

Aging With Grace

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Aging is no unique experience, we are all involved in the process, only some are further along in it than others. In the case of the Christian, however, this process is accompanied by a wonderful gift, the grace of God. A Christian, moreover, is not a Christian in isolation. He is part of a community made up of those who like him by faith have been made partakers of grace. Their response to this grace controls and motivates their attitude also toward their aging fellows. So there is a double aspect to the theme that I have been asked to discuss briefly: Aging with Grace. There is the effect of grace upon the aging themselves and also the effect of grace upon those fellow believers who are directly or more remotely involved with the aging.

August Pieper used to say that each age in life has its special spiritual perils. For youth it is sexual lust; for the prime years it is the lust for honor and power; for age it is covetousness gendered by fear that financial resources might not last until the time of death. To the dangers threatening the aging we would add at least two others: murmuring and despondency. We shall examine them at closer range and seek to determine how the assurance of grace overcomes these dangers.

Perhaps now that we are living in a welfare state with Social Security available to practically all citizens and with other agencies providing various forms of material assistance to the aging there is less of a temptation for the aging to hover over their resources in the fear that they may not be sufficient to last them for the remaining years of their lives. The current trend to insist upon adequate care for the aging, stimulated as it is by the realization on the part of politicians that senior citizens comprise an increasingly large block of voters, ought to assist in removing the fear of the aging that they may not be adequately provided for during their last years. Still I doubt whether anything external is going to prevent the Old Adam in the aging from worrying about the adequacy of their resources and being concerned about hanging on to enough of them so that they by their own efforts might make sure that they will not become impoverished. I well remember a conversation that my wife had with a recently retired farmer in Weyauwega. They were talking about someone who had gone to Florida for the winter. In that connection he commented that he would take a trip to Florida too if he could be sure that his savings would last for the rest of his life. When he died some six months later our first comment was, "He could have gone to Florida." But his concern about making his savings last showed that August Pieper's observation that covetousness presents a special temptation for the aging was apt.

The antidote for covetousness and its twin sin worry is grace. John teaches us to marvel at the grace of God when he writes: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 Jn 3:1). The best manuscripts add: "and we are." This is indeed the marvel of grace that it took us who by nature are the children of wrath, laid the sinfulness and sinning which provoke that wrath upon his incarnate Son and punished him for them, so that wrath is removed and we instead are embraced as dear children. Paul summarizes the process of grace thus: "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal 4:4-5). It is also a marvel of grace that the Holy Spirit changed us from such who by nature turn their back's to God into such who accept the Savior's work as done for them and therefore rely upon grace.

Now that we are the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, we can be sure that our Father has a fatherly concern for our wellbeing. The psalmist assures us of that: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Ps 103:13). At this point we shall not discuss other facets of this concern: the privilege of prayer, loving discipline, the assurance of a heavenly inheritance. Our emphasis at this point is that our Father's concern shows itself also in providing for our material needs. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us promises that allow us to draw this conclusion. There is the general promise: "If ye then, being evil,

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Mt 7:11). Referring directly to the matter of provision for our physical needs he says: "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?...If God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" (Mt 6:26,30). Then he draws the conclusion: "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:31-33). You see how Jesus from the premise that by grace we are God's children draws the conclusion that our Father will provide for our material needs.

Therefore when the aging Christian is tempted to count his resources and to become alarmed because they do not seem adequate to supply his needs for the remaining span of his life and therefore to determine to part with as little of them as at all possible, to grab whatever might augment them, and to hide and hoard what he has, he has one weapon. That is to turn away his eyes from uncertain riches to a certain and reliable Father, to contemplate his power and wisdom and love, and to rest his confidence in them. His Father is his real security.

Those who minister to the aging will want to be alert for symptoms of the covetousness of which we have been speaking. They will expose it as a product of the old man. They will seek to strengthen the new man in his battle against the old by reminding their aging fellow believer that grace has made them children of God, by encouraging them to dwell upon the implications of having the privilege of calling God Father, and by refreshing their memory concerning the direct promises of provision for our material needs which are based upon the fact that by grace God is our Father. Thus they will help the aging Christian to age with grace.

