

Giving the Blessing to Your Older Children

An excerpt from

The Gift of The Blessing

By Dr. John Trent and Gary Smalley

When our children were young, Norma and I (Gary) made a commitment to give our children the blessing. We knew that simple acts of unconditional love could make a major difference in their lives. We have seen the fruits of the blessing by watching them mature, leave home, and increase their desire to enrich the lives of others. *But what I never realized, or ever dreamed, was how powerful-and how necessary-the blessing would become to my older children.*

Kari, Greg, and Michael have now grown up and left the house, Kari and Greg to spouses and homes of their own, and Michael to college at an out-of-state school. Our home is much quieter, but not empty. Their laughter, voices, pictures and love still echo from each wall in our house. And what's more, instead of their growing out of their need for our blessing, they've grown to appreciate it even more. So if you have older children who have moved away from home, they're never out-of-reach of the blessing you can continue to give them. Here are eight important ways you can bless your children to show them your love and appreciation for who they have become as adults.

Older Children Fall Back on Our Praise

While we've spoken at length about the need to verbally praise our younger children, I've seen with my own grown children how important affirmation continues to be. In fact, as the decisions they make become more serious, and the trials they face become more real, praise is a tremendous source of security and strength for them. Children of all ages have an "affirmation bank," that requires constant deposits. When we do verbalize our love, we continue to give them a foundation that operates apart from any trying circumstances they might face.

Recently, I saw two examples of how important words of praise are for older children. First, I met a bright, energetic young woman in her early twenties who, already, is building an outstanding career. She is poised, confident, and always wears a smile. And that's someone who only gets paid commission sales in a highly competitive field, and who faces rejection every work day of the week! What keeps her going as she faces so many closed doors? What is the main thing she credits for her top honors as a sales rep?

"Without a doubt, it's my parents," she told me.

"I deal with rejection from people every day, but I've never gotten anything but acceptance from my parents. For example, I can't think of a single time when I've been alone with my father-and I mean since I was a child-that he didn't verbally affirm me about something. Let me tell you, there are a lot of days that I draw on his praise,

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and it keeps me going.” Now as an adult, facing criticism and stiff competition, her parents’ words of praise for who she is, and what she does, are like a lighthouse on a stormy night.

The second example of the power of praise came from my son, Greg. In fact, he taught me a lesson I’ll never forget about this important aspect of the blessing. Last May, Greg married a wonderful young woman named Erin. After their honeymoon, Norma and I had the privilege of traveling a good part of the summer with them before they headed to graduate school and their new home in Colorado. In my own life, I’m always looking for ways to strengthen my marriage and parenting skills. Perhaps that’s why, without realizing it, I began pointing out things that I noticed in Greg’s interaction with his new bride.

If he did something I felt was somewhat insensitive, or not completely loving, I found myself taking up Erin’s defense. Without meaning to, I made him feel uncomfortable around me, even defensive. I had no idea how deeply this affected Greg until one night after we’d been traveling for almost four weeks. My son pulled me aside when Norma and Erin were out of the room and we had a “son-to-father” talk.

“Dad,” he said, in a serious tone. “I need to have a talk with you.”

He outlined his feelings and concerns in a very loving way. But sandwiched in between his words of appreciation for me, was the clear message that my “helpful” pointers were being taken as criticism of him as a brand new husband.

As we talked, Greg reminded me of a crucial lesson. “Dad,” he told me. “I’m not perfect, but I’m *trying*. This is all new to me. Do you think that for the first year or so, instead of concentrating on the negative things I’m doing, you could praise me for what you see me doing correctly? I think that would help me a lot more than what you’re doing now.”

Greg’s words made an immediate impact on me. He gave me a reminder that praise is one of the most positive reinforcing tools God has given us as parents! Since that conversation, Greg hasn’t had to come to me one time about my “help.” But what he has heard from me is consistent encouragement and praise for the many things he is doing right.

Look for anything your children are doing, saying, acting, or experiencing that you believe is valuable and healthy for them, and that honors God and others. Like the fourth chapter of the Philippians says, “Whatever is honorable,” these are the things we should think on, and praise in our children.

