

A GUIDEBOOK TO ETHICAL WILLS AND LEGACY LETTERS

How to speak a meaningful blessing to your family.

Introduction

Thank you for inviting us to help you engage in a very sacred effort.

It's our belief that, for whatever else we do to serve, support, and provide for our families and loved ones, at the end of the day the most critical things we can offer are our prayers (or if you prefer, our wishes and blessings) and our testimonies (the stories of our hearts).

Those blessings and stories outlive us, shaping the people whose hearts treasure what we offer, and form the core of what passes down through our family lines.

A favorite scripture verse of ours is Proverbs 13:22. "A good person leaves an inheritance to their children's children."

Certainly, an inheritance can include financial elements, but that's not the focus of that verse, nor is it the focus of an ethical will (also called a legacy letter). Instead, the focus has to do with a deeper inheritance. The gift has to do with naming strengths, extending permission, offering and asking forgiveness, releasing loved ones from lies or false beliefs, and pointing out the path your love would most delight to see them travel.

The inheritance you leave must be an open-handed offering. A wish. A hope. An invitation. A lingering prayer. Something to travel with your family lightly, and light their way as they go.

It is the last refrain of the song you hope they'll carry with them as they carry their love and longing for you once you're gone. It's not ordinary work. And it is most definitely sacred. May you be blessed in your efforts.

Again, thank you for allowing us to be a part of what you're setting out to accomplish.

~ The Centurion Response Team

What is an Ethical Will?

Although most people probably aren't familiar with the term "Ethical Will," the tradition dates back thousands of years. Bible readers will recognize the concept in the deathbed blessings from Isaac and Jacob, among others.

Ethical Wills, also known as Legacy Letters, are not legally-binding documents, nor do they give instructions regarding your estate. They are for people of any age who are thinking about how to speak a meaningful blessing to people they love after they're gone.

Death is a part of life, and it is certainly an important part of life in relationship with our families. While the topic can feel macabre, we feel it is far more tragic to leave without saying goodbye.

It's no small task to communicate when there is nothing left to change, nothing left to discuss, nothing left to forgive.

The people hearing your words will be somewhere in the process of grieving your absence, and the task is to give them words to hang onto as they move forward.

This moment looms large in the imaginations of people facing end of life realities. But ethical letters are for people who, for any reason, are ready to think about what needs to be said in their relationships, and who want to make sure those things get spoken.

**Creating an ethical will
does NOT mean you're
giving up or giving in.**

It means you're ready to look at all of your life for the sake of offering a blessing upon the lives of others.

When to Create an Ethical Will

We are hardwired with a desire to be known, to belong, to be remembered, to make a difference, and to recognize the gifts of this life. But for most of us, most of the time, admitting that hardwiring feels embarrassingly melodramatic, so we ignore it.

More than being prepared to offer a gift to your family upon your demise, the practice of writing an ethical will helps many people think about the relationships they have with their family members. It helps them notice what they love and hope for, and it helps them be more intentional about the way they express their love while they're still around.

The “right time” depends on you, and at what point the importance of steering your family story outweighs the distractions that fill all of our ordinary days.

A few smart moments to consider creating an ethical will:

- For **betrothed couples**, to build a foundation of understanding of one another's values.
- **New and expectant parents**, to create framework of shared values regarding child rearing and you'll guide children toward.
- For **families going through a divorce**, to provide reassurance for children involved by reminding them what is important to their parents.
- **Growing families**, to talk to their children about values and what is uniquely important to their family.
- **Empty nesters**, to engage adult children by establishing and discussing common family values.
- **Mid-life**, to convert life experiences into wisdom to share with future generations.
- For **grandparents**, as a natural and warm complement to whatever other blessings you've preserved for young people who'll be shaped by your example.

Having some version of an ethical will in your files makes sense the same way a traditional will or life insurance does.

Overcoming Obstacles to Writing an Ethical Will

Any meaningful endeavor will be met with resistance. Below are some of the most common reasons we hear, and how we encourage people through them.

“I’m not special.”

The blessing you offer is not about you; it is about all of you. You are offering a gift, not testing loyalty or credibility. You are offering peace and blessing to strengthen your family to endure the tests of time, grief, and their return to ordinary days.

“My past disqualifies me.”

Your legacy letter is not a victory march. It is a slow and humble kiss offered not from what you’ve done, but who you’ve ended up becoming.

“I don’t want to sound lofty or preachy.”

If you speak from your heart, people will receive your gift with grace, even if you don’t have similar beliefs. An ethical will is not a mandate. It’s a gift, offered with open hands, to be received when and how your loved ones are ready for it.

