

## The Role of Grandmothers and Grandfathers in the Family Elders' and Deacons' Meetings – Fall, 2011

**This is a topic that could be better handled by some of you veteran grandmothers and grandfathers rather than by a rookie like me. However, I will make a few comments for your consideration because I think that this role in our families is not insignificant.**

**With today's mobile workforce and fractured families, children are frequently the ones who suffer, although in the case of dysfunctional or broken homes everyone suffers. So often, hundreds or even thousands of miles separate grandparents and grandchildren. In these cases, it takes creativity and planning to maintain contact through the various methods of communication or by actually traveling to where they live or having them visit you. It is well worthwhile to make the effort to maintain communication. If at all possible, grandchildren should grow up having had the privilege of knowing their grandparents. The influence of grandma and grandpa is a relationship that can have lasting impressions upon grandchildren or even great grandchildren.**

**When we were young, we were so busy earning a living, striving for success in our chosen fields of endeavor, paying off a mortgage, raising a family and acquiring the necessities of life and likely quite a few things that were not necessities, that we had little time to cultivate relationships that we should have put much higher on the priority list. Now comes the time when all that was so important holds little relevance anymore – the workplace is history, pensions take the place of earning a living, the mortgage is paid, the family is grown and have children of their own and earthly treasures hold increasingly little attraction for us. What, then, has taken the place of all that we once held so dear. I submit to you that as we have grown older, family relationships have taken on new significance, not the least of which, is the arrival of grandchildren. They not only remind us of past experiences as we endeavored to raise our own children, but they also represent fulfillment and continuity of what began years earlier with the union of one man and one woman. The passing years have made us painfully aware of our mortality and in a sense they link us to the immortal as grandchildren carry on the family name and portray physical and character traits of their ancestry. This, of course, is looking at it to a great extent from the perspective of natural thinking.**

**When viewing our progeny from a more spiritual perspective, the scriptures give direction concerning the impact that grandparents can have on their grandchildren. One of those scriptures is found in Deut. 30:19, "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." As so often is the case, the choice that we make in our generation determines the direction of future generations. We choose life not only for ourselves but also for our seed (our children and those who follow).**

**Psalm 103 speaks of not forgetting all the benefits (vs. 1-5) we have in the Lord and that those benefits extend beyond ourselves to the generations that follow (v. 17). In spite of our frailty and mortality (vs. 14-16), God is merciful to them that fear**

(reverence) Him and His righteousness extends to our grandchildren. Let us have a look at those scriptures. What a heritage there is in Christ! It has often been said, "the best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." Similarly, the best thing we can do for our grandchildren is to show forth Christ by living a godly life and being a good example to them. Make no mistake about it; choosing the Christian life will have huge implications for good down through the generations.

I have been reading a book titled, "The Gift of Grandparenting" – Building meaningful Relationships with Your Grandchildren – by Eric Wiggin. This book is endorsed by Focus on the Family and is written from the Christian perspective. Some of the ideas expressed in this class are taken from that book and I will indicate when I am using a direct quotation. What I found particularly noteworthy were the principles that grandparents can adopt to help grandchildren build meaningful, productive lives motivated by love for God, for family and for others. There are five principles that Wiggin elaborates on and I have added a couple of my own. They are: the principle of acceptance, the principle of encouragement, the principle of security, the principle of self-control and the principle of creativity. I have added the principle of expectations and the principle of bonding. We will deal with each one separately.

1. **The Principle of Acceptance** – we all have something built in to us that desires acceptance. Grandchildren are no exception. Acceptance must be unconditional. Children must know they are accepted and loved and that there are no conditions attached to that. We can demonstrate acceptance in many small but powerful ways as we interact with our grandchildren. For example, they want you to be interested in what is happening in their lives at any given time. This can include numerous activities such as pieces of artwork from school, their report cards, their athletic endeavors, something they have written, something they built perhaps with Lego, a collection of something they are interested in or a board game they particularly like. Acceptance is not only showing an interest, but it is also being actively involved with them. This may mean playing a game with them or reading to them or taking them to the swimming pool or paddling pool or the skating rink. It is good for grandchildren to see the family doing things together, not the least of which is attending church together on Sunday morning. This is where they will learn, together with parental teaching, that Christ's love for and acceptance of them are unconditional, demonstrated by His sacrificial death for every man woman and child. Eph. 1: 6, "Now all praise to God for His wonderful kindness to us and His favor that He has poured out upon us, because we belong to His dearly loved Son" (LB). Christ's love and acceptance of us should extend through us to our family – our grandchildren.
2. **The Principle of Encouragement** – 1Thess. 5: 11, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (NI). Children model what they see adults do and repeat what they hear them say and this is especially true of their parents and grandparents. Positive attitudes result from being encouraged. We need it as adults and children need it even more. Words like, "I have confidence in you" or "I know you can do it" are motivational. The reverse is also true. Put downs and criticism will cause feelings of inferiority and hopelessness. The scripture in Eph. 6:3 warns parents to not ridicule or be unreasonably severe with their children. "And you fathers (parents), do not provoke (over-correct) your children to wrath

(causing them to be angry and resentful), but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (NKJ).

