

Responsibilities of Older Men in the Lord

Today, I want to discuss the responsibilities of older men and we should start by turning to Is 61:3 because this verse gives a metaphor for a person's life, which is that of an oak tree. *They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.* We all know an oak tree starts as a small acorn and matures into a large tree (The root word for tree means solid, steadfast, true). I'm sure there are many stages to a tree's life, but I am going to break down the metaphor for man into four stages: childhood, young man, mature man, and older man. This is also confirmed in 1 Jn 2:12 as John characterizes the stages of a man's life into children, young men, and fathers. (Note, I break fathers into two subcategories: mature men and older men)

We also see this same metaphor (although we don't know what type of tree) in Ps 1, *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.* Note in this verse the psalmist not only likens our lives to a tree but also that our lives have seasons. There is a winter where things are quiet and dormant, spring where fruit is started, summer when it grows, and fall when it is harvested. So, from Isaiah 61 and 1 Jn 2, we have stages in the life of a man, and from Ps 1 we see there are seasons of productivity in our lives.

Now we need some criterion, or metric, to mark the transition from one stage of life to another. The most applied metric would be age, but I am not going to use this as it is arbitrary and really does not reflect what I want to say, so we are going to use the idea of responsibility to measure the movement from one stage to the other. By responsibility I mean adult responsibility; you have a spouse, dependents or extended familial commitments, a job, community and or church obligations: it is the idea that other people in your sphere are critically dependent upon you.

- a. Childhood: no responsibility.
- b. Young Man: little or some responsibility.
- c. Mature Man: lots of responsibility.
- d. Older Man: discharged responsibility.

These stages are true of all men, but we are interested in how we deal with them as believers. So, before we go on, let me make three comments:

- A. First, God did not call us to be believers at the same stage. Some of you became Christians when you were children, others as young men, others as mature men, and some of you as older men. I do not know why He called you at the time He called you, but I want you all to be thankful that He did call you.
- B. Second, God has blessings and opportunity for us at each stage, so if you missed one, you are in one now, so seize the opportunity and the blessings you have before you!
- C. Third, learning to manage the responsibilities of a stage, and transitioning from one stage to another can be difficult. Why is this?
 - 1. No (or very few) role models.
 - 2. Not a lot of teaching or emphasis on it.

3. It is hard for us to ask for help.
4. Adverse cultural messages, emasculation, and feminization.
5. We abdicate. Sometimes it is just easier to let things ride.

Today I want to focus on the last stage, that of the older man. To do so I'm going to do three things,

1. Define older men and the goal of older men.
2. Discuss some sins that hold us back.
3. Discuss an example of an older man to whom we may aspire.

Older Men, a Definition, and their Goal.

What is an older man? You are an older man when the bulk of your responsibilities have been discharged: your wife is trained (just kidding) the kids are raised and on their own path, your job is winding down (or done), and your community obligations are lessened. Tit 2:2 states that at this stage a man should be *temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance*. In the season of a tree's life this is the fruit bearing stage (Ps 1). Note fruit is composed of two things: a seed and flesh.

What is the seed? The seed is your legacy. There is a difference between an inheritance (what you leave behind to someone) and a legacy (what you leave behind in someone). Note one is much more difficult than the other. Leaving a legacy can mean many things: what character traits did you instill in your kids or those within your influence? What values did you leave them with? What world view did you impart? What vision of life do they have? In other words, what part of yourself did you leave within each person with whom you were involved?

What is the flesh? The flesh is your time, your finances, your spiritual gift, your accumulated expertise, and acumen. It is the summation of your life experience, skill, and wisdom. Now here is the most incredible thing, fruit is meant to be eaten. So as older men, we are to be metaphorically picked and consumed. This is our goal; we are to allow ourselves to be plucked and eaten, and our seed is then to be left behind and planted to take root in another. Note the alternative is bleak, and that is if you are not plucked and consumed, you eventually become over ripe, drop to the ground, rot, and your seed wastes away in the sun.

I also want you to note that to give away your life experience, skill, wisdom, gifts, (or to be metaphorically eaten) requires effective communication. You cannot give of yourself to another without the ability to communicate freely and effectively what you know. However there are some things that can prevent your consumption. Another way to phrase it is there are some sins which can hinder your communication and poison your fruit; which now leads to a discussion of,

The Seven Deadly Sins of people over Seventy (partially adapted from 13 ugly habits of older people).

