

Sermon 62, The Old Man and his Crown, Proverbs 16:31-17:6

Proposition: Righteousness makes for a glorious old age.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to a meditation on the glory of old age. Notice, if you would, how our text begins and ends with references to the old age and glory. We don't often think of old age as being respectable; our culture is well known as a youth culture and one that glorifies the young, even if we actually have very few children. (Actually, as far as I can tell, any culture that glorifies youth generally doesn't have a lot of them. Perhaps the opposite is the case as well, and cultures that respect old people don't have a lot of them around? Economists tell us that value resides in scarcity . . .) Be that as it may, the Bible tells us that youth and the dawn of life are vanity, and it includes the peremptory command, "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:32). But though old age is a time of honor and fruitfulness in Solomon's conception here, it is not automatically so. Rather, old age will be blessed like this on one condition. That condition, of course, is righteousness. From the rest of the book we know that righteousness and wisdom are interchangeable concepts; here the sage speaks under the heading of righteousness. Indeed, if you look at the passage with me, you can see that it easily divides into two parts: the rules for righteousness and the theology of righteousness. In other words, the righteous life is not only ethical, but doctrinal too. It is not only what you do that makes your life righteous; you also have to know the LORD as the one in charge of events and as the arbiter of morality. Ultimately, of course, you must know Him as Father and glory in Him as such if you want the real glories of old age.

I. Righteous Gray Is Glorious, 16:31

Gray hair is a crown of glory. This statement is a metaphor comparing the gray hair on the top of your head to the crown on top of a king's head. But actually, it escalates the crown metaphor one

step further, telling us that gray hair is not only a royal crown, but actually a crown characterized by glory.

What is glory? It is weightiness, splendor, reputation. The proper response to glory is worship, or at the very least honor. Fame is merely glory's stepchild, a pale shadow of the greater splendor that belongs to being actually glorious.

This is what's being ascribed to gray hair. Gray hair does not just demonstrate status; it demonstrates the highest status, the status we refer to as "glory." That's how awe-inspiring gray hair is. In a rightly constituted culture, people would honor and respect gray hair the same way they would respect a royal crown. I suppose this means that someone like the present Queen Elizabeth would receive double honor because she wears an actual crown and has gray hair to match.

But though being old is honorable, as I said a moment ago, it is honorable and glorious only on one condition. That condition is that you lived a righteous life to get to your old age.

I'll give you an illustration that I've been observing all the time recently. As you know, my grandfather lived with my family for a few weeks this summer. He is a godly man, and he has lived a righteous life. But he loves food, and even though he's close to 150 pounds overweight, he'll chow down on huge plates of food whenever he gets the chance. He will eat, and eat, and eat, way more than an active working man needs and certainly far more than anyone who sits in a chair all day needs. That overeating problem makes it very hard to respect him. It's an open sin, an obvious sin, and it is sure disgusting to see it in someone else. (Oh for the grace to be as disgusted by our sins as we are by others'!)

The crown of glory is marred by a single sin — even by a sin that in the grand scheme of things is quite a minor sin. But it's a sin nonetheless, and it certainly harms grandpa's glory.

II. The Rules of Righteousness

Well, Solomon goes on to tell us that to achieve a glorious old age, you need to live a righteous life. His instructions on what that looks like can be broken down into the ethical and doctrinal, or right living and right believing.

A. Patience, Poverty, and Wisdom Are Preferable, 16:32, 17:1-2

We start with right living. The first thing we're told about right living is that it requires self-control. Solomon describes this in two ways: slowness to anger and ruling one's own spirit.

We talk about some people as quick-tempered. That is, they get angry very fast. You do one little thing, and they instantly jump from calmness to fury. They are not slow to anger; it doesn't take a lot to provoke them. In the most advanced cases, where people have spent the most time giving in to their passions and indulging their appetites, it literally takes nothing at all to make them angry. One can think most quickly of an abusive father. He walks in the door in the evening and sees a lego on the dining room table. Instantly he's yelling and shouting. "Who did this? Who left this lego here? I'll spank you all!" And then he does. Brothers and sisters, that is not slowness to anger. Some people are so quick to anger because they were already angry. They're angry all the time, and they will manifest it for any reason, or no reason.

The person who is slow to anger is better than that — morally better than that. This is the dad who comes in the door and sees the bathtub overflowing, three holes punched in the wall, his wife standing out on the driveway chatting with her sister while the baby lies in pool of its own filth in the bedroom and the older kids watch cartoons and spill Hawaiian punch on the carpet — and doesn't get angry — that dad is morally better than the one who gets enraged over nothing. The mom who wasn't on the phone with her sister ignoring the kids but rather worked with them patiently all day and didn't get furious when the tub overflowed and the Hawaiian punch went on the carpet — that mom is morally better than one who gave the kids 20 minutes of the sharp side of her tongue after they spilled the raspberries in the grocery store parking lot.

