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Week 47: Fall Mission Feeding

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Sharon Hodde Miller

In the studio

SHEILA: Hi! Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Sheila Walsh here with Randy Robison. I have to tell you, I'm excited about this book today. I brought it to our production meeting and said to our crew, "We need to book this guest!" It's called *The Cost of Control*: "Why we crave it, the anxiety it gives us, and the real power God promises." And it is by our guest Sharon Hodde Miller. Welcome to this program.

SHARON: It's good to be with you guys.

SHEILA: We're thrilled to have you. Why did you choose to write this book at the time you wrote it?

SHARON: So I'm a pastor and when the pandemic first hit, I was paying attention to how the people in our church were responding to the pandemic. I was paying attention to how people online were responding to the pandemic, and it was clear to me pretty immediately that one of the things the pandemic was exposing was a major issue with control.

The pandemic had taken away our certainty and you could see Christians, by and large, were not responding by drawing on the millennia of the tradition of spiritual resources, of scripture, of faith, of trust, to cope. We were taking all our fears to the internet instead of to God. So I could see this idol of control that was exposed.

I wanted to dig into that, but I also find that my best teaching comes from conviction over my own sin. So once I identified this as a discipleship issue, this is something I want to dig into, I thought, well, I need to turn the focus on myself and consider whether or not this is also in my heart. Because if you'd asked me three years ago if I wrestled with control, I would have said no. But through that journey, I discovered that I do struggle with control as well.

RANDY: I think we all do to some degree. But I think to understand how to properly handle certain control issues, we have to acknowledge there are some things that we should have control over. What are some of the things that we should control so that we know the other things that we shouldn't necessarily try to control?

SHARON: So the entire arc of the book is looking at how God doesn't give us control but he does give us agency. "Agency" is a psychological term that we don't find in scripture, but I find it to be a really helpful term. I define it as the power to influence ourselves and our circumstances. And the operative word there is *influence*. We cannot control our circumstances. We do have some control over ourselves, even if that is inhibited some by sin, but we cannot control the outcome of things. We can only influence the world around us.

And we see that distinction break down between Genesis two and Genesis three. In Genesis one and two, Adam and Eve have profound agency. They are not puppets. They're not prisoners. They're not robots. God commissions them into the garden with tremendous power and authority and influence. But as soon as they want more than that, they don't just want influence, they want control and that's the breakdown that occurs in Genesis three. So that's when we don't honor that boundary, that limitation, we want more than influence, we want control.

SHEILA: Why do you call it "The Devil's Deal"? I thought that was such an interesting term.

SHARON: Well, the entire book is a meditation on that moment in Genesis three. And every time we try to control something that God has not given us to control, we are reenacting that moment in Genesis three again and again and again. And so that's one reason why it's a devil's deal. We're reenacting that.

But I also found that concept of a devil's deal, like when you hear that term "the devil's deal" you know it means when you make a deal with the devil you lose much more than you gain. And that's something that was helpful for me to understand about control because I think we think with control that we can actually get something good out of it. That if I try to control a situation, I can make it work for me and this is a complete and all-out lie. That whenever we try to control something that God has not given us to control, we will break it more. It is a devil's deal in that way. And for me personally, that was clarifying. That it is not just that I shouldn't control, it's not just that should let go of control because control is an illusion, but that it will cost me whenever I try.

RANDY: Now you can say that, but I would think that a lot of people, even if they don't admit it, would disagree with that. Because I think, as a parent, if I can control my child, I will make them a more godly adult. Or as a pastor, if I can control my congregation, it will be a more godly church. Why is that not true?

SHARON: Well, one of the things to understand about the cost of control, and the title of the book comes from Genesis three where we are not just reenacting that moment but we're reenacting its consequences as well. And that's why this is almost an immutable rule of the universe. This has been written into creation.

But what's a little bit tricky with parenting, with being a pastor, is that the cost might not be immediately apparent. So you can experience some success for a time, and you will see that with your kids, you might not see the consequences for decades. Now with parenting, especially, that is very nuanced because God has given us tremendous influence in our children's lives, and tremendous authority. We are called to discipline and teach them but what keeps me -- my children are little and so I don't know if I'm

walking this well. But honoring the reality that I'm called to exercise a profound influence in my children's lives, I ultimately cannot control whether or not they follow Jesus. And if I violate that boundary and I try to force them, it will cost my relationship with them in the end.

