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Caring for Elderly Family Members

Central Truth: Care for elderly family members is obedience to God.

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Longevity is a mark of our generation. A typical person can expect to live eighty years or longer. The average life span was near forty years only a generation ago. It is projected that by the year 2025, people who are sixty-five and older will outnumber those eighteen and younger. One aspect of “the graying of America” is the increasing number of older women who live alone.

That raises the question in most families of care for the elderly. There are two alternatives: care for them in the private home of a family member, or place them in a “rest home” designed for the elderly. Such decisions are very difficult, and the younger adults who make those decisions must do so knowing that soon they will be the “senior saints” for whom such decisions are made.

That poses a challenge in each church, also. What will be done for older members? The congregation must minister to them and give them opportunities to continue to minister.

How should the younger deal with the older? Consider these four guidelines which will apply in your personal and your family life.

Maintain Respect for the Elderly (I Timothy 5:1, 2)

A great change came in America following World War II. The “baby boomer” generation was born. As it grew to maturity it became known as the “me-first” generation. A youth culture was born. Slogans like “Trust no one over thirty” became common. Business directed its commercial messages to

appeal to the teen and the young adult. Even many older people tried to get in on the fad and began to dress and talk like the younger ones.

A general but unspoken disregard for the aged followed. Older men were no longer addressed as “Mister,” but they were called by their first names or slang names by many of the younger. A lack of respect for the aged, which had marked polite society for centuries, was abandoned by many. Older people were considered by some to be useless and a burden on society. An official in a high office of state government said, “Old people ought to die and get out of the way.” Those attitudes and actions are in direct contradiction to biblical teaching concerning the aged. Consider what the Bible says about your attitude and actions toward the elderly. Review them and live by them.

Children are instructed to “*honour thy father and thy mother*” (Exodus 20:12) and to “*obey your parents in all things*” (Colossians 3:20). Honor refers to attitude; obey refers to action. So children are to show respect to their parents in attitude and action. God commands it. Gray hair is a crown of glory when the person who wears it is living a holy life (Proverbs 16:31). Long life is not a burden but a gift from God (Psalm 91:16). God's special assistance is provided the person who grows weak from age and infirmity. He has promised, “*Even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you*” (Isaiah 46:4).

Life tends to lose its meaning for many elderly persons. Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 speaks of the deterioration of the body and the depression of spirit which many suffer. Days come when one says, “*I have no pleasure in them*” (verse 1). Eyesight fades; hands tremble; teeth are lost; sleep is light and often disturbed. There is a fear of falling; strength fails. Gradually the body loses its vitality until death comes with the loosening of the silver cord, breaking of the pitcher at the fountain and of the wheel at the cistern (verse 6). But that is not as depressing as it may sound. “*Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day*” (II Corinthians 4:16).

The aged are still profitable to us and to the Lord's work. They have wisdom based on study and experience which the younger adults have not yet attained. God says, “*With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding*” (Job 12:12). The zeal of youth needs to be tempered with the wisdom of age. Give older people an opportunity to be productive. God says, “*They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing*” (Psalm 92:14). Look for ways older family members can serve their family and older church members can serve their Lord through His church. Luke 2:37 reports how Anna, “*a widow of about fourscore and four*

years, . . . departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” What a blessing grandparents can be by praying for the family and the church. The older can strengthen the younger by prayer.

It is difficult when there is child/ parent role reversal due to age and/ or infirmity. The parent may be unable to make his own decisions, and the child may have to make them instead. When the child acts as parent and parent as child in making decisions, it is very traumatic. But even in such cases, maintain respect for the older person. God commands it. To fail to do so is to sin against God.

Assume Financial Responsibility for the Elderly (I Timothy 5:8, 16)

Many young families face a severe problem at this point. They are trying to get established in a business or profession, buy a home, and educate their children at the very time they must assume financial responsibility for their aged or infirm parents. It can create a financial squeeze and a family crisis unless both partners in the marriage are in agreement on what to do. Assuming financial responsibility for infirm parents is a divine assignment. It should be assumed with the following facts in mind.

