



WHEN MENTORING GETS MESSY

Source: Erin Davis

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mentoring-gets-messy/>)



Meet Katie (not her real name).

She's a 20-something recent college graduate. We attend the same church. At some point, she reached out asking if I'd consider being her mentor. Thus began years of coffeshop conversations, text-message exchanges, and partnership in ministry.

We've prayed together. We've studied the Bible together. We've talked through tough issues like birth control, disappointment, and calling with the goal of growing in Christ.

I love Katie. On paper, ours is the kind of Titus 2 mentoring relationship every women's ministry leader dreams of. Except, sometimes, it isn't. Katie doesn't always make the choices I encourage (and pray for) her to make, and her public behavior has sometimes embarrassed and disappointed me.

This is not just true of Katie, either. I can think of several other times when a young woman I've invested in has chosen a path, a relationship, or a biblical position that opposed the truth I'd prayed for her to see in God's Word.

More than once, I've had to wrestle with how to respond when Titus 2 goes awry.

Real Titus 2

If we were to play word association with the Bible, Titus 2 would be associated with the word "mentoring." In this passage, Paul presents a model for discipleship in which older men model godly behavior to younger men, and older women teach younger women:



"Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled."

- Titus 2:2-5

I love Titus 2—and the relationships it has birthed in my life. My walk with Christ has been enriched by older women who have demonstrated godliness for me or opened God's Word with me. My faith has been sharpened, and my life enriched, by spending intentional time with younger women like Katie.

This discipleship method is essential to the work of the church—and yet, I think, we often receive it as a formula with predetermined results. We assume that if we spend enough time—or the right kind of time—with younger Christians, they will grow in maturity and godliness at an exponential rate. If they don't, we assume the problem is with us.

Perhaps it's time to look at Titus 2 again.

Fidelity to Scripture, Not an Outcome

The apostle Paul wrote to his mentee Titus, a young Christian leader in Crete. "This is why I left you in Crete," Paul writes, "so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" ([Titus 1:5](#)). While other sections of Scripture are primarily historical or prophetic, this epistle is primarily instructional. In [Titus 2](#), Paul is instructing Titus on what he should do—not what will happen when he does it.

I've often heard Lore Ferguson Wilbert champion "fidelity to the Word of God and not an outcome." This applies to the Christian life—especially Christian discipleship. We invest in the lives of others. We pray for our Christian brothers and sisters. We stir one another up toward righteousness and good deeds. We bear each other's burdens. We do this, not because we are guaranteed a specific outcome, but because God's Word calls us to.

Mentoring Should Be Messy

When it comes to mentoring, most of us want the fantasy version where time and energy are abundant, communication is easy, and sanctification is immediate. But it's because our lives are so messy—not because they are tidy—that we need these kinds of relationships in the first place.

I've spent countless hours with younger and older women who long to be discipled, or hope to disciple other women. Both groups often stay in their corners because they don't know how to meet in the messy middle.

Paul spoke into the mess when he gave these instructions in the first place. Titus and the members of his church, after all, were surrounded by evil examples: "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their words. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work" ([Titus 1:16](#)). We need godly mentoring relationships precisely because the temptation to sin is so strong.

The young woman in your church who knows the Bible inside and out, fully understands God's plan for her life, and follows him perfectly does not exist. If she did, she wouldn't need a mentor. Discipleship will always look like messy people pointing messy people toward a perfect Savior.



Unique Bond

There are plenty of community organizations that partner older men with younger men and older women with younger women. What sets a church apart, however, is the message of the gospel. Our shared Savior is our common ground.

When the person you've invested in disappoints you, it's a gospel opportunity. You may display pride, bitterness, or anger. She may display sin, failure, or doubt. You both have an opportunity to confess, repent, forgive, and choose gospel hope. In Christ, every interaction can be gospel-infused.

Bigger Picture

When we extract Titus 2 from its context or view it as the only model for Christian discipleship, we get a simplistic approach with unrealistic expectations. We need the whole Bible to remind us that the church is the right place for sinners who make mistakes, wrestle with hard questions, and often miss the mark.

When we're discouraged by the results of our mentoring efforts, God's Word reminds us that we are in good company. Jesus spent countless hours with his 12 closest followers. And yet, Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, Thomas doubted him, and the disciples were regularly confused about what he was trying to accomplish. The "results" of Christ's investment, at least at first, seemed lacking. But his investment in them was an incalculable gift.

Younger Christians will disappoint you. So will older ones. You will disappoint them, too. But if your mentoring relationships cause you to seek Jesus and his help, you've already succeeded.