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Caring for Your Aging Parents

In a special series of articles called, "Caring for the Elderly," in the *Gospel Advocate*, April 1999 issue, an article was featured; "Parenting Your Parents" by Walter B. Edwards. Brother Edwards describes how his widowed mother, at age 85, came to live with him and his wife. He writes, "She had lost weight, was not eating properly, was not getting out of the house, and was not careful about her appearance."

Walter's wife, Susan, quit her job and became the full-time caregiver for her mother-in-law. This is not unusual. Research indicates that women are likely to provide higher levels of care for aged parents than do men. It is not that men are failures as caregivers; many men faithfully care for their ailing wives or mothers. It seems that God granted some women special gifts when it comes to functioning as care givers. As my own mother lay dying, I heard her say to the nurse, "I wish I had a daughter. She would have taken care of me. I only had boys."

Brother Edwards continued, "Caring for my mother, especially during the latter years, was the most difficult, most demanding thing my wife and I have ever undertaken in the 44 years we have been married." Their living room first became a hospital ward than eventually turned into a hospice room. The Edwards not only did the right thing and set the right example for others, they obeyed God's directive to "provide for his own" (**1 Tim. 5:8**).

In his discussion of how to treat widows, Paul directed Timothy, "But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God" (**1 Tim. 5:4**). Four verses later, Paul picks up the theme of aged widows again. "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (**1 Tim. 5:8**). Every child must find the way that best covers the need, but the obligation is clearly given.

The instruction to provide for one's "own" likely refers to spouses, children, and aged parents and grandparents. Providing for those "of his household" likely refers to aged members of his extended family who are desolate and in need of care (aunts, uncles, etc.). What about the elderly aunt who had no children? Her nieces and nephews have the responsibility to provide for her as well.

God-fearing people have always cared for and respected their parents. Number five of the Ten Commandments required, "Honor your father and your mother . . ." (**Ex. 20:12**). Paul repeated the command in the New Testament and wrote that this "is the first commandment with promise" (**Eph. 6:2**). Under the Law of Moses, one who cursed his father or his mother was to receive the death penalty (cf. **Ex. 21:17**). In the social laws that God gave Israel through Moses were these words, "Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father . . ." (**Lev. 19:3**). Later, in the same chapter, Moses wrote, "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**). The prayer for the aged included in Psalm 71 includes the plea, "Do not cast me off in my time of old age; Do not forsake me when my strength fails" (**Ps. 71:9**).

Perhaps the most negative example of a failure to care for one's aged parents is found in the warning by Jesus in **Mark 7:8-13**. Jesus warned them, "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"—' (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down . . ." (**Mark 7:11-13**). The hypocrites addressed by Jesus were devising ways to avoid discharging their responsibilities to their parents.

The purpose of this lesson chapter is twofold. First, it presents evidence that God expects adults to care for their aged parents. Second, this chapter shares recommendations from those who have experienced honoring their parents by caring for them in their golden years.

In addition to the physical price of the wear and tear on the caregivers, the financial cost of caring for your aged parents can be enormous. Aged parents and their adult children could alleviate much headache by discussing available incomes and budgets before the need arises for members of the older generation to require physical help to meet their daily needs. It seems morbid to discuss end-of-life matters while our parents are healthy and strong, but the necessity for discussing such matters requires us to get out of our comfort zones.

According to a 2014 report by the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2030 more than 20% of U.S. residents, almost one in five Americans, will be aged 65 or over. Indications are that in the next ten years 76

million baby boomers will either be taking care of aged parents or find themselves needing care from their own children and family. It is estimated that 41.3% of all personal caregivers of senior citizens are their adult children. God made provisions for aged parents by designating their adult children as their primary providers.

In 1981, Professor Dorothy Miller of the University of Louisville coined the term "sandwich-generation" to describe adults who are sandwiched between their aging parents and their own children. This means that while spending money and time on the education and growth of their children, middle-aged adults may be investing resources in the care of their aged parents. One of the most stressful periods of family life is when the caregiver is providing care for loved ones in at least two generations that are separated by decades but may share the same home.

Caring for aging parents is not just a challenge for Christian families. The Jewish community in particular produces literature aimed at caregivers for aged parents. In a 2012 article in Washington Jewish Week, an anonymous author shared tips to help caregivers deal with the stress involved in taking care of your aged parents. Included among the excellent suggestions was the concept of asking for help from relatives and friends as well as marshaling community resources.

Do not make promises about nursing homes and assisted living facilities that cannot be kept. It is easy to make promises when aged parents are healthy and not in need of long-term care. Guilt awaits those adult children who make promises like, "I will never put you in a nursing home," if indeed that proves to be the best course of action. Nursing homes are sometimes the best alternative for the quality of care and the aged parent's unique circumstances. Adult children should not feel guilty for making decisions that provide the best care for their loved ones.

Discuss medical directives like living wills and preferences about long-term life support. At first, senior citizens may express reluctance to discuss these matters with statements like, "Let's talk about this later. We just need to enjoy this moment now." Discussing the long-term needs and expectations of aged parents will take a heavy burden off of adult children about end of life decisions for their loved-ones. It will also relieve the parent to know that his or her long-term needs will be met. It is especially important to make sure that wills, deeds, and other legal documents are available to the adult children in the event that the parent dies.

One very painful subject must be addressed: the loss of mental capacity among some elderly parents may result in hurtful words being said that will outlive the parent. Consider the following true story. The aged mother, who had not stood in years, was standing at the foot of her hospital bed

against doctor's orders. The nurses said she had to be restrained in bed to prevent her from falling. Papers had to be signed. As the middle-aged son signed the papers his mother's consciousness came back momentarily. With tears in her eyes she said to him, "You are the last one I thought would turn against me." Twenty-five years have passed, but the memories of Mother's words still haunt my memory.

For some explained reason, if there are multiple children in the family, the one who does the least and comes about less often will sometimes become the aged parent's favorite child. Those who have experienced this phenomenon recall the broken hearts they experienced as a result. The one who is providing the day to day cleanings, bathing, and diaper changing hour after hour is seldom thanked. Yet the adult child who has neglected responsibilities is often praised and adored as the favorite child. It is good for caregivers to remind themselves of three things at this point. First, the ailing person is not responsible for comments made under their present duress. Second, you are repaying the care you received as an infant and small child. Wayne Jackson remarked, "As one received care as a child, so it is his responsibility to return that care to the needy parent." Third, you are obeying God in your efforts to care for your parent, regardless if the aged parent acknowledges your sacrifice or not. Knight reminds us, "Thus for a professed believer who has God's law ("honor your father and your mother") to fail to do what even many unbelievers instinctively do warrants the verdict that he is "worse than an unbeliever."

The Mayo Clinic published a list of things to look for if you have aged parents. The list includes the issues involving personal hygiene, memory loss, and safety at home and on the road, weight loss, moods, isolation, and mobility. It is easy to be in denial about the behavior or mental capacity of our loved ones; we want to overlook the warning signs of long-term problems. When a medical diagnosis is given, become an expert in that ailment so that you will be aware of the related issues. Encourage your elderly loved ones to be as socially active as possible. Many seniors seem to enjoy gathering with members of their own cohort. They have lived in the same times, with the same music, memories, and tragedies.

If your parents are deceased, you have memories of their last days. There might be things that you would do differently, but hopefully you have no regrets. If you are currently caring for an aged parent, you know this narrative well. Determine to take care of your parent so that you do not have to second guess yourself in years to come. If your parents are healthy and vibrant, please take time to discuss the important issues that will help you face the time when their health fades and their strength fails.