



Respecting Ourselves as Elders

The writer of Proverbs said, “The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness” (Prov. 16:31). Also, “The glory of young men is their strength, and the splendor of old men is their gray head” (Prov. 20:29). The Bible is clear about respecting our elders, i.e., the older men and women among us. “Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise” (Eph. 6:2); “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:32).

We have heard all our lives, and correctly so, that we should treat our older people with respect. The Bible is plain. We also have preached to and scolded the young people when they fail to do this. Obviously, every generation has to work at respecting its elders, or else why would we have these admonitions from thousands of years ago? Paul lists “disobedience to parents” among the worst sins (2 Tim. 3:2; Rom. 1:30). We have also read dozens or hundreds of examples of disrespect in our own generation and there is no doubt we live in an unprecedented time of disdain for authority.

I am asking in this article, however, if elders today don’t display their own level of disrespect toward old age, and if we aren’t as guilty of those biblical admonitions as anyone else. I don’t mean that we can’t laugh at ourselves. In fact, I enjoy those “oldies” jokes as much as the next person. I believe that older people are much better off with a sense of humor about their age rather than taking offense, because it isn’t going to change and you can’t fight it. So it is not that seniors laugh at themselves or truly struggle with the pains of older age, but that we sometimes fight against God Himself over the experience of old age. We just don’t like it and wish it were different. Here are a few thoughts.

Old age is a time appointed, we shouldn’t fight it. Death is appointed to all people because of sin (Heb. 9:27). Moses wrote that God returns us to dust after 70 or 80 years because of our sin and it is only afterwards that we can “fly away” (Psa. 90:10). The marks of age are the pointers in that direction and it is God’s will that we go that way. If we think correctly, we should honor it.

Old age brings burdens and these are our stewardship. Again Moses said, “Their boast is labor and sorrow” (Psa. 90:10); Solomon said, “I have no pleasure in them” (Ecc. 12:1). David said, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me” (Psa. 23:4). I know this is a tough assignment but this is the greatest time of testimony in your life. It witnesses to your faith in Christ’s resurrection and your confidence in eternal life.

Old age is ridiculed by youth but this is the time of teaching and discipleship. We live with those aging maladies: we can’t see as clearly anymore, we can’t always hear what some are saying, we can’t recall details as sharply as we once did. This is the whole subject of Ecclesiastes 12. Sure, we feel the sympathetic response of some as if they are sorry for us. Shouldn’t we rather say with Solomon, remember your own Creator while you are young because these days are coming on you as well? (Ecc. 12:1). The conclusion of that chapter is that the whole duty of man is to fear God and keep His commandments (vs. 13). Let’s show that our older age has increased our ability to do that!

Old age brings good and bad and we should accentuate the good. Besides all of those negative things that come with aging, there are many more positive things that we didn’t pay attention to before. This is hard, but don’t wallow in the difficulties as if “nobody knows the trouble I see.” Everyone knows them, or will. Be the exception to that rule. You are wiser and godly; you have strength to overcome these hardships; you have perspective on life that the younger ones can’t have; you even have time to devote to God that a busy life didn’t afford you. Say with Moses, “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psa. 90:12).

I noticed that when Moses and Aaron were leading the nation out of Egypt that they constantly consulted the elders (Exod. 3:16, 18; 4:29; 12:21; et al). Rehoboam failed to do this (1 Kings 12) and Jeremiah lamented that destruction had come to Jerusalem because the “elders were not respected,” nor “shown favor” (Lam. 4:16; 5:12). Generations before may be guilty of this but let’s not encourage it ourselves.