SHEILA: I discovered with our son when he graduated from Texas A&M, and he was brought up obviously in a Christian home, he was involved in everything. But he found something really interesting when he got to college; that some of his friends, whom he had assumed were believers too, when the roof over their heads no longer dictated how they behaved, it was as if all bets were off.

So I think that's -- how do you find the way to -- because if a child doesn't own that themselves, if it's just, if you're in this house you can't do this and you can't do that. Okay, great! I'm not in this house anymore. So now, he found the first year of college very difficult because it was just -- well, what are we doing now? Was this all a big game because our parents told us?

SHARON: I draw a lot of guidance from the passage where Paul is talking about ministry, and he talks about how I watered, or I planted the seeds and Apollos watered but it is God who gives the growth. That has been a real category for me in thinking about parenting. That I need to plant seeds into my children, I need to water their faith, I need to cultivate their faith to the best of my ability. But at the end of the day, it is God who gives the growth. And when we forget that and when we try to play God in our kids' lives, we do damage to our relationship with them.

RANDY: Yeah. That's tough as a parent. That's a tough one.

SHARON: It's hard! It's really hard!

RANDY: But I think it is equally as hard for some other situations outside of parenting. What are some of the areas where you look at ways that we might try to control ways,

things that we shouldn't be trying to control?

SHARON: So another area I try to look at in the book is controlling our bodies. We are -
- [Laughing]

RANDY: You can do that?

SHARON: We don't think of this as an area of control, but we exist in a culture that is constantly promising us that we can control our bodies. And there are entire products that are marketed to us that you can defy aging, that you can control your health. All these supplements you can take or diets you can practice or serums -- or whatever it is that you can make your body submit to you. And this is another area in which we can experience some success in it for a while.

And so you might not think, I don't have an issue with control with my body, and it is possible that's because you're young or you're in good health but right now your body is cooperating with you. And as soon as it stops, which is inevitable for all of us, that's when you begin to discover what sort of relationship you have with your body. And if you have a controlled relationship, this is another area where you'll experience *The Cost of Control*, which is that you will begin to resent your body and you'll begin to experience body shame and make an enemy of your body. So that's a really common one that we don't think of as being about control at all but is close to home for most of us.

SHEILA: When you finished writing it, as you reflected on your own life, do you feel there were areas in your life where control cost you?

SHARON: Yeah. The closest to home for me has actually been in my marriage because my husband and I lead a church together. And like most married couples, sometimes we don't agree. And there have been conversations where we didn't agree on the direction of our church, or we didn't agree on a decision that we're making about our church. These are important decisions. It is kingdom stakes that we're talking about. So it was very easy

in my mind to justify engineering the outcome of that conversation, and not by yelling at him, not by threatening him, not by being aggressive by all but I'm very strong with my words. I know how to make the conversation go in a particular direction and get the outcome that I want.

But what I've seen over the last several years is that it was costing my marriage. And again, it wasn't right away. It was taking years and years and years of sort of corroding the foundation of our marriage. And so that has reframed a lot of those conversations with my husband now where I'm asking, now I can get this outcome which I think is important for our church, but it is going to cost my marriage somehow. Is it that important to me? And usually, really 100% of the time it is not.

RANDY: This is really tough to see because I think, a lot of times we do get into control issues because we want the best or we think we know the best.

SHEILA: It is subtle, isn't it?

RANDY: Right, it is very subtle. How do you know if I'm exerting my influence in a way that is healthy or if I'm power-tripping and it's going to cost me later? When you're in the middle of it, it can be hard to know.

SHARON: That's a really great question. I think a lot of it comes down to wisdom, to discernment, to paying attention. To some extent, we are called to influence the people in our lives. I would not be a pastor if I didn't believe that to be true. But if you're in a position where you can feel I'm pushing this person. Like I'm starting to push this person and they're pushing back. Or maybe they're not pushing back but either way, you realize I'm leading the ship here against this person's will. That would be a red flag for me to at least have a conversation with a wise godly person in my life. Is this straying into control? Again, you go back to parenting, that line can take a lot of discernment, and to me, it is wise counsel and prayer to inform us.

SHEILA: I have to tell you, the part of your book that hit me personally the most is when you're talking about your husband, that he was a child of an alcoholic and the shame that comes with that and what happened to him during the pandemic. Because my father died by suicide, and I was involved. I feel like I've spent so much of my life trying to make sure everybody else is okay. And it is absolutely exhausting. What was that like for your husband?