The two other specific temptations for the aging that were mentioned before are murmuring and despondency. They can hardly be treated as separate problems, for murmuring only voices the thoughts that fill the heart. Every Christian, no matter what his age may be, is tempted to question the Lord's ways, to waver in his faith, to feel sorry for himself when affliction strikes in one form or the other. But in many cases he may expect to bounce back, be it from a heart attack, bereavement, or financial reverses. But you don't bounce back from aging. And aging does bring its own burdens as you well know. We have a classical description of some of them in Ecclesiastes 12. The aging are prone to disabling illnesses and conditions. This realization led to the establishment of Medicare. Even under the most favorable conditions they can't do what once they could, they tire easily and rest up slowly. Their mental powers likewise deteriorate. The first evidence may be forgetfulness, the final senility.

The reaction of the aging when pains and burdens come is no different from that of the younger. Our sinful nature prompts us to ask, "Why did the Lord let this happen to me?" And then it supplies the wrong answer, God must not love me any more. God has forgotten me."

But the believer will not try to probe the unsearchable judgments of God or his ways that are past finding out. He will rather direct his thoughts to the grace of God. He will review the past manifestations of that grace. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro 5:8). "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Ro 8:32). Looking to the cross he will be made sure that in spite of all appearances to the contrary, God does love him. God's whole past record proves it.

Furthermore, the believer will consider what his Father means to him in his present condition. He has given promises that are directed specifically to the aging. "Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age" (Ps 92:13-14). "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" (Isa 46:4).

Above all the aging believers will be sustained in their infirmities by the prospect of what grace has in store for them in the future. Every new birthday is a reminder to them: “Here have we no continuing city” (Heb 13:14). But because they know what grace has done for them they can also confidently add: “We seek one to come.” Especially when they reach or pass their seventieth birthday they are impressed with the fact that their days are numbered by the familiar words of the 90th Psalm: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away” (10). But, as said, the aging believer knows where he is going. One of the implications of the fact that in his grace God has made us his children is thus drawn by the Apostle: “If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Ro 8:17). If they are joint-heirs with Christ, what he prayed for them in His high-priestly prayer will certainly be answered: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me” (Jn 17:24). The more they fix their eyes upon that glory, the more eager they will be to slough off this mortal coil and enter in upon the enjoyment of it. As they realize that that glory is everlasting while the end of the trials of this life is fast approaching they will think as did the Apostle: “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Ro 8:18).

Those who have the privilege of ministering to the aging will do what they can to keep before the eyes of the aging Christians whom they serve what grace has done for the past, the present, and the future of his people. Thus they will assist them in aging with grace.

We have already anticipated in part the other angle which is involved in aging with grace, the fact that the aging Christian does not live in isolation but in a Christian community, the members of which are also partakers of grace. Motivated by appreciation for what God in his grace has done for them, they often become the instruments through which the Lord acts in fulfilling what he has promised to do for his aging children.

Among those who by faith are partakers of grace the first ones to whom concern for the aging is assigned are their own children. Our Lord Jesus in his perfect obedience to the law also in this respect set a good example. When he hung dying upon the cross his aging mother Mary stood at the foot of the cross. Even when he was enduring the anguish of suffering the punishment for the sins of the world, he was not so engrossed in his own plight that he failed to notice her. Rather, we are told: “When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother!” (Jn 19:26-27). There was no doubt in John’s mind as to what Jesus meant, no counting up of the problems which might be presented by having to provide a home for Mary, no hesitation. Rather, we are told: “And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.” His love for Jesus and his appreciation for what Jesus was doing for him moved him to an instantaneous and joyful response.

Nor was this to be a unique instance. Paul writes to Timothy: “If any widow have children or nephews (NIV correctly translates “grandchildren”), let them learn first to show piety at home, and to requite their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God” (1 Ti 5:4). There you have it all: the obligation and the motivation, for who among those who are grateful for grace will not be eager to do what is good and acceptable before God?

