

SHAPING VIRTUES IN GRANDPARENTING

Larry McCall

Elder, Christ's Covenant Church (Winona Lake, IN)

Here is a heart-searching exercise. Imagine that you have passed away, and the pastor presiding at your funeral asks your now-adult grandchildren to give a testimony at your memorial service of the impact you had on their lives. What will your grandchildren say at your funeral? What do you hope they will say?

Leaving a Legacy

As grandparents, we want to make a difference in the lives of our grandchildren—a lasting difference—the kind of difference that will last into eternity. We want to leave a legacy not just of money or things, but a legacy of faith, a legacy of love and dependence on Jesus, a legacy of lives marked by the Shaping Virtues of humility, joy, generosity, and gratitude.

So, how does that happen? What would have to be true of our lives as grandparents to make a Christ-honoring, eternal impact on our grandchildren?

The Apostle Paul drew attention specifically to the powerful legacy of a godly grandmother when he wrote to his closest protégé. At the beginning of 2 Timothy, Paul reflected, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Tim. 1:5). The apostle was clearly honoring the impact that Timothy’s godly grandmother and mother had in his life, acknowledging God’s grace at work in the transmission of a life of faith from one generation to the next. Isn’t that the implication of Paul’s exhortation to Timothy a bit later in the letter?

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing *from whom* you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:14–15, emphasis mine).

Paul was reminding Timothy not only of the words of life he had learned as a boy growing up, but he was also drawing Timothy’s recollection back to the people from whom Timothy had learned the gospel—including his own godly grandmother. God had used the gospel teaching of a godly grandmother, given increased impact by her gospel-reflecting example, in shaping the life of young Timothy, a man used greatly by God in the spread of the gospel. Now, that’s a legacy worth investing in as grandparents, the legacy of a godly life example.

As we grandparents pursue Christ with gospel-motivated passion, what fruit of the gospel should we be praying for in our own everyday lives? We should be praying for fruit that will serve as a Christ-reflecting legacy for our grandchildren.

Grandfathers and Grandmothers

Spending some time in Titus 2 may be helpful. How does Titus 2 begin? “But as for you [Pastor Titus], teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Teaching the content of “sound doctrine,” the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ as they are delineated in Titus 3:4–7, is necessary for every healthy church. But this sound doctrine, this gospel truth, must not be left hanging in some detached, ethereal form. It must be applied very practically to the daily lives of the members of the churches. So, Titus is charged by the apostle to teach “what accords with” sound doctrine. It is as if Paul is writing, “Show the believers what difference the gospel makes in their everyday lives. Help the believers live out the gospel ‘so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior’” (Titus 2:10). Then, Paul describes what the everyday life of Christians should look like in various life situations when fueled by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For the sake of this article, let’s start with grandfathers. What God-honoring, Christ-reflecting, gospel-fueled character traits should be evident in the lives of older men? Paul says that “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness” (Titus 2:2). Rather than children seeing the older men in the church as “grumpy old men,” ranting and raving about politics, the economy, the weather, they should grow up seeing the grandfathers in the church as faithful, joyful, gracious, loving servants of the Most High God. Why give them reasons to question the effectiveness of the gospel on everyday life? Older men, by God’s grace, let us give our grandchildren a living example of the effects of God’s gospel on our everyday lives.

What about grandmothers? Enabled by God’s grace, what kind of legacy can Christian grandmothers leave for the coming generations? Let’s look at Titus 2:3–4. “Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women.” Ladies, by God’s grace, leave a life legacy that is marked by a daily awareness of God and his amazing mercy to you. May your life be marked by gospel-shaped gratitude that affects not only your attitudes but also your words as you pour into the coming generations the supremacy of Christ in the daily life of your family.

Empowered by Grace

So, what empowers this growth of character in the lives of grandparents? Is it a matter of mere determination? “Just do it?” Let’s keep reading a bit longer in Titus 2. There’s a connecting word in verse 11 that adds hope and help in this pursuit of leaving a godly life legacy. Do you see it? It’s the word “for.” After painting pictures of what the everyday lives of ordinary Christians in various life situations should look like, the apostle Paul adds these encouraging words about God’s extraordinary gospel:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age (Titus 2:11-12).

Ordinary Christians can live extraordinary lives of godliness because they are empowered by God's extraordinary grace.

But, for grandparents to leave a contagious, godly impact on the coming generation, there needs to be intentional, meaningful time spent with the grandchildren. Though many grandparents in our culture are challenged with the hurdle of long-distance grandparenting, God in his mercy has let us live in an era in which we can have regular contact with our grandchildren even if they live far away. When we are with our grandchildren, personally or virtually, let us be intentional in letting them see the surpassing value of Christ in our lives. Are they hearing and seeing us live joyfully in a God-dependent, God-honoring way?

My fellow-grandparents, the way we live everyday life will leave a lasting impact on our grandchildren. That is what they will remember: not just our words, but the way we lived everyday life. That is what they will talk about at our funerals. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our adult grandchildren would say, "For my grandpa/grandma, to live was Christ and to die was gain"? Let's lean on the help of the Holy Spirit as we grandparents devote ourselves to continuing to grow in grace until that day when Christ calls us home. May our grandchildren see Christ in us, and may that leave a lasting impact on them.