

Writing an Ethical Will

and Letters to Those I Love

“And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.”

2 Peter 1:15

How to use this reference

Appendix K is your workbook: the seven movements, with prompts and room to write. **This is the companion that sits beside it:** craft guidelines, models from Scripture and history, three WhyzMen samples, a guide to the words that land (and the ones that wound) in letters, and a short shelf of books.

Read it once before you write. Reread Part Five before you give anything away.

Every sample here is a model, not a template. *Borrow the shape, never the sentences. If what you write could have been written by any grandfather to any grandchild, it isn't finished yet.*

What's inside

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- Part Three** • Models: Scripture, history, and three WhyzMen samples
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PART ONE

Do I need to read a book first?

No. You don't need a book on fatherhood before you hold your grandson, and you don't need one before you write to him. The men who never write an ethical will rarely fail for lack of information. They fail because they wait until they feel ready, and the feeling never comes.

If you want one book, read one. Barry Baines's *Ethical Wills* will show you how; Riemer and Stampfer's *So That Your Values Live On* will let you hear how others have done it across eight centuries. Everything else on the shelf (Part Six) is for later, or for the man who finds he wants more.

Then write one true sentence. Hemingway's advice in Appendix K is the whole method in miniature: "Write the truest sentence that you know." Then write the next one.

A legal will and an ethical will

Legal will: what you leave them	Ethical will: who you were, and what you hope they carry
Distributes what you owned	Distributes what you learned
Binding in law	Not binding in any way, and it shouldn't try to be
Drafted with an attorney	Written by you, in your own voice
Read after you are gone	Best read aloud while you are still here
Settles the estate	Settles the story

Keep them in their own lanes. See Guideline 9.

PART TWO

Twelve guidelines for the ethical will

Appendix K tells you how to begin. These twelve tell you how to make what you write worth keeping. They gather what ethical-will writers, hospice workers and Scripture agree on, and they carry the three tests from Session 14: Particular • Story, not sermon • Blessing.

While you write

- 1. Keep it short enough to be read.** Most ethical wills run from one to ten pages. One page read aloud at the kitchen table will outlive twenty pages in a safe-deposit box. Your Session 14 floor is one page, and one page is a real ethical will.

2. **Start with a person and a memory, not a message.** Picture one face, then one moment: a kitchen, a ballfield, a hospital corridor. The meaning will come out of the memory. Start with the meaning and you'll write a greeting card. (**Particular Test.**)
3. **Tell what happened, not what to do.** "Don't be greedy" is forgotten by Thursday. "The year the business failed, your grandmother sold her piano and never once mentioned it" is remembered for fifty years. The story teaches the lesson, and you don't have to. (**Story, Not Sermon Test.**)
4. **Testify to grace, not to your own goodness.** An ethical will that says "be good the way I was good" is legacy as works, and your children know better anyway. The Christian testament points past the man to Christ: what God did in me, not only what I did. Paul called himself "the worst" of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), and he meant it as testimony, not self-pity.
5. **Bless, don't bind.** Avoid "I command you," "promise me," and "you must." Scripture's first ethical will is honest about this: Jacob's words in Genesis 49 include hard words for Reuben, Simeon and Levi. The Bible records them; it doesn't recommend them. Paul's pattern is better: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). (**Blessing Test:** does it leave them freer, not obligated?)
6. **Offer your faith as testimony, not argument.** Faith can't be inherited like the family silver; God has no grandchildren. If you are writing to a child or grandchild who doesn't share your faith, tell them what Christ has meant to you on a specific day, and leave the rest to God. A testimony can't be argued with. A sermon invites a rebuttal you will never get to hear.
7. **Confess plainly, and without "but."** "I wasn't perfect, but..." erases everything before the comma. Name one specific thing, own it, and stop. Then name the forgiveness you have received and the forgiveness you have given (Movement 4 in Appendix K).
8. **End with hope.** Many ethical wills in the Jewish tradition say little about an afterlife. For a Christian, the resurrection is the last word. Tell them where you will be waiting, "so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Before you share it

9. **Keep the ethical will and the legal will in their own lanes.** Don't use a letter to explain who gets what, or why one child got less. Those sentences become the most quoted lines in the family, and rarely kindly (see Franklin in Part Three). Keep money out of it. If anything you write touches property, show it to your attorney so the two documents never contradict.
10. **Be even-handed with your children.** Not equal word counts, but no ranking and no comparisons. "You were always the responsible one" tells the other two who wasn't. Give each child their own particular memory and their own blessing. Stepchildren and grandchildren by marriage get their own pages too.
11. **Protect other people's stories.** Your confessions are yours to make. Your wife's, your brother's and your late father's are not. An ethical will isn't the place to reveal a secret that belongs to someone else, or to settle a score with someone who can't answer.
12. **Date it, and keep it living.** Write the date and your age at the top. Reread it on your birthday or on the anniversary of your commissioning. Add the story you forgot. Cross out what is no longer true,

initial and date the change, and leave the old line visible; the amendments become part of the legacy.