But in the same fifth chapter of First Timothy Paul makes it clear that the old saying is true: “Charity begins at home, but it does not end there.” It contains a group of verses, 9 to 11, which contains a number of exegetical problems into which we do not propose to enter. But for our purpose it is significant that he speaks about widows who are sixty years old or older, who by the standards of that day were definitely among the aging. Since qualifications are listed which they must possess, it seems that they were entrusted with some sort of public service, service in which they acted as representatives of the church. This observation would seem to justify the efforts of the Committee on Services to the Aging to gather and transmit to our people suggestions as to how we might tap the reservoir of talents, which we have among our retirees. In doing so we would be reflecting our concern for them, they would be relieved to some extent of the boredom that is apt to set in when their regular routine of employment has been terminated, and their service would promote the welfare of their congregation and the church at large in various ways.

The other hint as to how the family of Christians can show its concern for its aging members and do what on its part is good and acceptable before God is contained in the words: “If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed” (16). When the Apostle speaks about the church’s being charged, he seems to suggest that there were cases when the physical needs of the aging widows were supplied out of the congregational treasury when there was no near relative to support them. He recognizes that there is a limit to the capacity of the church to provide such support. But he also hints at a determination on the part of the church to assume the responsibility, shall we say as the second court of appeal either when there are no children or when the children fail their parents. We realize that there is no exact parallel to our present concern inasmuch as there is no reference to aging men. But I am sure that we are not guilty of eisegesis when we see in this chapter an indication that the church also has an obligation of love towards its aging members. We have indicated before that in a welfare state there may not be many cases where the church will have to offer needed financial assistance. But we have shown, I believe, that we who appreciate grace will show our appreciation for it also by being concerned about our aging fellow believers and doing for them what we can. Certainly financial assistance is not the only way of showing that concern. There are activities like visiting the lonely, transporting those that need transportation to services and elsewhere, providing devotional literature, and many more that are open to us.

While homes for the aged have been around for a long time, also in our own circles, recent years have seen a proliferation of them. Many children do not have an extra room in which they can house their parents when they are no longer able to shift for themselves. Some are not able to care for their parents after they have become very infirm, bedridden, or involuntary. Others can’t be bothered. The desire of our people to provide their aging fellow believers with a home is an indication that they want to respond to the Lord’s directives to be concerned about the aging. Cases of outright charity may be comparatively few in number, but cases where the residents of our Lutheran homes for the aged completely cover the costs involved in providing them with a home also are rare. The words “let not the church be charged” justify limitation of the amount of outright charity by the circumstances in each case. When our Christians who are aging need a home, they would prefer one in which a Christian atmosphere prevails. And when their fellow believers pool their resources to provide such a home, they become instruments through which the Lord fulfills his promise to provide for the aging. Grateful reaction to the grace that they themselves have experienced motivates them.

Those who are involved in the day by day operation of such-homes have a special opportunity to demonstrate their appreciation for grace by their attitude toward their work. The public hears a lot about deplorable conditions in some homes for the aging and about the indifferent and even hostile attitude which those who are employed in them show toward their patients. Here the Christians who are involved in such work have an opportunity to be “blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (Php 2:15). Realizing that their Savior has said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Mt 25:40), they will want to show their love for their Lord and their appreciation for his grace by serving their patients as well as they know how. If need be, they will be firm with them, but only because it is for their good. They will curb their natural impulse to become impatient with the eccentricities of the aging, bearing in mind the Golden Rule; “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Mt 7:12). They will go the extra mile to make life as comfortable and pleasant as possible for those for whom they are since their situation is such that there is little in the material side of life which can still bring them joy.

So while aging with grace first of all means that the aging Christian needs to find support in the grace of his God in the changing circumstances which come with the aging process, it also involves this that in his grace the Lord has planted him into a fellowship with others who like him are partakers of grace and who in response to that grace show their love for their gracious Lord in active concern for the aging.