3. **The Principle of Expectations** – this is not taken from Wiggin’s book, it is my addition. Holding reasonable expectations of someone is closely related to encouraging him/her. I have found that children, students and employees for the most part try to meet the expectations of their parents, teachers and employers. If expectations are fuzzy or too low the result is lack of motivation or confusion. Achievement comes by working toward specific goals. For example, children need to be challenged to think beyond today; beyond candy and hamburgers and potato chips. Questions like, “What are you going to do with your life?” should come early from parents, grandparents and teachers. They need to start thinking about post secondary education and about the fact that their lives need to be productive. This isn’t to rob a child of his or her childhood. Again, it cannot be emphasized enough that children, for the most part, will emulate what they see and what they hear from the significant others in their lives (parents, grandparents, teachers, peers, family and friends). The expectations of these people, in particular, need to be positive rather than negative. Significant others should be excellent examples to children.
4. **The Principle of Bonding** – this, too, is my own thinking and maybe a bit hard to put into words. A bond is something that holds fast. It is a uniting force, that which cements, ties or attaches. The scripture that speaks of a man leaving father and mother and cleaving to his wife is a bonding like no other human relationship. It is so close that they become one flesh (Gen. 2: 24). So when there is bonding in other human relationships such as parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren, there is a love that flows, a tie that binds, a uniting force that strengthens and embraces the heart. It is more powerful than adverse circumstances and has more lasting value than anything the material could ever hope to offer. It is a relationship that gives and asks nothing in return and is motivated by unconditional love.
5. **The Principle of Security** – a child should always feel secure in your presence. A security that tells them that when they lay their head on their pillow at night, all is well in their world because someone is always there looking out for their welfare. Children should learn early in their lives that there is security demonstrated by mom and dad/grandma and grandpa that goes beyond human capabilities and is rooted in a deep faith in a loving God to provide for the needs of the family. Wiggin says, “The secure child will become an adult who can serve God, confident that he’ll not be left helpless. Parents and grandparents should provide a love so transparent that a child can never question it” (unquote). Their home should always be a place of security regardless of whether mom and dad or grandma and grandpa are in charge. Grandma is more than a dispenser of cookies and grandpa is more than a candy machine. This is where there is an assurance of a willing ear to listen and a heart that will understand.
6. **The Principle of self-control** – this principle is so easily violated by grandparents and here is why. We can dote (pamper or spoil) our grandchildren by permitting what their parents do not permit. This is why we should always know what the rules of the home are. If there is no candy before meals then there is no candy before meals, period. The rule is the same as if mom and dad were there. If bedtime is 8:30 then they begin getting ready at

about 8:15. If television is restricted to certain times and programs, then they do not get to watch everything they want whenever they want. What are the rules regarding computer use? What are the rules regarding going to the house of a friend? If they have money, what are the limits as to how that is spent? What disciplinary measures are acceptable to the parents? Don't do what the parents do not approve of. How often have I heard a grandparent say how wonderful it is to have the grandchildren for a while, spoil them and then give them back to their parents? How ridiculous! Who wants to spoil any child or undermine what the parents are trying to teach? Our job is to support mom and dad as they navigate the sometimes rough waters of parenthood. We will give advice when asked and we will try our best to resist volunteering our advice when it isn't sought. We want to be welcome guests in their home and we can accomplish this far better by being supportive rather than by treading on the toes of parental responsibilities and authority. Being critical will not endear you to either grandchildren or to their parents.

We must always remember that self-control and self-discipline are learned by having discipline imposed upon us. Correction is a blessing. Correction is love. "For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12: 6, NKJV). "For our fathers used to correct us according to their own ideas during the brief days of childhood. But God corrects us all our days for our own benefit, to teach us His holiness. Now obviously no 'chastening' seems pleasant at the time: it is in fact most unpleasant. Yet when it is all over we can see that it has quietly produced the fruit of real goodness in the characters of those who have accepted it in the right spirit" (Heb. 12: 10-12).

7. The Principle of Creativity – perhaps this principle is more inherited than acquired although I do think it can be nurtured through challenging children to excel, to be the best that they can be using their God-given abilities. Give them the tools that foster creativity when they are young (paper and pencil or crayons or water colors, building blocks or Lego, games that challenge the mind, musical instruments, books, planting seeds and watching them grow, competitive activities where they learn about winning and losing, a sandbox in which miniature construction projects can develop). Perhaps the least creative of all activities is watching television because they are simply entertained and passive observers. Oh yes, I know that some programs can be educational and some learning can take place, but I think far too often the TV becomes the baby-sitter. Children have inquiring and imaginative minds – nurture that spirit of creativity in them so that when they become adults they will dare, as Robert Frost said, "to take the road less travelled by." You see the road that is less travelled is the straight and narrow way and few there be that find it. It takes courage to travel this road for it is the way of obstacles, of criticism, and of persecution, but it is also the way of life. Our children and grandchildren need to be rooted and grounded in Christian values and Christian principles. They need to learn to be led by the Spirit, who in His wisdom may lead in unorthodox ways. God, the Creator, is creative by his very nature. If you doubt this, just take a long look at the variety He has built into the creation that we are privileged to see with our eyes. He has blessed us with qualities of creativity that, if used under His guidance and direction, will be useful in the kingdom that He is building. Wiggan says, "Let you grandchildren

climb trees. Challenge them to excel in whatever field they enter. But tailor the tasks you give them to reasonable limits of their abilities. 'Train up a child,' said Solomon. Note the direction. Plants and people naturally, by creation, grow upward. Neither should be constantly beaten down, though both need pruning and direction."