PART THREE

Models: Scripture, history, and three WhyzMen samples

You are not inventing this form. You are stepping into one of the oldest kinds of writing in Scripture. In Hebrew it is the *tzava'ah* ("command" or "testament"), and the church inherited it. "You do not support the root, but the root supports you" (Romans 11:18).

Scripture's testaments

Passage	Who, and to whom	Notice
Genesis 49	Jacob, to his twelve sons	A blessing for each son by name, particular to each. Honest, even when the honesty is hard.
Deuteronomy 32-33	Moses, to Israel	A song and a blessing over each tribe, spoken knowing he would not enter the land.
1 Kings 2:1-4	David, to Solomon	"Be strong, act like a man." A father's charge, in four verses.
John 13-17	Jesus, to the Twelve	The greatest testament ever spoken, and it contains a bequest: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (14:27).
Acts 20:17-38	Paul, to the Ephesian elders	An elder's goodbye. They wept, embraced him, and walked him to the ship.
2 Timothy 4:6-8	Paul, to a younger man	"I have fought the good fight." An old man writing to a young one from prison.
2 Peter 1:13-15	Peter, to the church	The purpose statement for the whole form: so that "after my departure you will always be able to remember."

From history: three lessons in three lines

Judah ibn Tibbon, Provence, c. 1190. A Jewish physician and translator, writing to his son Samuel: "Avoid bad society, make thy books thy companions." He went on to describe bookshelves as gardens to walk in. It is a father writing about what he loved most, to the son he hoped would love it too, and Samuel became one of the great translators of his age. (*Israel Abrahams, trans., Hebrew Ethical Wills, 1926. Quoted as a Jewish text, in its own words.*)

William Shakespeare, Stratford, 25 March 1616. His will opens as English wills did for centuries, with a statement of faith before any property is named: "I commend my Soul into the hands of God my Creator,

hoping & assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour..." The Christian spiritual testament is a real tradition, not a borrowed one. But the line history remembers is a different one: *"I gyve unto my wief my second best bed with the furniture."* Four centuries later, scholars still argue over whether it was a slight or a tender bequest of the marriage bed. **The lesson: if you don't write what you meant, people will guess.**

Benjamin Franklin, 1771 and 1788. Franklin began his *Autobiography* as a letter: *"Dear Son: I have ever had pleasure in obtaining any little anecdotes of my ancestors."* That son, William, sided with the Crown in the Revolution. Seventeen years later, Franklin's legal will said: *"The part he acted against me in the late war, which is of public notoriety, will account for my leaving him no more..."* The same man wrote the warmest letter and the coldest clause, and both survive. **The lesson: a score settled in a will is settled forever, in public.**

Christian testaments worth knowing

- Patrick's *Confession* (5th century): a whole life's testimony written near its end, credited wholly to grace.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, May 1944: from a Berlin prison cell, *Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism*, written to an infant godson he might never see grow up. Blessing a child across a distance you can't close.

Three WhyzMen samples

These are composites, written for this reference. The names and details are invented. They show three different voices so that no one voice becomes the template. After each, a few notes on why it works.

Sample 1 · A one-page spiritual testament (the six parts)

To Mark, Teresa and Danny. Written the winter I turned 74.

1 • What I believe, and in Whom

I believe Jesus Christ is who he said he is, and that he has been more patient with me than I have ever been with anyone. I didn't always believe it. For about fifteen years I believed in overtime and the Steelers, in that order.

2 • How grace found me

In March of 1987 the mill let me go after twenty-two years. I didn't tell your mother for three weeks. I put on my work clothes every morning and sat in the Giant Eagle parking lot until three o'clock. Pastor Jim found me there. He was buying milk. He sat in the truck with me for an hour and didn't give me one piece of advice. That was the first time I understood that God comes looking for men who are hiding. Your mother forgave me before I'd finished apologizing.

3 • What I learned, and what it cost

A man who can't say "I don't know what to do" will sooner or later do the wrong thing alone. It cost me three weeks of lying and most of my pride. Cheap, as lessons go.