“My family doesn’t express things like that.”

Everyone wants to know they are loved and cherished. Frankly, the more out of the ordinary the gesture feels, the more healing and impactful it tends to be.

“I’m too busy.”

Indeed. Whatever you offer is a gift, not an obligation. A simple nugget of wisdom, expression of love, or paragraph of gratitude has the power to heal, connect, and positively impact your family members and future generations.

You’re reading this because you want to do the work, or because someone you love asked you to. Commit to it, or [contact us](#) and we’ll help you accomplish your objective.

Part 1: Defining Your Objectives

As you begin, remember:

1. You will not get this wrong. Anything you offer in love will be right.
2. Share from your heart rather than your habits. All is at peace.

1. Name your audience. What are the names of the most important individuals to whom you're writing? (We suggest you create a single letter for your entire circle of loved ones first, and then create variations or additional content for groups or individuals. Even if you stop at a single letter, writing their names out here will help you think about what you want to say.)

2. Where do you envision your loved ones reading or hearing your letter? (Are you writing for a group setting, a quiet moment of consolation, a guiding reminder or dose of encouragement? This will influence your tone of voice, and possibly your delivery instructions.)

3. Who will be the most receptive to what you share, or the most likely to treasure it?

4. What does your most receptive audience most need to hear from you? (Think beyond the season of grief and into what positive sentiments they'll rely on or return to. Think, also, about what sorts of affirmation they've never been able to get enough of; what you share here will be your final words on the subject. What do you appreciate about them that they may never have heard from you or thought they needed to hear at all? What will they miss hearing from you if you forget?)

5. Who will be the least receptive to what you share, or the least ready to hear it? (This could be strained relationships, relationships where you have struggled to “click,” people you offend or with whom you don't quite see eye to eye, people who are too young to really know you, or people – like employees, perhaps – who may have ever only known you as you play a role.)

6. What does your least receptive audience most need to hear from you? (Think beyond the season of grief and into what positive sentiments they'll rely on or return to. Think, also, about what sorts of affirmation they've never been able to get enough of; what you share here will be your final words on the subject. What do you appreciate about them that they may never have heard from you or thought they needed to hear at all? What will they miss hearing from you if you forget?)

7. What do you want your audience to feel? (What you're creating is a gift. How should it feel to unwrap it? What you're creating is a packaged conversation. What should it feel like to have you show up and spend some time with the person/people with whom you're conversing?)

8. Pause. Close your eyes for a few seconds and then write down what you're feeling right now. What wants to come out?

If you can, stop here for the day.

1. This is sacred work. It is a bonus gift for people who already love you and whose grief will be an expression of that love. Celebrate that.
2. Very, very few people muster the courage to do what you're doing. This is an expression of your life and the way you love people.

Well done.

Part 2: Engaging Your Life's Big Picture

You are creating a gift that people will carry with them:

1. Review your previous responses. Adjust them as necessary.
2. Remind yourself that this effort is a celebration of life and love.

The goal in this section is to zoom out from your present situation to consider yourself, and your life, in broader terms. An ethical will is not a record of your life's story, but it is an expression from your whole life. You are more than today's snapshot, as are your legacy and the memories your loved ones will carry forward.

Try to move quickly through the questions that follow. Their purpose is to remind you of a broader context, to jog your memory, and to position your emotions in a way that you can offer wisdom and blessings from the fullness of who you are and what you've lived. Keep your answers brief, non-exhaustive, and top of mind. (Or do it however feels right to you.)

1. My dad's name:

2. My mom's name:

3. How my first tooth came out:

4. The color of my first bike:

5. The first person I kissed:

6. My worst childhood fear:

7. My favorite recurring dream:

8. A memory I wish could last forever:

9. If I'd had a slogan as a teenager:

10. Spring smells like:

11. The craziest thing I've ever seen:

12. The strongest thing I've ever done:

13. The most important word:

14. The sweetest sound:

15. My family thinks I'm:

16. I think I'm:

17. What I like most about how I'm made:

18. The spiciest food I've ever eaten:

19. The coldest I've ever been:

20. The idea that shapes the world:

21. The hardest I've ever laughed:

22. The best thing to be called:

23. The time I was most wrong:

24. The time I was most right:

25. The best invention ever:

26. My family's most precious virtue:

27. Grief is:

28. My favorite joke:

Pause. Close your eyes for a few seconds and then write down what you're feeling right now. What wants to come out?

What do you notice about your life – themes, feelings, typical responses, how you’ve felt about the world, or how you’ve seen it respond to you? (It’s okay if nothing stands out. What we’re listening for are clues for the basis from which you will offer your most honest and authentic blessings. Those blessings come from within the context of your lived story.)