In the latter part of this class, I would like to concentrate on a few aspects of this topic that are partly personal experiences and partly that which I have gleaned from the experiences of others.

Giving gifts is always a difficult minefield in which to maneuver. Children these days seem to have so much showered upon them that one hardly knows what they would treasure or appreciate. We can't buy their love, but we may be able to win their love. Have you ever noticed that a child will ignore the expensive toys in his/her toy box and proceed to have a lot of fun with a cardboard box, pushing it around, climbing in and out of it, peeking through a hole for a different view of the people in the room or giving the dog or cat a ride in it. The box has become an object of his/her creativity. Perhaps the best gift you can give them is yourself – your time, your interest in their lives and in what they are doing. There is the story of a particular grandmother who became exasperated with the fact that her grandchildren never bothered to acknowledge her gifts to them. So, she decided that next Christmas she would send them unsigned cheques. It worked perfectly. Not only were they quick to come for her signature, but it also resulted in a visit from each of them. Now, in my opinion, this lack of gratitude says as much about the parents as it does about the grandchildren. Children need to be taught. Appreciation does not happen by osmosis.

Have you ever noticed that the memories you have of your parents or grandparents is likely some act of sacrificial love or knowing just what to do at a particular time. For example, the gift I remember best from my parents was a bank in the form of a little porcelain dog. I remember opening it and setting it aside. Not long after my mother said, "Why don't you look inside?" There to my amazement was a nice crisp \$100 dollar bill. Why do I remember this? For two reasons: (1) About that time in my life, I really could put that money to good use. In 1960 you worked a half a month for \$100. (2) I knew this gift was a tremendous sacrifice for my parents who were far from rich. We remember thoughtfulness and kindness more than we remember the many material things we received over the years. Love is a verb. We demonstrate love by the thoughtful things we do.

One Christmas my father remembered my three children with a card, a poem and a five-dollar bill for each of them. I remember the poem he wrote to Trevor and this is what it said:

In your hockey do your stuff,  
Two goals aren't good enough.  
For a hat trick you must strive,  
Then you'll get another five.

Let us analyze these four short lines: (1) he remembered his grandson, (2) it took time and effort to put those four lines together, (3) he recognized that hockey was important to Trevor, (4) he encouraged him to excel, (5) if he did well he would be

rewarded. My dad didn't live long enough to fulfill his promise to his grandson, but the day came when Trevor got his hat trick and his father fulfilled the promise. What a nice memory of thoughtfulness and of taking the time to remember a little boy nine years of age. This is the same man who on cold winter nights would somehow start the vehicle without the aid of a block heater and drive me 15 miles to town for a hockey practice or a hockey game. These are acts of kindness that you don't forget.

Let us spend a few moments on things money can't buy. I will list a few for you.

- (1) Excited laughter of children at Christmas time or at a birthday party.
- (2) The response of a grandchild catching his/her first fish.
- (3) The thrill of learning to ride a bicycle. Here is what I wrote when one of the boys was learning to ride.

Learning to Ride a Bicycle  
Falling, crashing, bruises, tears,  
Insecurity, frustration,  
Silent fears.

Riding a Bicycle  
Freedom, accomplishment,  
Pride, smiles,  
Confidence, contentment,  
Easy miles

- (4) A grandchild falling asleep in your arms.
- (5) Waiting in expectation for grandma and grandpa to arrive at their home and the hugs that follow.
- (6) To hear the words, "I love you grandma" or "I love you grandpa" without being coached.
- (7) Going to the coffee shop and buying their favorite drinks. Then giving a taste of coffee to our eight-year old granddaughter who responds with, "I love coffee."
- (8) To witness them giving their heart to the Lord and the spiritual experiences that follow.
- (9) Obviously the list is endless and all of you could add many more examples.

Here are a few ideas for immortalizing yourself. Maybe that sort of thinking is too carnal and therefore should not even be mentioned in the context of this topic. However, if we are honest with ourselves, I think we all have treasures that have been handed down to us that have very little material value, but great nostalgic significance. My father's violin is displayed in our home at the present time and will eventually find its resting place in the home of our eldest son. I never look at it without the fond memory of my father's ability to bring beautiful music out of those strings. Is it too materialistic or sentimental to treasure these things? I don't think so. "When the one you loved becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure." It isn't so difficult to leave a memory that links you to your children or your grandchildren long after you are gone. The money you leave will eventually be spent, but whatever you leave that is unique to you will be treasured. Here are some examples: a carving, a painting, a piece of needlework, a poem, a piece of jewelry, or

**an heirloom. However, let us never forget that the best heritage that we can leave to our children and grandchildren is a heritage of Christian values and principles.**

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