4 • What I ask forgiveness for, and what I have forgiven

Danny, I missed most of your games the two years I worked doubles. I told myself it was for you. Some of it was. Some of it was that the shop was easier than home. I'm sorry. I have forgiven my own father for never once saying he was proud of me. I think he didn't know how. So let there be no doubt in this family: I am proud of each of you.

5 • What I hope for you

Mark, I hope you'll let people help you; you're more like me than you'd like. Teresa, I hope you keep singing in the car with the windows down. Danny, the door has never been closed. You don't have to agree with me about God for me to be glad when your truck pulls in.

6 • My blessing, and my hope of seeing you again

The Lord bless you and keep you. I have never once been sorry I was your father. When my time comes, don't spend long at the cemetery. I won't be there. I'll be with your mother's mother and mine, watching the door.

Dad

Why it works

- **Particular:** a parking lot, a carton of milk, a specific son's games. No other father could have written it.
- **Story, not sermon:** he never says "don't hide things from your wife." The three weeks say it for him.
- **Grace, not goodness:** the hero of part 2 is a pastor buying milk, and the God who sent him.
- **Blessing:** Danny, who has drifted, is released, not recruited. The broken silence about pride is given away instead of passed down.

Sample 2 · A letter to his wife (memory · what I saw · one hope · a blessing)

Carol,

I still think about the night in 1979 when the furnace quit and we slept on the living-room floor in our coats with both babies between us, and you laughed so hard at me reading the manual by flashlight that you woke them up. I remember thinking, I married the right one. I've thought it a few thousand times since and said it maybe a dozen. This letter is for the rest.

I have watched you for forty-seven years. You notice who is missing from a room. You know the names of the cashier's grandchildren. You forgave me faster than I deserved, more than once, and you never brought it up again. I didn't know what grace looked like until I lived with it.

My hope for you is that you'll let yourself be looked after for a change. If I go first, I hope you'll finally take that trip to see Ellen in Oregon, and that you won't feel guilty about one single good day. If you find companionship after me, you have my blessing, with my whole heart.

You are the best thing God ever gave me that I didn't ask for. I love you. I'll save you a seat.

Walt

Why it works

- **It's a love letter, not an estate memo.** There is nothing about the house, the accounts or the funeral.
- **The release in paragraph three** is the most generous sentence in it. Many widows say they wish they'd been told plainly that they were free to live, and to love again.
- **"This letter is for the rest"** names what most husbands feel and never say: they thought it far more often than they said it.

Sample 3 · A paragraph to a son who has stepped away from faith

Sam, I know church stopped making sense to you a long time ago, and I'm not writing to argue you back. I just want you to have one true thing. The night your mother was in surgery, all I could pray was "help," and I felt held anyway. I can't prove that to you. I can only tell you it happened to me. Whatever you come to believe, you are my son, and nothing about that is up for discussion.

Why it works

- **Testimony, not argument:** one night, one prayer, one experience, and no request.
- **The last sentence is the blessing.** It settles the only question a drifting son is really afraid to ask.

PART FOUR

Letters to those I love: what to say, and what not to

A letter is smaller than an ethical will and often more powerful, because it is written to one person. The Session 14 shape is four moves:

One memory · What I saw in you · One hope · A blessing

The four things that matter most

Dr. Ira Byock spent decades as a palliative-care physician at the bedsides of the dying. In *The Four Things That Matter Most* (2004) he reports that what people most needed to say, and to hear, came down to four short sentences:

Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.

Not every letter needs all four. But the letter you most dread writing probably needs at least one of them, and your heaviest letters should be checked against all four before you seal them.

Eight kinds of sentences that land

These are kinds of sentences, not scripts. Each opener only shows the shape; finish it with something only you could say.

Kind of sentence	The shape (finish it yourself)	Why it lands
A named memory	"I still think about the day we..."	Memory proves you were paying attention.
Witness	"I saw you when you..."	Being seen is the deepest form of being valued. (The S10 Great Listener work, in writing.)
Specific thanks	"Thank you for the time you..."	Thanks for a moment outlasts thanks for "everything."
Who they are, not what they did	"I'm proud of who you are when..."	Achievement fades. Character is what they carry into their own old age.
A clean apology	"I was wrong when I... I'm sorry."	No "if," no "but," no explanation. Then stop.
A pictured future	"I can see you at sixty, still..."	Smalley and Trent's blessing element: a father's picture of what his child can become.
A release	"You don't owe me a reply, or a promise."	It turns a letter from an obligation into a gift (the Blessing Test).

