

## Senior Years: Old and New Testament

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### Abstract

*Longevity in the Old Testament is a positive attribute and patriarchal seniority is a blessing. The Israelites were taught to respect their elders for their wisdom and experience. However, the Gospels of the New Testament present a radical position. Jesus dismisses seniority or age distinctions. He asserts that those who will have everlasting life, respect, and honor are those who will experience a change of heart. The Epistles in the New Testament present a modified position in which the Mosaic Law is reinstated but in a compatible manner with Jesus' message. Content analysis of Biblical references, King James Version and the Greek text, make evident these differences in the context of the existing social organizational structure that influences the ideological value system of the times.*

### Introduction

For the past two decades, seniors have become a “hot” issue in the social and political fabric of this nation. “Baby-boomers,” those born between 1946 – 1963, started collecting Social Security and Medicare benefits. In a few more years, some argue, this will add an immense burden on the budget of this country and its economy. Since the number of those who are employed and contribute to this Fund will progressively decline and the number of seniors who will draw money from this Fund will continue to increase, the Social Security Fund will be “bankrupt.”

The world population this year (2010) reached over 6 billion people (6,796,976,920) and the U.S. Census Bureau reports that the U.S.A. population reached over 300 million people (308,502,608). Maryland's population in 2000 was 5,296,486 people. The percentage of those who were under 5 years old was 6.7%; the percentage of those who were under 18 years old was 25.6%; and the percentage of those who were 65 years old and over was 11.3% (598,503 people).

### Table I

Maryland's projected population at the end of this year (2010) will be 5,779,400 people. The percentage of those who will be under 5 years old will remain the same as in 2000. It will be 6.7% percent, although the actual number will slightly increase. The percentage of those who will be under 18 years old will slightly decrease from the year 2000. It will be 23.7% percent. But the percentage of those people 65 years old and older will increase to 12.2%, an estimated number of 705,087 people. Table I

	2000	2010
Persons under 5 years old	6.7 %	6.7 %
Persons under 18 years old	25.6 %	23.7 %
Persons 65 and over	11.3 % (598,503)	12.2 % (705,087)
Total	5,296,486	5,779,400 (estimate)

In 1997 the U.S.A. population age 60 and over was 44,158,531 million people. By the year 2025 it is estimated to be 82,501,033 million people. This constitutes a change from 16.5 % (1997) to 24.6 % (2025).

In other words, one in every four American citizens in 2025 will be a senior citizen, if we assume that 60 is the starting year of seniority. At the same time, the U.S.A. population will have 26,494,235 million people 75 years old and over – a 7.9 % of its population. Table II

Table II		
U.S.A. Population – Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2010		
	1997	2025
Age 60 and over	44,158,531	82,501,033
Percentage	16.5 %	24.6 %
Age 75 and older		26,494,235
Percentage		7.9 %
<hr/>		
Total	267,627,451	335,370,053 (estimate)

Indeed “seniors” is a “hot” issue with serious consequences for long-term care receivers and their political voting preferences. Of course, at times, it is difficult to understand old people, since younger people have not as yet gone through what older people have experienced. It is something else to be sick and recover in few days; however, many older people suffer loss of memory, increasing frailty, and are sick all at the same time and for longer periods. In recent years there has been an increased level of public conversation about long-term care and the role of those who provide care for an increasingly older population. An estimated 43.5 million Americans are family caregivers for people over 50, according to a 2009 survey by the National Alliance for Care-giving. The challenges – physical, emotional, financial, and logistical – are, for many care recipients and care-givers, overwhelming. Indeed, advantages in medical science have increased longevity. As the numbers of elderly increase, how are they going to be perceived or treated? In our predominately Christian nation, what is the view that the Bible holds for old age?

**Old Testament**

How old is *old*? In *Genesis*, Chapters 5 and 11 we read that the early patriarchs lived deep into old age. Adam lived 930 years, Mathuselah 969 years, Abraham 175, Sarah 127, and Joseph 110 years. Table III

Table III

Genesis: Chapter 5

	Adam (Αδάμ) and Eve (Εύα) (930)		
Abel	Cain	Seth (912)	
		Enos (905)	
		Cainan (910)	
		Mahalalel (895)	
		Jared (962)	
		Enoch (365)	
		Mathuselah (969)	
		Lamech (777)	
		Noah (950)	
	Shem (600)	Ham	Japheth