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Remember that even the smallest act of praise can be an encouragement to our children. Michael, our youngest, has even expressed how he appreciates seeing bumper stickers on our cars that read, "Our son and our money go to Baylor University!" I have two other smaller Baylor logos stuck on my car windows as well. Small thing, but to him they say, "I'm proud of you, I'm proud of your college and of the way you're working so hard at school."

Without question, praise inhabits the best of homes. And as our children grow older, their need for our affirmation becomes even greater, not less.

Older Children Need A Written Record of Our Words

Written words become a lifelong legacy for a child to keep. In a letter, you can express your pride in them, or share what you're learning from Scriptures, or what you're doing that fills them in on your life. Whether they're waiting in the mail-line in the military, reaching into their mailbox at school, or thumbing through their letters in their own home or apartment, written words of blessing from a parent are incredibly powerful. How powerful? John was involved in a wedding several years ago where a young woman graphically demonstrated the power of written words. At some reception dinners, words of love and blessings are easily spoken from both sets of parents. But in Angie's case, her father was a very quiet, extremely shy person. He did manage to stand up and share briefly-and nervously-how much he approved of the marriage. But then his daughter did something that expressed his love better than any speech he could have given.

Without his realizing it, since she was a young child, she had kept every card and note he had ever written her. Somewhat awkward with his spoken words, he eloquently expressed his love for her through written words. And she treasured and kept every one. Even recent letters that expressed how proud he was of her, and how much he looked forward to her marriage.

In front of the entire crowd (whose eyes were all filled with tears) she had her dad come up and stand beside her as she talked about how much he loved her; how meaningful his support had been over the years. And his love for her was all recorded in written blessings, captured in the several thick scrapbooks she had brought to the dinner.

With the kids out of the house, do you find yourself with a little more time? Then why not take some of that extra time and put your blessing for your children into written words. Even if they don't keep every card of letter you write in an album, they'll keep your words of love in their hearts forever. Often, our written words of love become

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priceless treasures when we're gone—a paper trail of love! A written memorial to our blessing to them.

If you're reading this chapter as a son or daughter, let me tell you how this same principle can be a tremendous encouragement to your parents. For years, I've greatly appreciated my daughter, Kari's, thoughtfulness in leaving Norma and me little notes around the house. Sometimes on a door, sometimes on the sink or refrigerator we'll find the words, "Mom and Dad, I was just thinking about you and wanted you to know how much I love you and look forward to the fun times we'll have in the future!" In many ways, Kari has taught the rest of us the power of written words of encouragement.

We Bless Older Children by Helping Drain Anger Out of Their Lives

I began my book *The Key to Your Child's Heart* by stating that the single most important factor in maintaining harmony in any home is to resolve anger as soon as possible. Even today, the single greatest problem I observe in homes across the world is the epidemic of broken relationships, most destroyed by unchecked, unresolved anger.

Too many people are simply not aware of how much damage anger heaps on any family or friendship. I label this unresolved anger as "closing a person's spirit." The more a family member "closes the spirit" of another, the greater the disharmony and distance in the relationship, and the less interest in spiritual things you'll see. Prolonged anger can lead to depression, ulcers, or high blood pressure. These are just a few of the emotional and physical problems that can accompany anger!

Most of us can recognize a closed spirit in another family member. They usually won't talk with us openly or cheerfully, and they dislike our reaching out to hug or touch them. They tend to argue more, and we can sense their subtle (or obvious) avoidance of us. With older children who have a great deal of anger, they may move away at the earliest opportunity, or even deliberately choose any path to take, except the one we've pointed them towards.

For anyone serious about reducing family friction, blessing older children, and dealing with anger in a healthy way, here are five brief, practical suggestions on opening another person's closed spirit. For greater detail, see *The Key to Your Child's Heart. Five Steps to Reopen a Child's Spirit*. Years ago, I disciplined my son Greg in anger after he was screaming while I was on the telephone. Without finding out the reason why he was yelling, I spanked him and watched his little spirit "close" towards me. When I realized what I'd done, I applied the five principles (not steps) I'll share with you, and

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in a matter of minutes I witnessed his spirit reopen.

Today, almost twenty years later, I *still* use these same principles if I see I've done something to put anger in Greg's heart. What's more, I've even used these guidelines to help him deal with the anger others may have placed there over the years.

