not something I just automatically knew. I learned from nonprofit leaders and workers who have been tapped into this conversation for a long time—healthy organizations who said before you partner with us, you need to understand our approach.

And the bedrock of that approach is this: Anytime the rich and poor combine, we should listen to whoever has the least power. We need to ask the local leaders questions, truly listen to their answers, and go from there.

The same goes for minority voices in culture, at home or abroad: When minority voices are saying the same things, those with privileges should hear them.

Whether it's a trip to help a community on the other side of town or on the other side of the world, it should not be about how it makes the travelers feel—how we come home “changed” or “moved.” That's not service.

10. You sum up your Christian theology simply in *For the Love*—and it's not necessarily what a lot of people are used to hearing from mainstream Christians. Can you explain your perspective?

I used to have a very safe view of Christianity. I lived in my own life world, taking care of anyone who fit my view of a Christian. It wasn't until I got older and really started experiencing the world that my theology was incredibly challenged. Some of that was right here in our own backyard, just experiencing diversity in our own American culture.

I started to realize that the theology that was keeping me safe, secure, blessed, and even correct wasn't translating everywhere else. So how could it be true? If it were true, it'd mean God only loves me and my kind. And I just knew that didn't jive with who He is.

11. You also discuss the future of Christian church in the book. And while you're decidedly an insider—you're a pastor's wife, church leader, and highly regarded Christian thinker—you really take up the cause of those who feel shut out of the church. Why?

People are leaving the church. A recent study estimates that by age 29, 80% of churchgoers will have become “disengaged” with their faith. Young people and folks in my generation are bailing—it's a mass exodus.

The problems people have with the church are well documented, and the people who have the problems are not a random, disgruntled minority. From the church's opposition to science and its consumerism, to its hostility toward the gay community and perceived arrogance, these are issues that have made a lot of people say, again and again, that they just don't see Jesus in church.

And the church—that's me and mine and everyone else with a stake in Christianity's future—needs to listen to these concerns. Where there's smoke,

there's fire. Let's just acknowledge that. Let's engage those who feel excluded. Let's have tough conversations and humble ourselves.

12. What is the most important message you hope stays with readers of *For the Love*?

I think the power of human connection and community is so very strong. We very much have the power to heal one another. But with anything that volatile, we also have the power to really hurt each other. And we do both. We hurt and we heal.

So much of the message of *For the Love* is “let's really and truly give this grace thing a try.” Let's see what happens when we forgive and practice compassion instead of judgment. Let's assume Jesus meant it when he said grace is for free, and it sets you free.

The full book title I wanted—that I could not get anyone to go for!—was *For the Love: Grace for Me and Mine, You and Yours, and Them and Theirs*. Because that's really the crux of it all: grace is for everyone.