

Proposing A New Image for Old Age

Summary: *A message for "older members" month (August) that challenges myths about aging and what people can do in their twilight years.*

You might find today's sermon title a little funny. It's a beautiful Sunday in August and we're talking about getting old. What made me start thinking along this line was something in our Christian calendar. This is Older Adults Week. Did you know that? Nationally, it is Older Adults Month.

Why should we bother with this subject of aging? Because we can't help but experience it. Is there anyone growing younger? We all are going to experience aging, and you don't have to wait until you are retired to experience the effects of aging, am I right? Can you do now what you could when you were 17?

We will all hopefully deal with aging parents. I say hopefully because it is hoped that you will experience having your parents with you that long. Not everyone does. Hopefully, God willing, we too will become old because the alternative is not all that good.

Paul Mays is the administrator of a nursing home who happened to see a lovely, well-groomed 86-year-old woman walking slowly down to the dining room. He said, "Hey, Mavis. How's it going? How is everything?" Mavis said, "Well, as good as can be expected." Then she stopped for a moment and thought a bit and said, "You know this growing old stuff is for the birds. But considering the alternative, I'll take growing old."

She represents our ambivalence towards aging in that all of us want to live a long time, but none of us want to grow old. I think the reason for this is due to our image of an old man or an old woman. Think about it. What comes to your mind when I say old man or old woman? Is it wrinkles, sickness, weakness, loss, forgetfulness, nursing home, dependence, crotchiness, incontinence? All these things come to mind, and this is fueled by our mass media which depicts old age as a calamity, something to be avoided. In fact, we try to mask it or hide it with dyes and creams and elective surgeries to show people that we are not growing old. We spent \$4 billion on these things on a yearly basis.

In our public discourse, senior citizens are referred to as a problem, as a threat to the collapse of our Social Security system, as a siphon of our medical dollars. Sometimes they are referred to as a burden or "the fate of the young." With all those negative images, who wants to get old? Nobody does. But is this an accurate image. Is this the real picture of aging and of growing old? If it is, should that be our focus? If not, what should our focus be as we age?

Let's hear from a man in his own culture and his day—the Apostle Paul. He was very old, but he never retired. He experienced what aging is as well as its effects, and he dealt with it very appropriately. He tells us how we can deal with it ourselves. Growing old and aging can be a very satisfying, very fulfilling experience if we follow Paul's advice. We find this in II Corinthians 4: 7, 16-18.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

We need to develop a right mental image of growing old. So much of what we experience and the meaning of it is dependent upon our expectations. If we expect it to be a very bad experience, we are going to think this as we enter into it. If we expect it to be something very good, we will experience this instead.

Have you seen the movie, "Home Alone"? This little boy is told about the crotchety guy who lives next door and that he has murdered his whole family. If the little boy peeks at him through the window and the man sees him, the boy shuts the blinds really quick because he fears him. However, the little boy finds that he is really a kind, elderly gentleman who was a devout Christian and a loving person.

To develop a positive imaging of aging, we need to take our lives off what is seen. I am not saying that we should deny reality. You will find a very realistic portrayal of aging in Ecclesiastes 11: 8-10. This tells us to enjoy life while we are young because dark days are ahead. Paul himself does not deny the effects of aging. He says that outwardly we are wasting away.

I witnessed the wasting away of my grandparents and their deaths, and we must be very realistic about this. Aging does keep you from doing the things you did when you were young. As you age, you tend to experience more pain in different places and recovery time is a lot longer. Some people experience some sensory loss. As you age, your bones become more brittle, and falls can cause us to become disabled or even crippled. As you age, you lose loved ones.

Now, that's a realistic picture. However, I'll say this. All these things are true of every period of your life. This is not unique to aging. We experience these things all through our lives, and they are not a hazard of getting old. They are a hazard of being alive. In fact, if you are over 70, you should praise God because you have already beaten the averages. More than half of your classmates are gone. You are the survivor, the lucky one, the fortunate one. We need to praise God for our lives instead of our losses which is why Paul tells us to fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen.

What does it mean to fix our eyes? It means to focus on something as a goal or a target. Like an archer who pulls back the arrow and focuses on the bull's eye, like a golfer who focuses on the hole and not the hazards, our proper focus is to go for the goal. It is by looking at the goal that we derive our motivation, our energy, and our enthusiasm. It's what makes the game meaningful for us, it's what makes the struggle and pain worthwhile. No runner focuses on the pain while running. If they do, they lose heart and falter. No golfer stares at the bunker or the lake in fear. If they do, they will lose their game. They look at the goal and at the things that are positive in their lives and try to achieve more than they thought they could.

This is our mistake with aging. We are focusing on the wrong things. We are focusing on the hazards rather than on our goals and dreams. This is probably why we have a very negative view about aging instead of a very positive one. Aging can be a very positive thing. There are a lot of benefits to growing old. One benefit is the fact that you are alive. Another is that you have

no more deadlines or schedules, no more performance reviews, no more ladders to climb. You can relax and really enjoy your life. It can be an incredible time of creativity. Some of the best artists and poets painted or wrote during their retirement years. Colonel Sanders of KFC built his business after he retired.

Another nice thing about growing old is that all your life you try to make something of yourself. You try to prove your in-laws or your parents wrong. You try to make something of your life. The wonderful thing about maturity is the fact that you are somebody, and you have always been somebody, and you don't have to prove it anymore. It's not something you achieve, it's simply the gift of being born in the image of God.