Kind of sentence	The shape (finish it yourself)	Why it lands
Plain love	"I love you."	Many men have never written those three words. Write them, and don't hedge them.

What not to say, and how to say it better

Most of the damage in family letters is done by good men with good intentions and one wrong word. The left column is how it comes out under pressure. The middle column is what you probably meant.

Instead of...	Try...	Why
"I'm sorry if I hurt you."	"I'm sorry I hurt you when I..."	"If" puts their pain on trial.
"I know I wasn't perfect, but..."	"I wasn't the father you needed when... I'm sorry."	"But" erases everything before it.
"I forgive you for..." (when they don't think they wronged you)	"Whatever has been between us, there is nothing on my side of it now."	Forgiveness nobody asked for reads as an accusation. Name a wrong only if you both already know it.
"Promise me you'll..."	"My hope for you is..."	A promise binds; a hope blesses.
"Take care of your mother."	"Your mother will need you, and you'll need her. Lean on each other."	Don't hand a grieving child a job. Make it mutual.
"Don't be sad when I'm gone."	"Grieve however you need to. And when you laugh again, know I'm glad."	Don't tell people what to feel; give them permission to feel it.
"You need to get back to church."	"Here is what Jesus meant to me on the worst night of my life."	Testimony can't be argued with; a demand invites a rebuttal.
"You were always the responsible one."	Name one particular thing in each child, without comparison.	Every label for one child is a verdict on the others.
"You're a great kid."	"The way you sat with your sister at the hospital..."	Generic praise is a greeting card. Specific praise is a keepsake.
"Don't make the mistakes I made."	"Here's a mistake I made, and what it cost."	Story, not sermon. Let them draw the lesson.
"I'm proud of you for finally..."	"I'm proud of you." (Or: proud of the specific thing.)	"Finally" smuggles in the old disappointment.
"I always wished you had..." (married, finished school, become...)	Leave it out.	A regret about their choices is a weight they can never answer.

Instead of...	Try...	Why
"Your grandmother would have wanted..."	Speak for yourself.	Don't conscript the dead, or your wife, into your argument.
"Everything happens for a reason."	Name the hard thing, and where you saw God in it.	A cliché closes the wound without cleaning it.
"I left you less because..."	Say it face to face now, or not at all; never in a sealed letter.	Money explanations become the family's most quoted lines (see Franklin).

Special situations

To your wife. Write as her husband, not as her estate planner. Put in something only the two of you know. Consider giving her, in writing, the freedom to travel, to laugh, and to find companionship again. Many men never think to say it, and many widows wish they had heard it.

To young grandchildren. Write to the age at which they will read it, and tell them how old they were when you wrote it and what they were doing that week. Leave out adult burdens. A story from when you were their age ("I was once your age", Movement 5) is worth more than advice.

To a child who is distant or estranged. Shorter is better. Don't relitigate; one clean apology and one open door. Ask for nothing, not even a reply. If the wound is deep, consider a conversation, perhaps with a pastor or counselor present, before any letter.

To a child who doesn't share your faith. Testimony and love, not argument (Guideline 6 and Sample 3).

To stepchildren and blended families. Each child gets their own letter. Don't let biology set the length, and don't write "like my own" unless you are sure they want to hear it; "mine" is often the better word.

If you have no children or grandchildren. Write to a niece, a mentee, a younger man at church, or the next WhyzMen cohort. Everyone hands something forward. Titus 2 assumes elders have someone to teach.

PART FIVE

Giving it away

Read it to them, face to face. This is the Session 14 instruction, and it has evidence behind it. When Martin Seligman and colleagues tested five positive-psychology exercises (2005), the one that produced the largest immediate rise in happiness was the *gratitude visit*: writing a letter of thanks to someone who had never been properly thanked, then delivering and reading it in person. The benefit lasted about a month. The research measured the writer. The reader's face is the part you will remember.

Handwrite the copy you give. Your handwriting is part of the gift; grandchildren keep it long after the words are memorized. Type a draft first if that helps, then copy it out on good paper.

If it is to be opened later, seal it in an envelope marked “To _____, to be opened _____.” Tell your wife and your executor where it is. Keep it with your important papers, not inside the legal will. Keep a scan or photocopy somewhere else.

Check it against the legal will. If a letter mentions any object, gift or sum of money, show it to your attorney. A sentimental line can create a legal question you never intended.

Expect silence, sometimes. Not every letter gets a reply, and some replies take years. A letter is a seed. *“Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return”* (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

Bring it back to your triad. Read one paragraph. Your brothers answer only: “What I heard you value was _____.” Then keep writing, through First Fruits and beyond.