SHARON: So one section of the book I look at different ways that we either try to exert control in our lives or try to feel in control. And there are the common ones like power and money. These are ones that we often associate with control. But another chapter is on shame that you mention. We use shame to control people, that's a really compelling way to make people move is to shame them.

But what I learned through the last couple of years is that you can also use shame to feel in control. I learned this from my husband as an adult child of an alcoholic. And what is very common for children who grow up in dysfunctional homes is they're taught that they're in control of things that they are not in control of. Because the parent will say, "It's your fault that I'm acting this way." And an eight-year-old child doesn't know the difference between my parent is sober or my parent is intoxicated. So they believe it is my fault, I am in control of you.

But what was fascinating for my husband to unearth is that he wrote a narrative in his interior world that also made the world feel less chaotic. Because what he started believing was I am in control of the people around me. I am responsible for their emotional well-being. This is the definition of codependency. But he was not motivated by that simply because his father told him that but because it made the world feel more predictable to him. Because the alternative is I'm in control of nothing. In this dysfunctional home, I'm in control of nothing that my parent does. I'm completely vulnerable to their erratic behavior.

So this shame narrative makes you feel like you have more control. And that to me, I

grew up in a healthy home, which initially made no sense to me. But I can see with you, with him, it makes so much sense that that shame narrative even though it tears you down, it also makes the world feel more predictable.

SHEILA: If someone was thinking like okay, you're ringing bells and there are red flags flying all over the neighborhood in my heart right now, what is even like a first step? Because you talk about the difference between control and the power that Jesus gives.

SHARON: The first step -- that's a really good question. Sort of depending on where someone is coming from, I guess the first thing I would say is a note of compassion and grace because I mentioned the whole book is a meditation on Genesis three. And even though we live in this post-Genesis-three world, we were created for Genesis one and two. We were created for security. We were created for stability. So whenever we long for that, that is not sin. And that's so important to say because I almost exclusively have control in a sin category, and it definitely can be but sometimes you're just reckoning with the fact that the world is not as it should be. And your desire for it to be healed is not wrong at all. ally put that in you, and it reflects his heart. We see that no more clearly than Jesus coming to make right what we cannot make right through control.

And so that's the first thing that I would say. But the other hope that we have in Jesus is that in this book I explain you don't have control, but you do have agency; I list all these different forms of agency. We also have self-control. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we have self-control. So we have tremendous power available to us. But the fact of the matter is, at the end of the day, I can walk you through all the forms of agency that you have and you can exercise it perfectly. I can explain to you what it means to exercise self-control and you can practice it perfectly, you can do everything right, and it still does not change the outcome. The outcome is still a disaster. The outcome is still not what you would want it to be. So to know that at the end of the day we have this power available to us but really our real hope is that this is not the end of our story. That we do not have to fix what is broken around us; Jesus has come to do it for us. And to make sure that we are trusting in that instead of ourselves.

RANDY: In the last few seconds, what does it do for you, what has it done for you when you put that control in its right place?

SHARON: It has motivated me to stop controlling in a way that nothing else has. Because I've been a Christian my entire life, I've known that I shouldn't control but in the thick of it, that has not been helpful to me. [Laughing] Just knowing that you shouldn't do something is not as compelling as knowing why. And this book was my why. It helped me to let go because I now understand this is not going to turn out the way that I think it will. And that Jesus has something better for me.

SHEILA: It's a fabulous, fabulous book. You're going to want to read it. There is so much that we didn't get to.

But Randy and I want to talk to you about some people in the world at the moment who do not have control over an area that is life-changing. In fact, it can cost their lives. But we have found a way that we can step into that gap and help. So please watch this and then I'll tell you how you and I can make a difference.

On the mission field

ANNOUNCER: The love between a father and daughter is like no other. But a father shouldn't have to watch his daughter suffer from something so preventable.

ISAK: So often when we're here, we see mothers and children. We hear the stories from mothers. We've seen so many times the broken heart of a mother. It so often comes down to us telling the story about the mother, the heart of the mother. And yet, the heart of our Father is also us as fathers. And that role as a father is actually the role of protecting.

ANNOUNCER: While our mission team was at this Angolan clinic, they came to know the story of Albano and his daughter Margareta. Isak and John, as fathers, can relate to

this love all too well themselves.

ISAK: A father who literally is the expression of their Father's heart. This is a man like you and I, a man who wants to protect his precious little child.

ANNOUNCER: But what is a father to do when the enemy attacking your daughter is malnutrition?