So how do you get here? How do you become slow to anger, especially if you are a naturally fiery kind of person? You have to learn to rule your spirit. Rather than your spirit ruling you, you are the one in charge of it. When that's the case, you are morally better than the warrior who can capture a city. You are stronger than the general who can overthrow a corrupt regime. Where does that strength come from? Solomon doesn't say here, but it comes from the LORD. It comes from the God who rules the behavior of dice. He is powerful enough to help you rule your behavior too. That's why the next verse placed right after this verse. God can rule dice and He can rule you. He can control the weather and He can control you. The way to learn self-control, then, is to learn to walk with God, to pray to Him for His sanctifying power, and to practice self-control in the face of temptations to anger and outrage and lust.

So the first right behavior that brings about long life is slowness to anger. It is living with a cool spirit, not walking around angry all the time but rather walking around joyful all the time because you submit to God's providence in your life. But the second right behavior, really another aspect of this first one, is contentment with what God has given you. A "dry morsel" — bread without butter or olive oil or jelly — is better than a houseful of sacrifices with strife. Yes. You're better off eating old hard dry bread with nothing but water to wash it down, but in peace with the people at the table, then you are at enmity with others while you feast on prime rib with them. What's even more interesting here is that the source of the meat is sacrifices. To be a religious family that can't get along with each other truly is awful in the sight of God. And to have an abundance and still not be able to get along with each other is even worse. Brothers and sisters, in order to reach a glorious old age, you and I need to learn the secret of contentment, which is this: a little with God is incomparably better than a lot without Him. A dry morsel, with the quietness and peace in the home that is the fruit of the Spirit, is better by far than having all you could want but being at each other's throats about it. I've said for a long time that I'd rather live in a cardboard box under a bridge and have a loving family than in a mansion on Cape Cod or in Jackson Hole and have a family that hates each other. Do you actually believe this? Do you see a dry morsel with love as superior to lots of external religious observance but no real love or understanding between the members of the family? If you don't, your priorities are different than God's. Indeed, ethically speaking, you won't have a glorious old age. You'll be sniping at your family members, and they at you, all the way to your funeral and beyond.

Well, the third practice that's required for a glorious old age is wisdom. You not only need to learn patience and contentment to age well; you need to learn wisdom too. The most famous instance of v. 2 being fulfilled can be found in the career of Jeroboam, who worked for Solomon for years before he wrested 80% of the kingdom from Solomon's son Rehoboam after Solomon's death. He quite literally received an inheritance among the brothers; indeed, he got the lion's share of Solomon's kingdom. Yet he was not a son, just a servant. Brothers and sisters, to be such a shameful son that your father disinherits you and brings in a hired guy as his heir is a bitter pill to swallow. But that's precisely the point here: without the power of God teaching you wisdom, you will cause shame and be rejected by your family.

The ultimate example of this is the Jewish people. They were God's chosen people, but they were rejected by Him after the death of Christ. The Gentiles, the slaves, inherited the promises while the Jews, the original children, were cast out. Don't be a fool, Solomon is saying. If you are, you'll never receive the inheritance you're counting on.

So if you want to age well, pursue patience, contentment, and wisdom.

B. The Prurient Ear & Tongue Get Punished, 17:4-5

Negatively speaking, don't have a prurient ear. To grow old in righteousness requires that you control what you listen to. After all that this book has said about the positive side of listening, it's important to recognize the negative side of it too. Brothers and sisters, it's an *evil* person who listens to gossip and evil. In other words, yes, this text is saying something about the morality of those who subscribe to *People* magazine, those who spend their time retailing gossip about their church and family, those who enjoy the ravings of the philosophers and pundits. If you listen to discourse that tears down, whether it's couched in crude terms or in philosophically sophisticated ones, you are guilty. What kind of discourse am I talking about? Statements like "If it feels good, do it." Statements like "Human beings exist to enjoy bodily pleasure; anything else is delusive." Statements like "Natural selection is ultimately responsible for the endless forms most beautiful which have evolved around us." Statements like these, and their progeny, are the prurient discourse that make you into an evildoer and a liar. Yes, saying them is wrong — *but so is listening to them*. Does this mean that it's wrong to read Darwin or Marx? No. It's not wrong to hear; what's wrong is to *agree* with what you hear. A righteous ear takes no delight in these things. The wise Son doesn't enjoy hearing evil words, whether they are words of error, hate, murder, mayhem, or anything else.

But for every sin of the ear, one might think that there are twenty of the tongue. Solomon picks out the particular sin of mocking the poor. Laughing at others' misfortunes has a long and dishonorable history. It is a damnable sin. The one who takes joy in someone else's calamity will not go unpunished.

