

3 Ways To Become The Godly Elders Today's Youth Need – And Want To Follow

The best way to help foster the Fruit of the Spirit in others is not by demanding it of them, but by living it out with them.

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This generation wants to honor its elders and be mentored by them.

That may not feel like it's true – especially if you, like me, are old enough to qualify for AARP membership. But I assure you it is.

I know this because I see it all the time. Youth, both in and outside the church walls are looking for genuine relationships with their elders.

They want to learn, connect and grow. They want to be mentored and disciplined.

No, not all of them. Most of us didn't consciously want that when we were their age, either. But in my experience, more of today's youth want godly older men and women in their lives than we did when we were their age.

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A couple weeks ago, I wrote, *Hey, Boomers! Let's Step Up And Be The Elders The Church Desperately Needs Right Now*, and got a lot of feedback – most of it very encouraging.

But there was some pushback as well. All of the criticism expressed the same viewpoint: today's youth may need to have elders in their lives, but it's impossible to find any who are truly willing to be disciplined.

So why is there such a difference in the experiences some older believers have with younger ones? And how can we do this better?

I think it comes down to three primary factors, all of which have more to do with how we, as elders, approach our role than how the youth behave or how they feel.

1. Meet Them Where They Are

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Start by serving, not demanding.

Living and walking along with them, not just talking at them.

This means listening before speaking. Really hearing what they are going through.

When we do that, we'll discover that they have three types of challenges.

First, they have challenges that are obviously universal. How to negotiate relationships and make wise decisions for instance. On those, we can offer wisdom from our own experience in Christ.

Second, they will express ideas and desires that will seem strange at first (like their choice of entertainment or wanting tattoos), but the more we listen, the more we'll find common ground. Underneath most of those choices is a desire to both fit in and stand out. When we were younger we felt the same confusion, but expressed it in different ways. (Remember how our parents reacted to our hairstyles and choice of music?) In those situations, we can share wisdom from our common underlying needs, even if we don't share their tastes.

Finally, there are the challenges they face that truly are different from anything we had to face. For instance, it's likely that our kids' and grandkids' generation will, for the first time in our nation's history, make less money than their parents did. They're also facing a culture that is increasingly indifferent, even hostile to a Christian witness. None of that is their fault, but they have to live in the fallout of it. In such situations, the greatest gift we may have for them won't be good advice, but a listening, sympathetic ear and prayerful, loving friendship.

To become the effective elders the next generation needs, we must have a similar approach as missionaries do when they go in to a culture that is new, and therefore feels strange and sometimes scary to us. In such situations, humility goes a long way. We have to listen and learn before we will have anything to teach.

2. Be Worth Listening To

We need to behave like elders worthy of honor. Living lives that people want to emulate. Following Jesus with such joy, passion and hopefulness that others can't help but be drawn to him.

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If you have a hard time finding young people who want to be mentored, seriously ask yourself this question. Are you behaving in a way that is worthy of being honored? Are you truly setting an example to follow? Not just in (self)righteous behavior, but in selfless generosity and humble teachability.

No one wants to listen to an old crank with a "what's wrong with youth today?" mentality or a "when I was your age we knew how to respect our elders" attitude.

As elders, it is not our job to convict of sin or correct their behavior. That's Jesus' job. And he does it very well.

It's our job to love them. To lead by example as we live a life of humility, holiness, patience and joy.

Certainly there will be moments of correction. But we have to earn the right to do that by showing ourselves to be trustworthy first.

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3. Help Them Be Like Jesus, Not Like Us

The goal of an elder or a Christian mentor is not to help the next generation become more like us. It's to help them become more like Jesus. The only way we can do that is becoming more Christlike ourselves.

The current and coming generations don't want to do church the way we did it. This is a good thing.

Becoming like your elders isn't discipleship, it's mimicry. Repeating their habits and behaviors isn't growth, it's going through the motions.

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When elders become more like Jesus, we show those coming behind us how to do it too. Then, when they become more like Jesus, they'll challenge us to keep growing even more. Each serving and blessing the other in an upward cycle of faith.

A servant will always become like their master. But an elder isn't a master. An elder follows the Master, and helps others follow him, too.