1. **Become tenderhearted.**

The first step that I needed to take to open Greg's spirit was to reflect tenderness and softness in my words. "A soft word turns away anger," the proverb says, and gentleness has a way of melting anger.

We communicate several things to the person whom we have offended when we soften our tone. First it says, "You're valuable and important." Second, it shows that we are willing to slow down long enough to correct what has happened. Finally, by adopting gentleness, we communicate that we are open to listen, that is safe for him or her to share what has happened, and that we don't want anyone to maintain a "closed spirit" in our home.

2. **Increase understanding.**

The second step to open a person's spirit is to increase our understanding of the pain he or she feels. As Greg has grown older, when I have stopped to listen and softly ask Greg why he was hurting, I've found his resistance to talking begin to drain away. As my spirit became even softer, I had deeper understanding and could feel his pain. Many times just these two factor-being soft and then understanding a person's pain-will open a person's spirit.

This is particularly important as children get older. The gift of listening with understanding to an older child is often all they need to make the connection between what they're hurt or frustrated about, and dealing with that hurt in a positive way.

Avoiding lectures and increasing careful, honoring listening can be very helpful for a child of any age.

3. **Recognize the offense.**

The third step to opening a person's spirit is admitting that we were wrong. One of the hardest things for many parents to do is admit when they are wrong. I find it is especially hard for fathers. I do not necessarily like to find out

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when I am wrong, and it's not always easy to admit when I am. But I must remember that a hardened, resistant attitude is extremely detrimental to children.

One of my favorite Christian camps is Kamp Kanakuk, in beautiful Branson, Missouri. Jim Brawner was for years one of the directors of the camp (now our National Homes of Honor Director!), and one summer, he made an incredible discovery.

He asked each of the several thousand teenagers who came to camp during the summer, "What is the one thing you wish your parents would do more often?" The answer wasn't, "Say, 'I love you,'" more often, or even, "Spend more time with me." They didn't even say, "Send more money!" The overwhelming number of teenagers said the very same thing: *"I wish my mother and father would admit when they're wrong."*

There is tremendous bonding power when we become strong enough to admit our mistakes to our children. While some children may use our apology as ammunition to shoot back at us, most will be moved to a level of closeness-and a freedom from anger-that would shock you.

Softness, listening, and admitting we're wrong. These three factors are crucial, but there are two more actions that are equally important to making sure the spirit has reopened.

4. Attempt to touch.

The fourth factor is attempting to touch the offended person. Why? First of all, he needs to be touched. If he reaches out and responds to our touching, then we know his spirit is opening or the anger is draining out. This is an extremely important time to take his hand, put an arm around him, or otherwise touch him in a meaningful way. Even with an older child, that touch lets him know that we care, that we love him, and that he is very important.

Second, touching often allows us to find out if the child's spirit is *not* opening. If my child pulls back or moves away when I try to touch her, it is commonly an indication that she isn't ready to open her spirit. She may need more time or greater understanding from the one who offended her.

For all the reasons we listed in the chapter on meaningful touch, we encourage you to practice appropriate hugs, handshakes and kisses with your older children.

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5. And finally, seek forgiveness when warranted.

The final step we need to take is to seek forgiveness from the one we offended. When we have offended someone, we must not only be willing to admit we're wrong, but also to give that child a chance to respond. For me, the best way is to say something like, "Could you find it in your heart to forgive me?" When Greg was young, this is when I knew I had reopened Greg's spirit, for when I asked for his forgiveness, he would rush into my arms.

Once they're talking to us again, allowing us to hug them and speaking to us in honoring tones, we can say at this point that true restoration and forgiveness has been gained. And usually, most of the anger is gone.

Praising our older children; leaving them a written legacy of our love for them; and helping to drain anger out of their life. All three are powerful ways of giving the blessing. And a fourth way is equally powerful.

Give Them the Inheritance of a Good Name

Not everyone can leave a \$100,000 inheritance to their children, even if they want to. I remember when Norma and I were first married; her father took us out to dinner and told us we were going to receive a \$100,000+ inheritance very soon. In our minds, that very night we began to spend that inheritance in one hundred different ways! Thank the Lord, we never actually went out and bought things based on his words, because the economy went into a deep slump. Her father lost all the money he had verbally promised (and far more) nearly overnight.

