

936 Pennies

Discovering the *Joy* of
Intentional Parenting

Eryn Lynum



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Eryn Lynum, 936 Pennies
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To our Savior, Jesus.
Author of time and giver of hope.

To Grayson.
Your belief in me has taught me to soar.

And to our children.
You show us every day
how to best spend our 936 pennies.
You amaze me.

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-one-
Counting
Time

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The Jar

My teeth were clenched as I balanced our frantic toddler on my hip, discreetly stuffing animal crackers into his mouth. It was a desperate attempt to keep him focused and quiet, and it was failing. We had missed his nap-time window, and it was backfiring big-time. Our three-year-old stood next to my husband. He stared out into the crowd, tightly clutching his daddy's hand. The sight of him caught me off guard, exceptionally handsome in his light blue button-up shirt and dark denim jeans. He looked much older than his three years. It was a rare occasion when our family looked so put together, but it was all about to unravel at the whim of our one-year-old, Ellison. He thrashed about in my arms, struggling to break free from my grasp. I repositioned him on my hip so that his kicks would be directed away from my midsection. Our third son was nestled deep within my abdomen—a secret shared between my husband and me.

We stood on a stage with a handful of other families from our church. It was Child Dedication Sunday, and we were there to vow, in front of our church family and God, to raise this unruly boy on my hip to know and love the Lord. It was an important day for us. “Down! Down! Down!” Ellison yelled at the top of his little lungs as he pushed my hand away. *Five more minutes. We only need to keep it together for five more minutes*, I silently prayed.

Our pastor introduced each family. He then turned to the parents onstage and reminded us all of the great responsibility we have to raise these children into godly men and women. He reassured us of

the support we would have in our church family. The congregation then bowed in prayer for the children and for the mission before us to show them who Jesus is. The bowing of heads seemed to be the clincher for my son's waning patience. Any last scrap of civility he had was now gone. He wailed through the entire prayer. With our pastor's "amen" came a few snickers from the crowd. The laughter was good-natured; our church family understands the wildly unpredictable temperament of toddlers. But my face was still flush with embarrassment as we found our way offstage, my flailing toddler in one arm and a small gift in the other.

Gifts are often given at these child dedication services. At our former church, where I worked as the assistant to a children's pastor and was responsible for putting together these gifts, we gave away children's worship CDs and kids' Bibles. But nothing would prepare me for the gift I was given on this day, at our own son's dedication.

As our pastor spoke to us on the stage that morning, he had given each family a glass jar full of pennies. My hands dropped a bit as I took in the full weight of the jar; it was heavy with the weight of exactly 936 shiny copper pennies. "In these jars is a penny for every week you will raise this child," our pastor explained. And with his words, the jar felt exponentially more heavy in my grasp. "Every week, when you get home from church, remove one penny from the jar. It will be a reminder of the time you have left to raise your child before he or she goes out on their own." I stared at the pennies, all shiny and glinting inside of the glass jar. They looked like so many . . . yet so very few.

Our pastor instructed us that upon bringing our jars home, we should begin by removing a penny for each week old our child was. Ellis was one and a half. He was the oldest child being dedicated that Sunday morning, and I had a lot of pennies to remove. So many, in fact, that weeks later I had not removed a single one of them. Maybe it was because I hadn't carved out a spare moment to sit and count them out. . . . But I suspect it was because my heart was afraid to feel the weight of seventy-six pennies being emptied

from that jar, never to return. Perhaps I was afraid to begin removing pennies because I knew that with each penny I removed, that little glass jar would only grow heavier, more imminent, and more immediate. It wasn't only Ellison's jar that was weighing heavy on my heart. When I looked at our firstborn, now three years old, my soul felt the weight of 172 pennies gone. I had to ask the inevitable question: How had we spent them?

In Ephesians 5:16, God's Word tells us to make the best use of the time, because the days are evil. "Teach us to number our days," Moses prays in Psalm 90:12, "that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Removing pennies from a jar is exactly this: time counting. It is us numbering our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Is that not what every one of us parents yearns for along this journey: a heart of wisdom in how to spend this time?