Genesis: Chapter 11

	Arphaxad (403)		
	Salah (433)		
	Eber (464)		
	Paleg (239)		
	Reu (239)		
	Serug (232)		
	Nahor (148)		
	Terah (250)		
Abram	Nahor	Haran	
		Lot Milcah(f) Iscah(f)	
Abraham – Sarah (175)	Hagar (127)	Ishmael	
Isaac (180) - Rebekah			
Esau and Jacob – Lea/Rachel (Bilhah and Zilpah) (147)			
12 sons - Joseph (110)			
Moses (120)			

There are some problems with these Genesis numbers. (Borland, 1986) First, from biological evidence men do not live to be eight or nine hundred years. Second, men do not father children when they are over a century old (i.e., Adam was 130 years old when his son Seth was born; Seth was 105 when his son Enos was born; Mathuselah was 187 when his son Lamech was born; Shem was 100 when his son Arphaxad was born; Abraham was 100 and Sarah over 80 years old when Isaac was born). Such problems disappear, however, if one assumes the following: (a) the original Genesis numbers were not written in decimal notations. They were instead recorded in an archaic, pre-cuneiform, sign-value, number system, similar to what we know today as Roman numerals; (b) the compilers of the original Hebrew text calculated the years/seasons data using one or more archaic number sign for tens, a different sign for tenths, and a different sign for measuring units of weights. This is called sign-value notation. This original text was edited several times. It was edited again in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and later translated into Greek done in Alexandria, Egypt about 280 BC – known to us as the Septuagint (Best, 1999).

It appears that the early scribes had difficulty interpreting correctly the archaic sign-value system, since they did not know which number system the original texts were written and the context in which they were written. When the scribes translated the numbers, probably erroneously assumed they were written in the Sumerian proto-sexagesimal number system. The Sumerians used one system of numbers designed for counting discrete objects such as animals with different notations and a different number system designed for counting volumes of grain (Nissen, 1993). Confusing one system for another creates errors. Such errors converted tens of years to hundreds, years to tens of years, tenths of years to years, and also inflated the ages at death for people who were mentioned in those records (Klein, 1974). Genesis 5 was based on these mistranslated numbers representing the ages of Noah, a Sumerian king of Shuruppak, and his ancestors which were written in clay tablets before the river (Euphrates) flood of 2,900 B.C. The archaic (pre-cuneiform) Sumerian number system was probably created by taxation scribes, so that tax collectors would know who was responsible for paying real-estate taxes. Therefore, when the Old Testament numbers are translated properly, Adam lived to be 81 years old and Mathuselah, the epitome of longevity, lived to be 84.9 years old. Table IV

Since life expectancy in biblical times was perhaps forty for those who lived past the age of five, it is indeed a remarkable achievement for the patriarchs of the Old Testament who lived to be seventy and eighty years old. The confirmation of such longevity can be found in *Psalms 90:10*

*The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*

*(Αι ημέραι της ζωής ημών είναι καθ'εαυτάς εβδομήκοντα έτη, και εαν εν ευρωστία, ογδοήκοντα έτη, πλήν και το καλήτερον μέρος αυτών είναι κόπος και πόνος, διότι ταχέως παρέρχεται, και ημείς πετώμεν.)*

Few scholars suggest that Moses wrote this psalm; however, others point out that the psalm was written by someone else during the Babylonian exile (Dummerow, 1911). The entire psalm contrasts the eternity of God with the transience of human life. Be that as it may, it can be said that such a declaration was somewhat optimistic; nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that there were some individuals, like Moses, who reached the age of eighty.

Adam	81
Seth	79.2
Enos	78.5
Cainan	79
Mahalalel	77.5
Jared	84.2
Enoch	36.5
Mathuselah	84.9
Lamech	63.3
Noah	83

Patriarchal longevity is designated in the Old Testament as having “white” hair (**πολιά**), which is a manifestation of something positive and a blessing. Two biblical occasions characterize old age as a negative, unpleasant and joyless period of one’s life. The “evil” days, Greek text “bad or terrible” days, are the dangers lurking about and above the path of elderly as they approach the grave.

*Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say I have no pleasure in them. ( Ecclesiastes 12:1)*

*(Καί ενθυμού τον Πλάστην σου εν ημέρας της νεότητός σου, πριν έλθωσιν αι κακαί ημέρες και φθάσωσι τα έτη εις τα οποία θέλεις ειπει, δέν έχω ευχαρίστησιν εις αυτά.)*

*Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth; (Psalm 71:9)*

*(Μη με απορρίψης εν καιρώ γήρατος, όταν εκλείπη η δύναμις μου, μη με εγκαταλίπης;)*

Although this description is evident in Ecclesiastes and Psalm seventy-one; nevertheless, in the years of Noah, Abraham, and Moses people were taught to respect all elders. They were taught to honor seniors for their wisdom and experience.