1. Making every conversation an organ recital or a complain fest. I can't tell you how many conversations I have had with people who in some way, find out I am a physician, and then proceed to tell me their most pressing medical concerns. They don't ask for my permission, they just assume I am interested and so unload. Other topics may include politics, food or gas prices,

or their family woes. But the common denominator is a complaining spirit that is self-absorbed and oblivious to the person in front of them.

2. Providing unsolicited advice. Because of our life experience we often have solutions to a loved one's or another's problems, but as a rule of thumb most people would rather be heard than given a fix. Advice is valuable, but only when it is asked for. Don't insert yourself where you are not invited.
3. Providing an unsolicited opinion. I was at a memorial service for a friend when I saw a woman there who I hadn't seen for years. I approached her to say hello and the first thing she did was tell me how a bad a shape we were in as a country. She proceeded to tell me she was living in Minnesota and was so proud of helping to kick out ICE. I replied with "Ok, nice to see you again" and left. She had completely politicized our conversation from the very first sentence. She provided an unsolicited political opinion and destroyed our interaction.
4. Playing the victim. As we get older life becomes harder: our health can fail, we lose loved ones, we sometimes see our families blow apart, and any number of life tragedies can hit us: and with all these woes, it is easy to play the victim. We can fall into a trap of feeling sorry for ourselves and our every conversation becomes "a woe is me" session (i.e. no one visits me, no one calls me!). No one wants to be around a person like that because every interaction carries blame. Ironically, the more one plays the victim, the resulting social isolation reinforces the sense of victimhood. It is a terrible spiral.
5. Living in the past. Memories are great but life is not lived there. Don't let your conversations drift backwards. In other words listen to the story of the person you are speaking with without the compulsion to tell yours.
6. Refusing to adapt or learn new things. This is a hard one because it is more difficult to learn as we mature. But we use that as an excuse not to engage our minds. We become intellectually fossilized; and this can limit our interaction with others. This is especially true of technology. We often hesitate to explore ways in which other generations communicate and so limit our abilities to connect with them. Not on Facebook? Instagram? Not using facetime, or electronic messaging? Not current with popular music, shows, movies, etc.? Don't remain trapped in your generational paradigm. We have so many ways in which to learn and engage. But first, we have to have the mind set to do it.
7. Refusing help. One of the wonderful things about America is our collective sense of self sufficiency and independence. But as we mature we become less and less of these things. Sometimes our sense of pride cuts off the willing graciousness of others who want to help. It is a difficult balance to strike, but pride can isolate you. Let people help even at times when you don't need it. Letting people in to help creates connection and allows them to use their gifts.

The Caleb Club, (lessons for older people from the life of Caleb).

Caleb is one of my favorite Biblical people. Born into slavery in Egypt he grew up making bricks and suffering under the oppression of Egyptian slave masters. He witnessed the ten plagues. He participated in the first Passover and witnessed the consequences of the angel of death who destroyed the firstborn of Egypt. He participated in the urgent march out of Egypt and felt the anxiety and fear of Pharaoh's

approaching army as the Israelites were trapped at the Red Sea. He saw God's deliverance as the Red Sea parted and he crossed over with his countrymen on the dry ocean floor. He witnessed the destruction of Pharaoh's troops and chariots. He saw God's leading in the form of the cloud by day and the fire at night. He partook of God's daily provision of manna, and on two occasions, water from the rock. He saw the provision of quail for meat. He witnessed the giving of the law at Mt Sinai. He saw the orgy and idolatry of the golden calf. He saw God bring them to the edge of Canaan where we first meet him in scripture in Numbers 13:6.