Before you seal anything: the five-question check

- ☐ Could only I have written this, to only this person? (Particular)
- ☐ Does it tell what happened, rather than what to do? (Story, not sermon)
- ☐ Does it leave them freer, not obligated? (Blessing)
- ☐ Does it say at least one of the four things: please forgive me, I forgive you, thank you, I love you?
- ☐ Is there any sentence about money, inheritance, or someone else’s secret? If so, take it out.

PART SIX

The short shelf: an annotated bibliography

None of these is required. Start with the first two. The rest are here for the man who finds he wants more, and for facilitators.

Start here

Baines, Barry K. *Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper*. 2nd ed. Da Capo / Balance, 2006. The standard how-to, by a hospice medical director who co-founded The Legacy Center. Exercises, worksheets and real samples. The best single book for the process.

Riemer, Jack, and Nathaniel Stampfer, eds. *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*. Jewish Lights, 1991. An anthology of real ethical wills from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, with a guide to writing your own. Read it for voice and form; the texts are Jewish and should be read as such.

For facilitators

Baines, Barry K. *The Ethical Will Resource Kit*. The Legacy Center. Workshop materials for leading a group through the process. Dave's copy is the program's facilitator reference.

Abrahams, Israel, ed. and trans. *Hebrew Ethical Wills*. Jewish Publication Society, 1926; facsimile ed. 2006. The classic scholarly collection, including Judah ibn Tibbon. The historical root of the form.

Going further on ethical wills

Riemer, Jack, and Nathaniel Stampfer, eds. *Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury*. Schocken, 1983. The companion anthology; more modern voices, including Holocaust-era wills.

Turnbull, Susan B. *The Wealth of Your Life: A Step-by-Step Guide for Creating Your Ethical Will*. Benedict Press, 2005. Short and practical. Source of the line "What you have learned is as important as what you have earned." Good on connecting an ethical will to charitable giving.

Freed, Rachael. *Your Legacy Matters*. Minerva Press, 2013. Broader legacy writing across life stages; useful later for the WhyzQuest women's and couples' tracks.

Letters and the blessing

Byock, Ira. *The Four Things That Matter Most: A Book About Living*. Free Press, 2004. A palliative-care physician on the four sentences people most need to say. The best single book for the hard letters.

Smalley, Gary, and John Trent. *The Blessing*. Thomas Nelson, 1986; revised editions since. The five elements of a biblical blessing. The basis for Movement 6 of Appendix K and for the Session 15 commissioning.

Nerburn, Kent. *Letters to My Son: A Father's Wisdom on Manhood, Life, and Love*. New World Library, 1994; rev. ed. 1999. A model letter voice: particular, warm, rarely preachy.

Edelman, Marian Wright. *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*. Beacon Press, 1992. A short book-length letter of hard-won lessons, rooted in faith and family history.

Pausch, Randy, with Jeffrey Zaslow. *The Last Lecture*. Hyperion, 2008. Written by a dying father for three children too young to remember him. A study in writing for the age at which they will read it.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography*. Begun 1771; public domain. Begun as a letter to his son. Read its opening beside the story of how the two men ended.

Faith models

Scripture: Genesis 49; Deuteronomy 32–33; 1 Kings 2:1–4; John 13–17; Acts 20:17–38; 2 Timothy 4; 2 Peter 1:13–15. The testaments behind every other book on this shelf.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8. Fortress Press, 2010. Includes “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism,” May 1944, to his infant godson.

The craft of writing about your life

Zinsser, William. *Writing About Your Life: A Journey into the Past*. Marlowe, 2004. Write small, write particular, write it in your own voice. Already on the WhyzMen shelf.

Pennebaker, James W., and Joshua M. Smyth. *Opening Up by Writing It Down*. 3rd ed. Guilford Press, 2016. The research on why writing about hard things heals the writer (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986, is cited in Session 14).

Seligman, Martin E. P., Tracy A. Steen, Nansook Park, and Christopher Peterson. “Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions.” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 5 (2005): 410–421. The gratitude-visit study cited in Part Five.

Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *The Power of Moments*. Simon & Schuster, 2017. Why a letter read aloud becomes a defining moment, and how to mark one on purpose.

Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass, 1999. The spine of Session 14: the letter you write and the letter you are.

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Historical quotations: Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills (1926); Shakespeare’s will (1616), original spelling; Franklin, Autobiography (1771) and last will (1788). Samples in Part Three are composites written for WhyzMen; names and details are invented.