Mosaic Law stipulated the death penalty for parental (older people) abuse, because parental reverence was regarded as a religious, not merely a social, duty.

*And he that smiteth his father or his mother, shall be surely put to death; Exodus 21:15*  
(Και όστις πατάζει τον πατέρα αυτού η την μητέρα αυτού, θέλει εξάπαντος θανατωθή.)

In *Deuteronomy 27:16* there are curses against those who do not honor or who speak ill of their parents.

*Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother and all the people shall say Amen;*  
(Επικατάρατος όστις κακολογήση τον πατέρα αυτού η την μητέρα αυτού και πας ο λαός θέλει ειπεί Αμήν;)

Yahweh in the Old Testament was described as old and wise.

*I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of Days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; Daniel 7:9*  
(Εθεώρουν έως ότου οι θρόνοι ετέθησαν, και ο Παλαιός των Ημερών εκάθισε, του οποίου το ένδυμα ήτο λευκό ως χιών, και οι τρίχες της κεφαλής αυτού ήτο ως μαλλίον καθαρόν;)

Since God was the “Ancient One,” He demanded that His people respect and honor Him; therefore, He expected and required that those who were older be respected and honored as well.

*Thou shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man, and fear thy God. I am the Lord; Leviticus 19:32*  
(Ενώπιον της πολιός θέλεις προσηκόνεσθαι, και θέλεις τιμήσει το πρόσωπον του γέροντος, και θέλεις φοβηθή τον Θεόν σου. Εγώ είμαι ο Κύριος;)

In *Proverbs 23:22* Solomon exhorts his son to listen to his father and not to look down upon his mother when she is old. The verb υπάκουε in the Greek text means more than merely “listen.” It suggests a degree of respect which borders on obedience to one’s father.

*Harken unto thy father that begat thee and despise not thy mother when she is old.*  
(Υπάκουε εις τον πατέρα σου, όστις σε εγέννησε, και μη καταφρόνει την μητέρα σου όταν γηράση)

In *Job*, we read Elihu, the younger of Job’s friends, waited until the older men had spoken to Job first. He also treated his communication to Job with admiration and respect, since Job was his elder.

Having elders in Hebrew families was a blessing and their absence was considered a grave misfortune. Eli’s punishment was that he will not experience the joys of having elders in his family.

*Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father’s house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house for ever, said the Lord. I Samuel 2:31*  
(Ιδού, έρχονται ημέραι, ότε θέλω κόψει τον βραχίονα σου, και τον βραχίονα του οίκου του πατρός σου, ώστε άνθρωπος γέρων δεν θέλει είσθαι εν τω οίκω σου. Ο Κύριος λέγει.)

The verses in this chapter may refer to the massacre of the priests in Nob; however, the image is very clear - the obscurity of one’s family was considered a serious affliction. In *Exodus 20* we find the Ten Commandments Yahweh gave to Moses. They establish the ethical and moral foundation of Israelites’ relationship to God and amongst themselves (Dummerow, 1911). It is worth noticing that only one commandment has a “reward” attached to it, while all others do not mention any reward. If one obeys the fifth commandment *Honor thy father and thy mother*, he or she is rewarded with longevity *that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee*.

Obviously, the conditions under which the Israelites lived during those times were very demanding and difficult. Nomadic existence, a social organizational structure of early Israelite life, had an impact on family elders, “forcing” them to heavily depend on younger members. There was no Social Security system, organized welfare program, or any insurance protection plan. However, this commandment not only “speaks” about the physical obligations children must fulfill towards their parents, it mostly “speaks” about honor.

In this sense, it does not distinguish between which parents deserve honor and which do not deserve it. They all must be honored. While the parents that Moses led out of Egypt did not settle in God's Promised Land, children who honor their parents will be given a long life on the land that God has promised. Longevity is a precious, wonderful, and desirable blessing.

The purpose of longevity is to declare for a long time the greatness of the Lord and the fact that He is just, righteous, and one's rock (English text); but more powerfully a fortress φρούριον – as written in the Greek text.