What about questions you’ve always lived with, or lived as though you were trying to answer? (Life questions often have to do with big ideas and big needs. Things like belonging, healing, protecting, trusting, faith, longing, grief, fear, mystery, loneliness, shame, doubt, meaning, etc.)

What do you think about those questions now?

If you can, stop here for the day.

1. You've just skimmed through your life, inviting a variety of memories to the surface. If you have the patience, see what they inspire.
2. Your life has been a gift. All of it. Especially this phase. May the sweet carry the bitter, and may you enjoy peace and a few deep breaths.

Well done.

Part 3: Owning Your Place to Bless

Your audience loves you and will receive your gift well:

1. You do not need to force anything.
2. You only need to find an authentic posture from which to love.

Imagine the President stepping up to the podium to speak. The person needs to carry a certain posture and presence to deliver their message in a “presidential” manner. Compare that posture and demeanor to what you’d expect from a nurse or a counselor. Compare that to the posture you’d expect from an intimate friend whose shoulder you knew you could cry upon. Compare that to how you might imagine your father or mother speaking to you right now. The purpose of this section is to help you define the posture and presence that’s right for you and for the people who are going to receive your blessing.

1. Who are you to your audience? (Try to move beyond names and titles into attributes. E.g. the strong one, the funny one, the cheerleader, the quiet one, the translator, the protector, the servant.)

2. What does your audience tend to look to you to provide? (These answers may sound a lot like the last ones, but see if you can find subtle differences or extra layers.)

3. Which version of you will your audience need in the short term? Is that version different in the long term? (Imagine where you envision the letter being read, and how you want to show up for your loved ones in that/those setting(s).)

4. What authority do you have to offer a blessing? (Sometimes it's easier to name roles, titles, virtues, or other objective sources of credibility than it is to risk being our own credibility.)

5. In your life, who has played the role or held the authority you're working from in this effort? How would they own that space and this effort? (This could be a parent, a hero, or a faith or virtue-based example. The goal is to help you bless openly, with very low self-consciousness or ego in the mix.)

Part 4: Preparing Their Hearts

Not everybody chooses to do this part, but we think it's a good idea.

We suggest telling a short story to create a bridge from the audience's surroundings into the ethical will/letter itself. The idea is to not move too quickly into the intense part. We suggest the story, then writing your audience's names, then moving into the specific blessings. Your loved ones will absolutely make room for this small indulgence (it is a sort of gift of respect they can offer, during a time when they would do anything for you).

Your story can absolutely include humor, and if you're known for being a jokester, you could even pull off a story-based joke here. But bear in mind that humor is often a coping or diverting tactic, and your use of humor may set a limit to how much emotion your audience is invited to experience during a moment where the depth of emotion is a big part of how valuable the moment turns out to be. Your goal is to bridge to a place where you can speak blessings that will travel in the hearts of your audience.

The best stories for this purpose tend to be stories from your life that feel like you anticipate your audience will be feeling. If you can achieve connection on the "here's what the same moment felt like to me" front, your audience will look to you for clues and guidance about how they can navigate their experience the way you'd encourage them to.

1. When have you felt what you expect your audience will be feeling in the moment in which you're expecting them to engage your letter?

2. What made that experience especially significant to you at the time?

3. What time of year was it?

4. What did you wear, and was there any drama or meaning behind that?

5. Who was with you? What thoughts or comments do you remember?

6. What other sensations have been similar to that day's? (e.g. "the loss of my father has been like a cavity I could never fill. Most of the time things are alright, but every once in a while, I bit down just so and the pain is as sharp and overwhelming as the night I learned he was gone.")

7. What happened just after the moments you're picturing? (How did ordinary life rush back in, or what sort of mundane rituals did you move through with your experience still fresh in your mind, etc.)

8. Now, write that experience down for your loved ones. You will likely find obvious connection points to people or scenarios. Your audience will connect the dots ... you just tell your story.

If you can, stop here for the day.

1. You've just visited a sacred space in your own heart, and likely one that you'd wish you could spare the people you love.
2. You've accepted the role of guide and blessing-speaker, of gift-giver, and of beloved focus of the grief that celebrates life's worth.

Well done.

Part 5: The Blessings

Your audience loves you and will receive your gift well:

1. You do not need to force anything.
2. Be yourself, and trust your love for them, and their love for you.

You've already defined the setting and the moment in which your loved ones will receive your ethical will and its blessing. You have reminded yourself about who you are, and who you are to your loved ones. And if you chose to engage the previous section, you've also used a story to set the stage. Here is the moment where your words "make eye contact," hold your loved ones, and endeavor to pour a rich blessing into their hearts.