Your parents bore the cost of supplying your needs as you grew from infancy to adulthood. The Bible says parents are responsible for providing for the children, not children for the parents (II Corinthians 12:14). So your parents provided you with material needs (food, clothing, shelter) as well as spiritual and social nurture. They did it when you did not remember to say “Thank you,” assuming it was your right and their responsibility. Consider the thousands of dollars they have invested in your care, if it becomes necessary for you to invest money in their care. You will never repay their investment in you, whatever their care may cost you.

Your parents will pass their estate on to you. It may be large or small, but it is all they have. Jesus based His familiar parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) on the basis of children inheriting the family estate. Occasionally you may see a motor home or recreational vehicle with a bumper sticker which reads, “I’m spending my children’s inheritance.” But that is the exception, not the rule, for most loving parents. They cared for their children so long that they want to leave what they have accumulated to their loved ones.

You show your love and appreciation to your parents by your loving care for them. Be sure they maintain a quality of life which does not make them feel neglected or demeaned. If they are in their private home,

keep in contact with them. Visit them regularly. Do little things around the house or yard for them. Call them on the telephone often just to say “hello.” Send the grandchildren for a visit, if the grandparents are in good health. Remember that they are still persons of worth. Some churches have a SMART group (Small Maintenance and Repair Team) which assists elderly members. You can do that for your parents or other older persons in your community. What a way to say, “I love you.”

Your care for the elderly is an act of obedience for God. Paul wrote, *“If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel”* (I Timothy 5:8). When relatives cannot (or do not) care for the elderly, the church and/or the government must. But the first responsibility of care for the aged rests with family members, not the church (I Timothy 5:16). One way you can honor your father and your mother is by caring for them when they are not able to care for themselves. It may cost you some time and money, but it will reward you far more.

Consider These Practical Issues

Let the elderly family members maintain their own home as long as feasible. There is an element of independence in knowing that you are still in your own home. Some have lived in one house for many years. Imagine how it would be to move out, knowing you probably will not live in it again. Let the younger be thoughtful of the feelings of the older. If there comes a time when such a move must be made, do it gently and sympathetically.

Bring the elderly family members into your own home, if possible. But it must be agreeable to your marriage partner. Take the in-laws into consideration. Older people often require more attention and care, especially if there are health problems. It is not fair to place that responsibility on one family member alone. When it is not possible to bring them into your home, do not feel guilty about making other arrangements. Just do all you can before placing them in a situation in which they do not prefer to be.

Place the elderly family members in a nice rest home, if that is expedient. You must visit that home and examine it thoroughly. Talk to people living there, and to members of their families, about the care provided. Look in the cooking/ eating areas for cleanliness. Observe the attitude of the workers toward people living there. Provide the best you can for your parents or grandparents in their last years.

Keep in contact with your elderly family members after they move into a rest home. Visit them personally. Help keep them in touch with their

friends. Worship with them (on occasion at least) in the services conducted in the home. Provide them with the newspaper and magazines they enjoyed when living in their private home. Come by and let them go to church with your family. Take them out to eat on “special” occasions and on “surprise” days. Take them gifts to remember special occasions (birthday, anniversary, etc.). Keep in personal touch with them.

A good preparation for caring for your aged relatives is to get involved with elderly people now. Remember that your children are watching as you minister to them. You are setting a standard by which you will be served one day. No person should be set aside and ignored in old age. Even those who are handicapped, mentally or physically, are still people who deserve respect and care. You can show the love of God in your care for your elderly family members.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do we mean by “the graying of America”?
2. Why does God command our care for them?
3. How is care for parents in obedience to Ephesians 6:2?
4. What promise to the aged does God make in Isaiah 46:4?
5. How can aged and infirm Christians still contribute to the work of your church?
6. What does Job 12:12 say about their value today?
7. What responsibility is set forth in I Timothy 5:8, 16?
8. How can a family continue to show love for an aged relative?
9. Whom do you know who needs your ministry this week?
10. Why does God show special concern for the elderly?