Aging actually brings financial stability. People are wealthiest at the end of their lives. I get angry at McDonald's. Senior citizens can buy a cup of coffee for 25 cents. I'm the one that needs the 25-cent cup of coffee. I have four children. I'm facing three weddings and four college tuitions. My in-laws and most older people are wealthiest at the end of their lives.

Even if we were to focus on the experience of the elderly person, we find that it is not that bad. Here is a realistic picture, despite what our society says, about growing old:

***80%** of you who are 55 and older will live and die living independently at home. Only 5% of those 55 and older today will live in a nursing home, and only half of those are there because of the effects of aging. Half of them are there simply because they have outlived everyone and there is no one left at home to take care of them.

***69%** of those over 65 say their health is excellent. 85% say they are functionally healthy. Only 15% are unhealthy, and it is not due to the effects of aging. When they study this, it is due to the effects of their former lifestyles. As you get to retirement age, nearly all health problems are preventable and curable. They respond to proper diet and exercise, rest, avoiding alcohol, drugs, smoking and excessive eating. If you do these things, you will reap much benefit as you grow older.

***10%** of the population will experience any form of senility of varying degrees. Again, this is not due to aging. This is due more to malnutrition, a tumor, drug use and abuse, depression, boredom, lack of hope, disuse of the mind, or the expectation that you will become forgetful and so you do. The only thing that changes mentally as you grow older is that it takes you longer to process information. Why? Because there is more information to process. Your data banks are very full at that time.

***Only 13%** of people 65 and older said that they were lonely. Young people were the largest population group that admitted to loneliness. When asked, 65% of them say that they are lonely.

***45%** of people 65 and older said that their lives could be better versus 49% of those who are under 65.

Can you see the real image of aging here? We always focus on the negatives and the reality is that it is much better than we think. Paul tells us that the proper image is not to focus on the hazards of aging, but to focus on the unseen. What is the unseen? For Christians, it means not focusing on the temporary, the material, or the past. It means we focus on the eternal, the spiritual, the purposeful, the dream, what lies ahead, and the possibilities. If we do that, Paul says that we are renewed day by day. We experience an eternal glory that will not fade.

What are some of those things that are unseen? Well, in this text it is the resurrection, eternal life, heaven, God's kingdom. It is realizing that with every day that passes we are not counting down our lives, we are counting up to our experience of heavenly glory. Paul says that what seem to be unsurmountable problems will become light and momentary as we focus on heaven. It's like having an experience of pain and then years later it's hard to remember the pain. That will be our eternal experience, and that gives us hope now knowing that our wasting away won't last forever. It is temporary. As we become older, we come closer to the light. If we are going to experience a more satisfying life, one thing we can do is become closer to that unseen world. One of the great gifts we have is time. Spend some time drawing close to the light. As your life is drawn closer to that light, may your heart and soul be drawn as well. As you draw closer to God, his promise is that he will draw closer to you.

Although our bodies are wasting away, our spiritual experience will be a growing satisfaction of being renewed day by day, so much so that in walking with our Lord in our lives, when we hit those shadow times the light of his glory will penetrate that darkness and we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death because he will be with us always.

The unseen represents much more for Paul. Paul did not retire to give up. He kept going, which is an issue I want to raise here. Many children of elderly people attempt to bumper-proof their parents' lives so that they can squeeze out every ounce of time with them in this life. They limit their parents to such a degree that the parents end their lives watching television and gumming applesauce. That's unfortunate because I don't see Paul doing that. I think it is a shifting of our focus from enjoying and living our lives to making sure we don't die or that our parents never die or keep from dying. Can you see the shift in focus from something that is positive to something that is negative? I want to keep my parents from dying versus I want to let my parents live and enjoy their lives. We should enjoy our lives and not bumper-proof them to the degree that we squeeze one hundred years out, but we don't live because we died way before. We find that Paul lived his life to the full serving his lord, giving all that he could, until Christ took him home.

What unfulfilled dreams do you have? That's the unseen. Fulfill them. What places have you always wanted to see but haven't? See them. What skills have you wanted to develop but didn't have time for? Develop them. What educational level did you hope to attain? What goals have you left unaccomplished? Accomplish those goals, get your degree. I don't care what age you are. If you see a need in the community that you have always wanted to fulfill, meet that need. If there is a ministry in the church that you've always wanted to start, start it. If you always wanted to be a missionary, become one. If you always wanted to do something positive with your finances, form a trust and do it. If you always wanted to spend time with your kids and grandkids but because you were working so much you didn't have time, spend time with your children and grandchildren now. Don't let society, don't let your kids, and don't let yourself put you on the sidelines or on a shelf. You are very useful. Make your life count. Finish well.

Think of Paul's life. All his life he looked over his shoulder because people wanted to kill him. He experienced distress all through his life. He was beaten with rods, he was flogged with 39 lashes five times, he was nearly stoned to death, he was shipwrecked three times, he was lost at sea for a day, he was opposed every-where, he was slandered and maligned and ridiculed inside and outside the church. At the end of his life, he was alone. He had no spouse, no home, no major medical insurance, no retirement center, and he was in prison with an incurable disease. Yet, what was his attitude? How does he end his life? Here's what he says: "Therefore, we do not lose heart. Although outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being

renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

How can we have such an attitude? Do what Paul did. Don't focus on the problems and the hazards. When you see a rosebush, do you see a flower with nasty thorns that prick you, or do you see a thorn bush beautified by flowers? Think of the difference in focus. What is your focus of aging? Our focus should be on the opportunities that we have and things that we can do, the unseen, drawing closer to the Lord, living our lives so that we can walk with him. If we do this, aging can become like an antique car. Think of that image. That could be your image of old age.

Sermon adapted from Sermon Central.