*To shew that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

*Psalm 92:15*

*(Διά να αναγγέλλωσιν ότι δίκαιος είναι ο Κύριος, το φρούριον μου, και δεν υπάρχει αδικία εν αυτό.)*

This is why God blesses people with long years on this earth. This is why Yahweh rewards people with white hair, and offers the sweet promise found in Isaiah

*And even to your old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you; I have made you, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you; Isaiah 46:4*

*(Και έως του γήρατος σας εγώ αυτός είμαι, και έως των λευκών τριχών εγώ θέλω σας βαστάσει, εγώ σας έκαμα και εγώ θέλω σας σηκώσει, και εγώ θέλω σας βαστάσει και σώσει.)*

It has been stated that such verses in Isaiah addressed those Jews who were inclined to object to God's manner of deliverance from the hands of Cyrus, the Persian king and conqueror of Palestine (Dummerow, 1911). Nevertheless, they do point out the willingness of God to sustain the aged no matter what tribulations they suffered.

### **The New Testament-Gospels**

The Gospels of the New Testament present a radical position. Jesus dismisses seniority or age distinctions. He asserts that those who will have everlasting life, respect, and honor are those who will experience a change of heart.

Seniority, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, appears to be of little value and parental honor somewhat ignored. Consider the following three examples:

First, in this instance Jesus ignores his mother and his brothers.

*There came then his brethren and his mother, and standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, behold my mother and my brethren! Mark 3:31-34*

*(Έρχονται λοιπόν οι αδελφοί και η μήτηρ αυτού, και σταθέντες έξω απέστειλον προς αυτόν, και έκραζον αυτόν. Και εκάθητο όχλος περι αυτόν είπον δε προς αυτόν, ιδού η μήτηρ σου και οι αδελφοί σου έξω σε ζητούσι. Και απεκρίθη προς αυτούς, λέγων, τις είναι η μήτηρ μου η οι αδελφοί μου. Και περιβλέψας κύκλω προς τούς καθημένους περι αυτόν, λέγει, ιδού η μήτηρ μου και οι αδελφοί μου.)*

Second, in this instance Jesus states the following:

*For I come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Matthew 10:35*

*(Διότι ήλθον να διαχωρίσω άνθρωπον κατά του πατρός αυτού, και θυγατέρα κατά της μητρός αυτής και νύμφην κατά της πενθεράς αυτής.)*

Third, in this instance Jesus declares:

*If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:26*

*(Εάν τις έρχηται προς με και δεν μισή τον πατέρα αυτού, και την μητέρα, και την γυναίκα, και τα τέκνα, και τούς αδελφούς, και τας αδελφάς, έτι δε και την εαυτού ζωήν, δεν δύναται να ήναι μαθητής μου.)*

Such radical positions can be understood, if one considers the following two assumptions: First, the Jesus Movement was in the beginning, as often is the case, a small, minority group. As such, in those historical times, some families had members that belonged to this emerging sect while other members looked with disdain upon their brethren who entertained thoughts of joining this sect.

It is reasonable to think that family members may have had serious theological rifts amongst themselves. Perhaps some family members persecuted and stoned to death their own relatives who expressed sympathies to this movement. Consider the case of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. The early sympathizers, if they were to sustain their commitment to the Jesus Movement, had to radically separate themselves from the dictates of their own traditional (Mosaic) values or those their close relatives adhered to. If they were to face the difficult challenges that befell upon them, they had to endure them alone because no close relative was in a position to assist or help them on such matters. Second, Jesus' message was antithetical to the existing Sadducean and Pharisaic pronouncements. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the "presbyters" and "fathers" of the Israelites. Most of them were indeed elders, the establishment while the Jesus Movement attracted mostly younger folks. It was the "Woodstock" generation of its time! In this sense, the above statements by Jesus can be metaphorical as well. That is to say, Jesus does not recommend a literal break from one's father or mother, but a "break" from the old attitudes and values of an established system. This can be confirmed in *Mark 7:10-12* where Jesus confirms the Mosaic Law stating that *whoso curseth father or mother let him die the death*. The Greek text uses the verb *κακολογώ*, meaning those who slander their parents. It is not suggesting a curse (*κατάρα*). Further, Jesus states that the Pharisees nullified the Law of God by their disgraceful treatment of the elderly.