ISAK: The dad was telling us how he's traveled close to 100 kilometers to get here -- seven hours! And this is a father expressing that heart, standing up as a man, okay? As a man who says, I have to protect the life of my child. That's the reality of the day, this father has done everything he can do, and all he could do got his child here.

I want to talk to you, the dads, the fathers watching today, and I want to ask you will you help us to be the extension of the Father's heart? The expression of it? The extension of the Father's hand? You give the gift that expresses the Father's heart, you extend his hands when you give the gift of life today with mission feeding.

In the studio

RANDY: That's a tough one for me to watch as a father of two daughters. I'd do anything for them. I think that's the heart of the Father. So many of you ladies have helped us over the years, you understand the Father's heart as well. We're coming to you again to say will you join us once again in this beautiful lifesaving effort we call Mission Feeding. We can't do it without you. I hope that you see the Father's heart and the love we share because we see it when you partner with us.

And Sheila, I know we can make a difference. We can share the Father's heart with so many people that are hurting right now when people join with us.

SHEILA: Yeah, I've been here for almost seven years, and I'll never forget my very first

trip. You can read statistics and educate yourself as much as you can but there is something else when you're just standing there in a malnutrition clinic with moms who, same as me, I mean as Randy said, I would do anything for my son. And the thought of my child going to bed hungry every night even though I've done every single thing possible is just heartbreaking.

And I've watched some of these moms because of the drought and just severe malnutrition, literally digging in the dirt to try and find anything that they can put in the stomach of their child. But the interesting thing for me was within just a few days we had gone from being in a malnutrition clinic where some of these little ones didn't even have the energy to cry. You could tell by the state of their body that they were severely malnourished, but it was everything they could do to just take the next breath.

And then to go to a village where we had already set up a Mission Feeding program, and being able to sit with those red bowls, and be able to hand out this food to them that looks a little like oatmeal but actually has everything in that, the protein, the vitamins, the minerals they need in that area of the world to maximize health. And they have to come to school to get a meal. So it is a way of trying to break that cycle of poverty.

This is something that James and Betty have been passionate about for years and they will never stop. And Randy, we've made it possible, we've broken it down in such a way that we can all enter at some level.

RANDY: Yeah, and you know because of the years of experience, the people we have in place, the processes we have in place, the relationships that we have globally, we are able to do this on an incredibly economic level. The bottom line for you watching is that your gift of \$30 today would help feed three children for three months. That's hard to fathom in today's inflationary economy. But it does! A gift of \$50 will help feed five children for three whole months. Maybe you can give \$100; that would feed ten children. And some of you, some of you, maybe some of you fathers out there could give \$1,000 and feed 100 children for three months.

Whatever you can do, we want you to help us reach that goal of feeding 350,000 children this year, this campaign. Will you go online or go to the phone and make the best gift you can? When you do, you will be sharing the Father's heart with people who desperately need to hear it and to feel it. I hope you will do something. Give the best gift you can and do it now.

Begin video clip

ANNOUNCER: Across the continent of Africa, children are suffering and facing severe malnutrition. Lack of rainfall and severe drought has led to one of the deadliest food crises in 40 years.

With food reserves gone and many areas experiencing severe famine, we urgently need to replenish supplies to keep feeding the 350,000 children who are counting on us. Through *LIFE's* Mission Feeding outreach, your gift of love can be an answer to prayer for a hurting and hungry child in their time of need.

Call now with your lifesaving gift of \$30, \$50, or \$100 to help feed and care for three, five, or ten children for three full months. With your gift of any amount, we'll send you the *LIFE Planner* bound in soft-touch leather. This planner will help you in your daily walk with space for you to record your appointments, goals, inspirational notes, and prayers.

With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the scripture pen set. Perfect companions to the *LIFE* planner, these beautiful wooden pens are inscribed with scripture references to keep your heart focused on God's plans for you.

Finally, with your gift of \$1,000 or more to help feed and care for 100 children, be sure to request our inspiring bronze sculpture, *Let the Children Come*. This beautiful bronze is a

reminder to care for children around the world in both word and deed.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of video

In the studio

RANDY: I hope you are going online or going to the phones right now. We have the agency, we have the influence over this world. And, Sheila, that Mission Feeding is a great way of expressing it. I appreciate what we've learned from Sharon Hodde Miller.

SHEILA: Honestly, Sharon, this book has impacted my life. So thank you for writing it and thank you for being with us here today.

SHARON: It's been wonderful!

SHEILA: And we'll see you next time on *Life Today*. From all of us here, goodbye!