Caleb was chosen from the tribe of Judah to be part of the spies to scope out the land. The verse tells us he was the son of Jephunneh. Num 32:12 tells us Jephunneh was a Kenizzite. Gen 15 describes God's promise to Abraham to give him the land of Canaan. God confirms His promise with an ancient rite of contract by walking between the carcasses of a ram, a goat, a heifer, a dove, and a pigeon. We pick up the narrative in verse 17,

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi^[e] of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites,²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites,²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

Note the Kenizzites were inhabitants of the land prior to Abraham. Therefore, Jephunneh was a descendant of an ancestor who most likely had joined Abraham (note there were 318 men born in Abraham's household- Gen 14:14) or who had come to Egypt during the famine in Jacob's time and was subsequently amalgamated into the nation of Israel. The point is Jephunneh is descended from a foreigner, yet somewhere along the line, whether through choice, or marriage, his family embraced the God and people of Abraham and were grafted into the tribe of Judah. Jephunneh's name means "beholder" (Easton Bible Dictionary). Smith's Bible Dictionary translates it as "for whom a way is prepared." Thus his name is a picture of how we come to Christ. We behold that Christ has prepared a way for us, and as Jephunneh was grafted into the tribe that would produce the savior of the world, so we through faith are grafted into Him. The fact that the descendant of a foreigner is picked to spy the land is significant. Caleb holds full rights as any other Jew, yet he is not a descendant of Abraham: Just as we, being Gentiles, have full rights as God's children grafted into the New Covenant (Eph 3, Rm 11).

Faith over Fear

We next encounter Caleb after returning from spying the land in Num 13:30 (Josh 14:7 gives us a little more insight as it says Caleb was 40 years old at the time). The spies spend 40 days scouting the land, then return. All agree the land is rich and good, yet there is a divided opinion about what to do. We pick up the narrative in Num 13:30 -33, *Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are."³² And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size."³³ We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants*

of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

Notice Caleb speaks first. He sets the tone; "let's go! and take the land!" But he is contradicted by the others who sway the crowd. Caleb chooses faith over fear. The 10 spies see big people, intimidating weapons, fortified cities, and their own smallness. Caleb sees God delivering 10 plagues to judge Egypt, the angel of death on Passover, the deliverance of the people from Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, the provision of manna and water, the leading of the Lord to get the people to Kadesh for this moment, and Caleb says, "I'll take God over what I see". This is why in Num 14:24, *God says of Caleb, But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.* There is a lot to fear as we age; loneliness, incapacity, dependence, yet like Caleb, we can choose faith over fear.

Patience and Perseverance over Pity.

Now turn to Josh 14. Forty five years have elapsed. All of Caleb's generation has died in the wilderness. The Bible mentions nothing of Caleb in this 45 year period. Yet now he suddenly appears to claim what God had promised to him 45 years earlier. What does that 45 year period suggest? It suggests Caleb never forgot what God had promised him. He waited expectantly for 45 yrs till he was 85 to see the promise fulfilled. He was patient. He persevered all the while living with those who had betrayed him at Kadesh Barnea. He had to wait them out. There is no mention of Caleb wallowing in self-pity, complaining, or despairing. God gave him a promise and he holds onto it for 45 years. He chose patience and perseverance over self-pity and victimhood.

Seizing Promises and not Coasting Complacency.

In Josh 14, the children of the Wilderness generation, under Joshua's leadership, have taken most of the land. Caleb, now 85, goes to Joshua to remind him of the promise God made to him 45 years earlier (see Josh 14:12). Caleb now wants everything God has for him. He has been waiting the last 45 years for it. He has not become self-satisfied or lazy. He has not gone soft! He is vigorous and expectant, waiting to see what God will give him. And note what he gets: Hebron, the only piece of land Abraham bought and owned while in the land, now the resting place of Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah. Think of the irony, a Gentile by ethnicity, now owning the most venerated site of the early nation where the father of the Jewish people and his family are buried. God has a sense of humor. So here is the application for us: In Caleb's life there is a growing faith with a growing age. He stayed spiritually relevant. He didn't coast, He didn't rest on his laurels or said God is done with me. He acted on and seized the promises of God at the advanced age of 85. I recognize that age limits our physical abilities but it doesn't limit our tongues. We are still able to encourage, to pray, to thoughtfully advise and mentor, to be hospitable, and to serve in whatever way we can.

So Join the Caleb Club: there are the three membership requirements,

1. Choosing Faith over Fear
2. Choosing Patience and Perseverance over Pity (and victimhood)
3. Seizing Promises over Coasting Complacency