1. Whom are you addressing? (It may be a single name, or a list of family names. It could be "friends, Romans, countrymen." This is the moment where you name your audience and call their hearts to attention for what follows.)

2. What would you say if you only had five words? (e.g. I love you, I'm gonna miss you, I'm proud of you, you are my joy. Calling your audience to attention will prime them. This "blurt" will shatter any emotional "stiff upper lip" that would hamper their ability to receive the blessing to come. This will be the moment when it's absolutely okay for them to relax into grief and let their emotions come. We are not trying to manipulate this response – we are holding space and honoring it.)

3. Who is the audience to you? (e.g. You are my family. You are my beloved. You are the friends who will carry me in death, just as you were the friends who carried me in life.)

4. What have they done well for you? (Their work is finished. What was it? What did they accomplish? What can you congratulate them for doing/being/saying/providing?)

5. How did their presence and their work shape your world? (What did you learn to see, do, appreciate, etc?)

6. Segue to the specific blessings you're about to begin. (Reference the bridge story from the previous section if you can. E.g. "I've spent hours thinking about you in light of that day in the car between meetings when I realized I could never fill the cavity of my dad's death. It hurt so bad and I would have given anything to hear from him. I won't be able to say everything that you deserve to hear, but there are a few things I want to make sure you know and carry with you.")

7. Above everything else, I want you to remember... (This should be about your connection and your relationship. Sometimes people are tempted to point to God or family or tasks here ... this is the moment for what exists between yourself and your loved one(s) when it's just you.)

Suggestion:

1. Do the next step for your broad audience first, then decide if you want to create individual blessings.
2. Most of the time, the 7 steps above this point serve as a starting point for most of your audience, so all that needs to be customized are the specific blessings for an individual recipient.

Ready?

8. From here, let the blessing unfold.

(Blessings for individuals may flow from you naturally. That’s great when it happens. But even then, it’s worth remembering that the person who receives your blessing will be thinking about your life, and their life, in a broad context. Very timely blessings about current interests or life circumstances are by no means a bad idea, but you may find richer material casting a wider net for your thoughts.)

A few idea starters:

For me, success means...

My hopes for the future...

The values I hope you embrace are...

My wishes for my children are...

My wishes for my grandchildren are...

My wishes for my spouse are...

A mistake in life I hope you can avoid is...

An experience I hope you get an opportunity to have is...

When you encounter hardship, I hope you will remember...

If you can, stop here for the day.

1. If you stop here, you've created something amazing for your loved ones. Celebrate that.
2. If you want to create individual blessings, we suggest you take a break first, and then see how fresh and present you can be later ... whatever you do will be a blessing, but it'll be stronger when you are.

Well done.

Part 6: Proxies, Flourishes, and Creativity

This stuff is hard work. You don't have to work from scratch:

1. The important thing is the sentiment and expressing your love.
2. Whatever you create will be received as a sacred treasure.

Your goal is to create a meaningful expression of love for people who care deeply for you. That doesn't mean you have to knock yourself out or be the poet you aren't. If it's been said well elsewhere, drag that phrase into your letter. Adding extra elements will only give your loved ones more symbols and connection points to you. Here are a few ideas to consider.

What are some of your favorite quotes?

What are a few moments where life opened something up to you? September 11 attacks, falling in love, having a child, etc. What did you see about life in those moments?

What are a few very meaningful words to you, and why?

Are there particular songs that mean a great deal to you? Are there quick stories that explain why?

Are there favorite family stories or jokes that will give your loved ones a bit more time with you?

Think outside the writing box by creating a video, a slideshow, a work of art. If you need some inspiration, read the book *The Last Lecture* based on terminally-ill Carnegie Mellon professor Randy Pausch's final words.

If You Get Stuck, Remember

There is no right or wrong with this effort, and anything you offer is bonus.

This is about your heart celebrating the people you love, of whom you're a part, as you consider the prospect of being apart.

Whatever you do will be you. Even if it's really, really bad, your family will embrace it because they love you.

You may go look for examples online, but you should know that your family will never compare what you do to what someone else has done. Be free in this effort. Say everything, and know that what you offer in love will be received in love.

May you, and your family, be deeply and lastingly blessed by your efforts.

We're Here to Help

At Centurion Response, we help family members tell their stories and express their love for the sake of articulating a larger, identity-shaping and life-orienting shared story.

If you like the idea of creating an ethical will but find the work challenging, we would be honored to guide you through the process and help you find the words to match your heart.

Our website is CenturionResponse.com.