So, while not everyone can leave a monetary inheritance to their child, and we shouldn't always count on that kind of inheritance anyway, every one of us can leave our children the inheritance of a good name.

In Proverbs, we're told that a "good name" is better than jewels. It's a priceless gift that we can pass down to our children, and they can pass down to their children in turn. Our name is something that, no matter what, we will pass down to our kids, and it can either be a blessing to them, or a curse.

Take Darwin Smith, and his son, Darwin, Jr. While this is an extreme example, it illustrates the importance of looking ahead two, and even three generations, on the impact we have on future family members. Darwin, Sr. came from an abusive home, and the home he made for his son was incredibly unstable. He was fired from over a

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dozen jobs all because every boss he had was terrible. But what his instability led him to do one winter day was even more terrible still.

After being dismissed from yet another job, Darwin, Sr., took a rifle, a handgun, and pockets full of ammunition and killed four people at his former plant, and then killed himself as the police moved in. His father left a name to remember all right, only Darwin, Jr. had to carry it as well. Every day at school, and every time his name was spoken in their small community, the name his father left him became a curse, not a blessing.

How different when we see a person whose parents have God and spent a lifetime helping others. The name these people have leaves a sweet fragrance for those who hear it and a powerful blessing to the children and grandchildren who carry it. How is your character today? From truthfulness, to consistency, to Christ-likeness, we need to leave our older children a name they can be proud of, not ashamed of.

We Bless Our Older Children by Taking Care of Our Own Health

While it may sound unimportant, one of the most important ways we can bless our older children is to maintain our own physical, mental, and spiritual health! When we pay attention to what we eat, the vitamins, and the prescriptions we take, and even exercise regularly, it's bound to help us live longer. And in my case, hopefully, it's extending my ability to be around to bless my children and their children even longer.

In my family, my father died of a massive heart attack at the age of fifty-eight. My oldest brother had a similar heart attack at age fifty-one and has had by-pass surgery since then. My next oldest brother died of a heart attack at age fifty-one. I have the same genetic tendencies that the other Smalley men do and have had for generations-high cholesterol.

Yet instead of my health becoming a cloud that my children have to worry about, I've done all I can to maintain a healthy life-style. Through the help of my doctors, diets, and regular exercise, I've seen my cholesterol move to a level below even the average risk factor.

For almost twenty years, I've vigorously exercised a half-hour each day- walking, tread-milling, stair climbing, bicycling, and occasionally jogging. And there's a reason. Whether we realize it or not, our children do worry about our health as we get older, even at times, more than we do. That's why actively taking care of ourselves not only blesses us physically-it's a way of giving our children the blessing as well.

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Recently, I just went through a procedure, angioplasty, where a camera was literally inserted into my heart arteries, allowing a doctor to see if the Smalley “curse” of high cholesterol had caused any heart damage. The result? To my amazement, and the doctors’, all the efforts and prayers I’ve made over the years seemed to pay off one hundredfold. I was told by the doctor when I finally awoke from the procedure, “Smalley, get out of here and go home! You’ve got a ‘baby’ heart, it looks so good. Yours is the best looking heart I’ll see in here all year.”

Many supportive friends celebrated with me about how positive my health has become, but none celebrated as much as my own spouse and children. Our daughter, Kari, called me in the hospital and said, “Dad, call me the minute you get out of the operation room and tell me everything’s okay. Because if it isn’t, I’m jumping on a plane and coming out right now!” It’s natural for our children to worry about us. However, they’ve seen me take an active role in doing all I can, not to become a burden on them through ill-health, and to avoid being any kind of burden to them for years to come.

While the previous five blessings for our children involve who they are in their relationships, this sixth blessing can become a tremendous, personal help to them.

Teach Them Financial Responsibility

When our children were young, we were responsible for them financially. But in the years that follow, we need to teach them financial independence and responsibility. There is a tremendous temptation to try and rush in and provide financial help, resources, or even luxuries that a grown child needs. However, at times, this can lead to over-controlling, and even short-circuiting the learning process when it comes to being financially responsible. Rather, like Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart stores, we need to help our children see the value of hard work, savings, and thrift. Norma and I see each of our children learning to work hard and plan financially for themselves and their own families. We’ve tried to instill within them an understanding of three important financial guidelines:

1. What do they believe God wants them to do in serving other people? The highest calling for each of us is serving people in love.
2. Once they decided on what area of serving others is best for them, anything from medicine to selling a helpful service, they then need to commit to gain the best knowledge and practical skills possible to become an expert in that field.
3. They must continually practice and increase their skills in their chosen area of service.

