

Embracing Aging: Helping Parents in Life's Last Season

by Ken and Doris Bickel

In the recent past, both of us have lost our mothers – Ken in April of 2013, and Doris just this past fall. Both of our fathers had died at a much earlier age (largely due to poor personal health habits), but our mothers lived into their early nineties. Traveling that journey into advanced aging taught us a few things that we wish we'd known earlier. Perhaps what we learned through our experience could be helpful for anyone who will face the aging and death of loved ones.

There are many things that could be said about serving and interacting with our aging loved ones – far too much to cover all at once. So, instead, we will focus on one general topic: namely, the conversations to be had and encouragements to be given to our parents regarding a biblical perspective on aging. These are the kind of perspectives that will help people face the aging process with expectations and outlooks that can shape and influence the quality of life; we both wish we had taken the opportunity to engage in these conversations with our mothers.

Help them embrace a balanced view on possessions.

Sometimes an elderly person's possessions represent family heirlooms and hold special connections to special memories of people and events from their lifetime. This reality should be affirmed. Yet, at the same time, it's a good thing when aging people can hold these possessions with a loose grip, and even begin the process of passing them on to future generations.

Both of our mothers did this. They took great joy in identifying which items they wished to leave to younger loved ones, which helped minimize feelings of loss as they went through the process of relinquishing valuables. They had enjoyed those possessions as gifts from God; now, at the proper time, they could pass them along as gifts from God to others they know and love. Having both of our mothers do this was a great personal blessing to us, and as they drew nearer to death, they had freedom from the burden of thinking about all of their possessions.

Help them adopt a balanced view of independence.

Independence has a good side; it calls for proactivity and responsibility, which both add to the feeling of leading a meaningful life. Some of the elderly people Doris has spoken with have been demoralized by the loss of virtually

all opportunities to make decisions. Others have unilaterally placed them in a care facility and the care facility now governs almost every aspect of their lives. As a result, personal dignity is diminished.

At the same time, as people age, they should realize that times will come when they will have to relinquish independence. They should be wise about engaging in heavy physical labor. They should realize that driving becomes more dangerous for them (and for others), especially at nighttime. They should accept it when the time comes to use a cane or a walker. This takes humility and they should realize that humility is a valuable quality in God's eyes, for it represents wisdom.

This wisdom especially must be embraced when considering whether the aging person should give up the matter of living alone. Children who want to care for their aging parents experience anxiety when they think of those parents living alone, as instability and forgetfulness increases gradually. Both sides of the equation (adult children and their aging parents) should adopt attitudes of selflessness and concern for the other as they discuss different options.

Doris and I both faced some difficult days as discussions and decisions were made regarding this issue. Both of our mothers, when they came to understand that they needed help, willingly allowed us to join them on their checking accounts and oversee the payment of bills. They also had wills and other legal documents prepared, giving children the right to make medical decisions and calling for no extraordinary measures to prolong life. This took the burden off of children caught in the midst of an emotionally charged environment. They did make their own funeral preparations, and even paid for it in advance, so that things were conducted in the way that they wanted. That was pleasing to them and took the burden off of those who would have to make those decisions during a time of grief.

Help them develop a balanced view of their demeanor when confronted with changing circumstances.

As some people age they carry with them an "entitlement mentality" that they developed earlier in their lives. As they age, they tend to become more demanding and cling to their self-conceived right to make self-centered decisions. They expect the ministry of others (rather than appreciating that



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ministry) and thus tend to become increasingly cranky about people meeting their needs.

This not only makes life miserable for their adult children and care facility workers, but the aging parents themselves are less and less happy as their expected demands are not met. All of this is then magnified when the aging individuals resist change. Change does yield feelings of insecurity, so this should not be ignored or dismissed, but change of living circumstances usually becomes necessary for those who live into their late eighties and nineties. Frustrations and breakdowns in family relationships can be avoided if these issues and feelings are embraced and managed with loving care.

Help them understand that adult children and caregivers do care about them – but cannot ignore the responsibilities to care for them with wisdom.

Wise are those aging parents who allow their children to care for them by making difficult yet caring decisions. Independently rejecting help from loved ones (especially as that help becomes more and more necessary) can be a matter of arrogance. Arrogance is not a righteous attitude in the Lord's eyes.

Help them have a hope for the future.

Aging adults can have a legitimate hope for their final years here on earth. That's found in continuing to have a meaningful life even if it's not a life of independence and self-sufficiency. Whether it's a ministry of encouragement to others in their same circumstances of life, or a ministry of writing cards to children and grandchildren, or a ministry of prayer for a wide variety of things – the list could go on and on with some creative thought invested into the topic – aging people can have a meaningful influence in others' lives. But, practically speaking, that's probably only true if they remain positive about life in general.

Then, of course, they can also have a wonderful hope for a future life with the Lord, if in fact they have trusted in the Lord Jesus for their redemption. Then, there will be no more tears, no more suffering, no more pain, no more sin, no more broken relationships; all that will be gone and they will experience a glory they can hardly imagine by being in the presence of the Lord. At that time, they'll undoubtedly wonder why they ever clung to this life so tenaciously.

Of course, much more could be said, but the above is probably enough at this point to stir your thinking around this topic. We trust you will have the confidence of the Lord and blessing of His guidance as you seek to care for your aging parents if, in fact, that opportunity for ministry awaits you in the days to come.