If the message was to clearly stand against the "elders" in real or metaphorical terms, the message, at the same time, included the incredible and inestimable respect one ought to show toward one's father. Consider the parable in *Luke 15:11-32* where a certain father at the request of his younger son offers him all that belongs to him. The son takes his portion and leaves his father's household. Years later, having lost everything and in a desperate position, the son returns. Upon his return and while he was far from his father's home, the father saw him and ran towards him. He hugged and kissed him. He told the servants to bring clean clothes for his son, prepare a great meal, and celebrate because his son, he said, was lost and was found again! Such an act was contrary to the prevailing logic of the city "elders." The father's compassion is a respectable and honorable attribute. This graceful gift is given freely no matter what prior wrongs or sins one has committed, as long as there is an internal, personal and voluntary change of heart – *μετάνοια*. The Greek verb *μετανοώ* means a real *change* of one's *mind* – an understanding or knowledge one acquires *after* an act (behavior) previously committed but now one regrets. The young son exhibited such genuine change of *mind* (heart). The father was also graceful to the elder son, who was very angry that his father prepared such a lavish feast. He did not enter his father's house to participate in the celebration. When the father heard about it, he went out to meet him. He reassured him that he was as beloved as the second son; but we do not know if the rigid, second son changed his heart!

Changing one's heart is not contingent upon age; therefore, seniority is not a pre-requisite to receiving the graceful gifts of respect and honor. Jesus does not wish to make or recognize age distinctions. Consider the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus.

*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? John 3:4*

*(Λέγει πρὸς αὐτόν ὁ Νικόδημος, πὼς δύναται ἄνθρωπος να γεννηθῆ γέρων ὢν. Μήποτε δύναται να εισέλθῃ δευτέραν φοράν εις την κοιλίαν της μητρός και να γεννηθῆ?)*

In the ensuing discussion, Jesus reveals to Nicodemus the essence of his message which was in direct opposition to the narrow Pharisaic interpretation in which Nicodemus had been nurtured. The Pharisees confined salvation to their own single group (race) and believed that the coming Messiah would judge all others with extreme severity. (Dummerow, 1911) However, Jesus offers a more powerful pronouncement that God has sent His Son to save all people in the world, and not exclude any part of it.

*For God so loveth the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever (young or old as you Nicodemus) believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16*

*(Διότι τόσον ηγάπησεν ὁ Θεὸς τον κόσμον, ὥστε ἔδωκε τον Υἱόν αὐτοῦ τον μονογενή, διὰ να μην ἀπολεσθῆ πας ὁ πιστεύων εις αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ να ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.)*

The New Testament-Epistles

The Epistles restore the traditional Mosaic Law and place parental honor in the context of Jesus' message. In *Ephesians 6:1-4*, written circa 70-90 A.D., we read:

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right; Honor thy father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise that it may be well with thee and thou may live long on the earth. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*  
(*Τα τέκνα, θπακούετε εις τους γονείς σας εν Κυρίω, διότι τούτο είναι δίκαιο. Τίμα τον πατέρα σου και την μητέρα σου, ήτις είναι εντολή πρώτη με επαγγελίαν διά να γείνη εις σε καλόν και να ήσαι μακροχρόνιος επί της γης. Και οι πατέρες, μη παροργίζετε τα τέκνα σας, αλλά εκτρέφετε αθτά εν παιδεία και νουθεσία Κυρίου.*)

Notice in this passage that there is a modification and an attempt to balance the traditional Mosaic admonition, honor your father and your mother, with the Jesus message, in the Lord – the Lord in this case being Christ. It is the Jesus who gave His life, so that one can have, if he or she believes in His resurrection, everlasting life. Notice again, that this passage establishes a balanced responsibility between children and parents (elders). While Dr. Spock was not known to the early Christians, they were instructed to treat their children in a decent manner, once again not for its own sake but in the Lord, (εν Κυρίω.)

In *I Timothy 5:1-4*, written circa 63-65 A.D., we read:

*Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father...the elder women as mothers...let them (children) first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents, for that is good and acceptable before God.*  
(*Πρεσβύτερον μη επιπλήξης, αλλά πρότρεπε ως πατέρα...τας πρεσβυτέρας ως μητέρας...τα (τέκνα η έγκονα) ας μανθάνωσι πρώτον να καθιστώσιν ευσεβή τον ίδιον αυτών οίκον και να αποδίδωσιν αμοιβάς εις τούς προγόνους αυτών, διότι τούτο είναι καλόν και ευπρόσδεκτον ενώπιον του Θεού.*)

It is the responsibility of children to honor parents and ancestors because such behavior is pleasing and acceptable to God.