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I've watched God honor and reward people all over our world who have held to these three guidelines. You'll notice that the focus isn't on money. It's on serving others with an expertise that leads to their efforts being recognized and rewarded. My children know that they can't depend on others to take care of them forever. They have to find their own plan for satisfying service, knowing that "the greatest among you is the servant of all."

Avoid Over-Controlling

As we've visited Michael, our youngest son, at college, he's mentioned many times a major problem of parenting-and blessing-older children. Namely, well-meaning children can find themselves with a parent who is far too controlling for their good. Mike has actually told us that instead of these parents being appreciated by their children, they look at them as actually withholding the blessing from them. One example he gave was of a junior in college who still has to call her mother every time she plans to do anything significant, either in-town or out-of-town. Instead of communicating concern, this checking-in has become a control device that her mother uses to live her own life through her daughter.

When our children are young, it's important that we remain in control as their parents. But as they grow older, there's a balance that must come into play. Namely, that we lead them by example and love, encourage them always, and support them with a listening ear or personal counsel-but not control. Rather, we should bless our children out of a desire that they take *positive control* of their own lives as they grow older.

Give Your Children the Chance to Return the Blessing to You

For me, it's easier to give a gift than to receive it. But as I've learned over the years, it's important that the blessing become a two-way street. While we need to travel the road first and give our children the blessing in every way, they also need to be able to express their blessing back to you.

Without question, one of the greatest rewards of giving your children the blessing is having them grow up one day and return it to you. That's what happened to me a few years ago, when I received something incredibly meaningful from my son. While it might not catch your eye, if you were to walk into my (Gary's) office, you'd see something hanging on my wall that's priceless. It's not an oil painting, or a bronze sculpture. It's a small plaque that my son Greg created and gave me that carries a picture of the two of us, a father's day card, and his words of blessing returned to me.

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All of us have tough, discouraging days at times. But not everyone has the words of love and appreciation I have hanging behind me. Words of blessing returned to me from my oldest son, Greg, that brighten the darkest day. The Father's Day card that I can't read without mist gathering in my eyes says,

This Is for You

*This is for you, Dad, for the father I love.
For the one who has cared all these years, but has never heard enough about how much I care. So this is for you.
For the one who has helped me through all my childhood fears and failures and turned all that he could into successes and dreams.
For the man who is a wonderful example of what more men should be.
For the person whose devotion to his family is marked by gentle strength and guidance and whose love of life, sense of direction, and down to earth wisdom, make more sense to me now, than nearly any other thing I learned.
If you never knew how much I respected you, I want you to know it now, Dad.
And if you never knew how much I admire you, let me just say that I think you're the best father that any child ever had.
This is a card filled with love, and it's all for you . . . Dad.*

And then added to Adrian Rodgers' beautiful poem are my own son's words of blessing.

"Father, my wish and prayer on this special day, is that we can share another fifty years of friendship together. To the molder of my dreams, yet still, to my best friend. I love you." Gregory T.

Greg's words are precious to me because they come out of a commitment Norma and I made years ago to provide our children with the blessing. We've looked at it as our gift to give our children to help them have a wonderful, meaningful life. But it is so humbling and encouraging when they return the blessing to us, it can make our hearts want to burst.

While I've spoken and given Greg numerous examples of my love and commitment (and Kari and Michael as well), I need to be able to receive the blessing from them, too. Not look for it. Demand it. Or pout if we don't get it. But be open to receiving it should they complete the loop by blessing us as well.

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Eight Ways to Bless Your Older Child

- *Praise*
- *Written words of blessing*
- *Drain anger from their lives*
- *Leave a positive inheritance*
- *Teach financial responsibility*
- *Take care of your own health*
- *Avoid being over-controlling*
- *Let your children return the blessing to you*

While the applications of the blessings may change when they're older, their hearts don't change. Even grown children are waiting for words of love to be spoken and heard.