Countless things have changed in the arena of motherhood since the very first birth story, when Eve welcomed baby Cain into the world. But two things have not changed. One is the reality of the limited time we as parents have with our children before they enter into adulthood. The other is the responsibility we have as parents to use that time well, to nurture and shape and guide our children into an abundant life. Nine hundred and thirty-six weeks is what we are given, and sometimes not even that many. Too many parents know the unspeakable grief of having those weeks cut short. We are never guaranteed the time we have with our kids. In light of that, our responsibility grows all the more imminent to spend that time fully. Our new jar of pennies was a stark reminder of this.

For weeks that jar sat on the floor in the backseat of our car. I could hear it *clink-clinking* as it rolled back and forth between tiny race cars and sippy cups when I would accelerate from or pause at a stop sign. I avoided it, along with the weighty task it challenged me to. I avoided it until one day I could avoid it no longer. Leaving the jar untouched would not make time stand still. I reached underneath the driver's seat and brought the jar inside. I set it on my desk and stared at it for a few minutes before walking to the kitchen in search of another. Rummaging through my canning

equipment, I found a glass mason jar, this one empty, yet full of potential. I set it next to the jar of pennies. This new jar represented the investment of a lifetime—truly, the investment of an eternity. Every morsel of the time that we have with our children we are called to grab hold of and use it for showing our children exactly who Jesus is. This is when I began to count.

I counted out seventy-eight pennies. They represented the weeks we had spent with Ellison since first bringing him home from the maternity ward. As I counted them out, I placed them into the new jar, and this is when it hit me—*we had not lost those weeks. We had used them.* We were using them for the creation of something beautiful. These pennies, and the weeks they represent, were not being cast to the wind. They were being invested. And we wanted to invest them wisely.

First Pennies

Parenthood is full of waiting. We wait for the plastic test stick to reveal a positive sign, or perhaps the referral letter from the agency an ocean away. We wait for the first kicks within our abdomen, or the doctor to speak “boy” or “girl.” We wait for the home visits and paperwork and court date. Some of us, caught entirely surprised by that positive sign, wait and hope for the shock to give way to excitement. Some of us wait for the ultrasound and that tiny heartbeat to release us from our deepest fears. Some of us wait for years.

And yet nothing can prepare us for that day when we take our first step over the threshold into parenthood. No matter how many birthing classes we attended or parenting books we pored over in recent days, despite the heaps of advice we’ve been showered with, when that child is first placed into our arms, we find ourselves very ill-equipped. And there we are, tasked with figuring it out as we go, moment by moment, day by day, week by week, some of us wondering if we’ll ever truly *figure it out*.

We may think that the countdown ends when the umbilical is cut or the adoption papers are finalized, but that is exactly when a new clock begins to tick away at time. We stare down at our new child, hoped for and prayed for and altogether perfect in our eyes. And this is when we fall under the full weight of our new responsibility. Wrapped up in this child is so much potential, and it is in that moment that we begin to understand just how much of our child’s future and well-being rests in our hands. Staring at

a newborn baby, eighteen years feel so big. Staring at a jar of 936 pennies, the same amount of time holds a deep sense of urgency.

However we enter into parenthood—whether completely expected or utterly surprised, with a perfectly orchestrated birth plan, an emergency C-section, or a labor of paperwork to bring a child home from across an ocean or across the state—here is this child and here are we, together: a new and beautiful unity. Nine-hundred and thirty-six weeks, if that, stretches out before us. And the question must be asked: How will we spend them? Will we choose to feel the weight of time passing, and if we do, how will that change today and tomorrow?

This is the challenge of counting time. We must choose it. We must choose the feelings, challenge, urgency, and mission—and it hurts. Moving that penny every week is a heavy task. But we choose this work of counting time because it asks us the difficult questions that ultimately guide us into a fuller life for us and our children. Every week as we move a penny to our “invested” jar, it leads me to ask myself questions like these:

- How did I invest this week in a manner that will impact my child’s future?
- What did we do this week that invited laughter into our home?
- How did we invest time in our child’s creative spirit this week?
- How did we intentionally slow down this week?
- How did I show my child Jesus this week?
- What priorities and values did I model to my child this week?
- What do I need to ask my child’s forgiveness for?