In *I Peter 5:5*, written circa 64-68 A.D., we read:

*Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder...for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble... the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus...make you perfect, strengthen, settle you...*  
(*Ομοίως οι νεώτεροι υποτάχθητε εις τούς πρεσβυτέρους...διότι ο Θεός ανιτάσσεται εις τούς υπερηφάνους εις τούς ταπεινούς δίδει χάριν...ο δε Θεός πάσης χάριτος, όστις εκάλεσεν ημάς εις την αιώνιον αυτου δόξα δια του Χριστου Ιησού...αυτός θα σας τελειοποιήση, ενισχύση, θεμελειώση...*)

In *II Timothy 1:5*, written circa 67 A.D., we read:

*When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in the also...*  
(*Ανακαλών εις την μνήμην μου την εν σοι ανιπόκριτον πίστιν, ήτις πρώτον κατώκησεν εν τη μάμμη σου Λωίδι, και εν τη μητρί σου Ευνίκη, είμαι δε πεπεισμένος ότι και εν σοι...*)

What is evident in this passage is the unmistakable generational faith passed on by grandmother to mother to son, which is the consequence of love in Christ. In other words, faith in Christ is passed by parent to child as part of the love in Him. As a result, the ability one has to do the right thing depends on the ethics taught by Jesus – unconditional love and sacrifice. In return for the honor children exhibit towards their parents through the love of Christ, instilled in them by their parents, they receive a long and everlasting life. In the Old Testament, longevity was a consequence of duty and obedience to the Law. During the Jesus movement (Gospels), it was radicalized and somewhat dismissed. In early Christianity (Epistles) it was a consequence of traditional law filtered through the personal relationship one had with Christ and His message.

How are the elderly treated in the current, predominately Christian, American setting? As secularization increased and social conditions changed, the responses toward the elderly have changed. Prior to the Depression, families in most instances did honor and take care of the elderly. During the Great Depression older folks were considered a liability, since many had to look for means to sustain themselves. As the population increased and became more urbanized distances between relatives and family members increased. This made it increasingly more difficult to take care of older people. Additionally, government programs such as the Social Security Act, and more recently Medicare, had an impact on how young people view their elder parents and grandparents. In the 1960's when personal independence and career paths for two parents dominated the American Dream, relationships between parents and children were placed on the "back" burner! In the 70's the "latch-key" children learned that they should take care of themselves first and the elderly can do the same for themselves.



Since the “baby-boomers” were not tended to, they did not feel as much obligation to tend to their parents. After all, there was a Social Security system to take care of those needs. It is not difficult to assume that the generation of the 80’s and 90’s, will have little to do with the elderly as well. The secularization of society eroded the Christian message and left a negative impact on traditional Christian family values. Also, the continuous bureaucratization of social life led to the development of seemingly “rational” structures which replaced the functions accomplished by family members at earlier times. As this process continued, the promotion of “youth” took over, placing the elderly on the margins of our social conscience.

The picture one can draw about the elderly, from the current scene, is for the most part negative. They are made to feel useless, ignored, and are cast off from society. Many voices lament the fact that many of the elderly are placed in nursing homes. How else can one explain the booming industry associated with the development of Assistant Living Centers and Nursing Homes? It is a consequence of a societal shift. In fact, in some such places one can find evidence of elderly abuse, crowded and understaffed facilities, and some degree of “bullying” by uncaring staff members towards defenseless residents. Allen Teal has pointed out that some Nursing Homes and some doctors milk the cow of Medicare with multiple testing and monthly office visits. One could defend these practices, which might be the result of increased litigations against doctors; however, the practice is evident also in the increased consumption of all kinds of products medical industries promote for the elderly: such as walkers, canes, motor-wheelchairs, bath tubs, and the like. These products are helpful to some, but are often promoted, for consumption purposes, as necessary for all.

On the other hand, many voices do promote the concept that the elderly can save our society from its own destruction. The elderly are worthy of our praise and admiration. The contributions they can and could offer are numerous: volunteers at hospitals, assistants with regard to child rearing, and kindergarten or elementary volunteer teachers. Indeed their wisdom, which they have gained through years of experience, can be helpful to many impatient young men and women. Most of them are prudent, live an orderly life, and the wisdom they acquired is evidence of their art of living well for such a long time – a societal benefit. A good argument can be made that respect and honor must be restored towards the elders. (Baylis, Stark, Campbell). It remains an open question which side will prevail.

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