Penny counting begs that these questions be asked. The weight that we feel each week as we unscrew that metal cap and move a penny from one jar to the next—we cannot do this without feeling. We cannot do it without consideration. We cannot do it without asking the questions that really matter, the ones that will shape

our child's life, as well as ours. And as we count, as we ask, as we answer, we discover the beauty in these days. We learn to pick them apart, dissect them, behold them, and be grateful for each and every one of them and the lessons they hold within. We discover that there is room and grace for our mistakes. Moving these pennies has taught me that God's grace is so much larger than all of my tongue slips and raised-voice regrets.

Perhaps that is the greatest lesson that counting these pennies teaches us: Jesus is enough when we are not.

Right before Moses died, he gave these words to Joshua, next in command, and they are true for us today: "The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (Deuteronomy 31:8 NASB). Every week, no matter how demanding and exhausting, God has promised you His presence, and that is everything you will need for walking this road of parenthood. No matter your situation, He knows it, and He is waiting to meet you right where you are. He goes before us, and He already knows what lies ahead. He knows the way. That is the beauty of these penny jars—they reveal to us just how much we need Jesus for this journey.

The truth is, when I stare at that jar of pennies, it is not only a poignant reminder of time's limit. It is also a reminder of my own limits. Some days I feel I am squandering our time together. With one slip of the tongue, one impatient reaction, or one missed opportunity to speak truth, I wonder if any of this is doing any good. A penny can be invested; it has the potential of growing in value. It also has the potential of getting lost in a couch cushion. The time we have with our children holds the same potential. Each moment is an opportunity to teach and to be taught—to love, to nurture, and to shape our children. Within these moments is when we show these little ones who Jesus is and what the value is

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of following Him. And I have discovered in my own motherhood that this is only possible when I myself am resting at the feet of Jesus and living in light of the promises in His Word. We discover freedom and hope in parenthood when we choose to see ourselves as Jesus sees us—forgiven, free, and righteous.

He calls us righteous, yet we feel anything but that. Parenthood acts as a mirror—and one of the most unforgiving kind—that reveals every little blemish and imperfection that we might have never noticed before. Where in the midst of our everyday challenges as parents can righteousness find a place? It is in our second penny jar that I see this question begging to be asked. This is the jar where we keep the pennies that have already been invested, the ones we have already spent. They speak of time and choices. They look tarnished; blemished by human touch and marred by my own faults. The ones in that first jar—still waiting to be invested—look shiny and new. And I wonder if there is any way to transfer them from one jar to the next without smudging them by my shortcomings. It's easy to feel wholly unworthy of investing these pennies.

Where is righteousness in all of this mess? It is in Christ alone.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,” says 2 Corinthians 5:21. And in 1 Peter 3:18, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

But there is one caveat. We find it in the 2 Corinthians passage: “That in Him *we might* become the righteousness of God.” God's grace leaves little room for conditions, but here we see it—that little word that we get caught up on: *might*. There is a possibility of leaving all of the promises—our hope for abundant life and intentional parenthood—sitting on the table to collect dust. For days. For months. For years. For decades. For a lifetime. For your child's lifetime. For generations. Far too many legacies are made up of dust.

This one condition—the one thing holding us back from the life we so desperately desire for ourselves and our children? The condition itself is adorned in grace. “For I am not ashamed of the

gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. . . . *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith*, as it is written, ‘But the righteous shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:16–17 NASB, emphasis added). Here it is, a promise wrapped up in ribbons of grace, accepted through the practice of faith—the act of believing. All that is required of us is the acceptance of the gift and promises laying before us; a receiving of this free gift through faith.

That gift of promises sits waiting on the table with your name scrawled across the gift tag. You glance down, the package glimmering in the light. Promises of abundant life for you and your family. There are traces of blood on that gift—the holy blood of Christ shed for us on the cross. This gift was bought with a price, and now it is given away without one, “*to everyone who believes.*” When we accept this gift, Christ’s blood spreads over us to make us completely clean before His eyes. Not just for heaven, but for now. He sees us clean *now*. Forgiven of our harsh words yesterday, our impatient reactions today, and our slip-ups tomorrow. He looks down upon us and sees only the blood—only Christ’s righteousness on our behalf.

This is where we see it—what we dared not imagine before—that we can be righteous. *Right now*. Christ himself is our righteousness. Only when we realize this—His perfect and complete provision on our behalf—can we begin to grasp the promises that He gives us in His Word. And those promises, made fully available to us right in the mess and chaos of everyday parenting, provide everything that we need to invest our pennies well.