When might we do this? Well, on the international stage we can say "That country is our enemy; I'm glad they're having a financial crisis and that people are losing their homes over there." Such an attitude is despicable, and God will certainly punish the one who holds it.

But what about on the personal level? We human beings are petty enough that we can be glad when a co-worker we don't like misses a belt loop when getting dressed in the morning. While that may not be quite as egregious as rejoicing over your arrogant boss getting foreclosed on, it is still the kind of thing God hates. Any kind of joy in others' misfortune repels Him. That means being glad so-and-so didn't get the promotion, because you think he needed taking down a peg or two. It means being glad that someone's car got hailed on when they had liability-only coverage. It means being glad that another church has fewer people than your own. It means being glad that your own wedding was a bigger spectacle than your sister's. Brothers and sisters, this kind of attitude will never result in growing old in righteousness. In fact, it will result in the opposite: growing old in evil.

So don't indulge your prurient ear and tongue. Instead, live in the fear of God that will change what you like to hear and what you like to say.

C. Children's Children Are a Crown, 17:6a

Well, the final practice of righteousness is to have children and train them in godliness so that they can pass on the faith to their descendants. That means training them to forgive. It means training them to come to church and worship God every week, showing them by your example that there is nothing more important than worship. You'll skip anything, but not worship. You'll drop any ball you have to, but worship is sacrosanct. You train them to listen to God's word, and to make their decisions in light of it. That is how children's children become your boast. "My grandson is a faithful servant of Jesus Christ who is an asset to his home, his church, and his community." "My granddaughter teaches those children and does all kinds of good things that I would have never thought of doing." Children's children are a crown. While you can't say that you personally are 100% responsible for how your grandchildren are doing, I think this verse suggests that you deserve some credit — or blame. You can raise your children right, and they can go wrong. No question. But raising them right does a lot toward having your grandchildren go right too. That seems to be what the context of this passage is indicating.

III. The Theology of Righteousness

But righteousness is not just practices. It is practices, but it is more than practices. It is also beliefs. To be righteous requires that you do, but also that you believe and ultimately that you know. That's where we'll conclude — where our passage does. But before we talk about the righteousness of knowing, let's look quickly at the righteousness of believing.

A. The LORD Rules Randomness, 16:33

The first thing you need to believe to practice righteousness is a fundamental conviction about the sovereignty of God. He rules randomness. He is the one who controls whether the die comes up with a 1 or a 6, and every number in between. He controls which way the coin flip goes. He rules these things. In Ancient Israel, God actually appointed the use of lots as a means to make certain crucial decisions. But the last time this method was used in Scripture was in Acts 1 for choosing a replacement apostle after the suicide of Judas Iscariot. Now that we have the Spirit, God does not want us to resort to chance to make our decisions. Yet, leaving all that aside, let's

focus on the point here: a foundational conviction for a righteous life is that Jehovah is in charge of the seemingly random. Indeed, the LORD rules everything, even those events that we call fortuitous.

This means that He has the power to help you change. He has the power to make help you be patient, content, and wise. If you don't trust His absolute sovereignty, you won't be able to live the righteous life that leads to a glorious old age. But if you do, then you will learn over the years to access His power and channel it toward holiness.

B. The LORD Assays Actions, 17:3

The other foundational theological belief is simultaneously an ethical belief. It is the belief that God will judge. He will evaluate your actions to see whether they were good or bad. This, of course, implies that every action has a definite character. It is either right or wrong. Yes, it may be mixed in some ways. But God will sort through that mixture and decide exactly what's right and what's wrong with it, all the way through.

If you remove the difference between right and wrong, you destroy ethics and you end up destroying people. But the LORD always evaluates in terms of the difference between right and wrong. He will tell you whether you were right or wrong. And He will reward you according to the rightness or wrongness of your works.

Are these two truths all you need to know for a righteous life? I can't positively say that they are. But if you know them, you certainly have the foundation for living a life that will lead to a glorious old age. A life built on the truth that God rules the universe and its corresponding truth that He judges actions and refines human beings through suffering in the furnace of affliction is a life that will turn out well.

Gold gets refined. Silver gets refined. Are you less precious than those metals? Do you need less refining than metal ore dug out of the ground, you chunk of dust? Of course not. We all know that we need refining, even if we don't like it very much. But it is precisely through this process of refinement that you become the patient, content, wise son who lives a life that grows into a glorious old age.

C. Your Father Is Your Glory, 17:6b

Our passage ends with a truth that we often overlook. Yet this truth is the most important truth of all for living an upright life. It is the truth that God must be your glory.

On the playground, did you ever brag about your daddy? "My daddy can weld. My daddy has more cars and a bigger house than yours. My daddy gave me a four wheeler to drive. I've never seen my daddy utter an angry word." I'm sure I was an obnoxious little kid about it, but I know that I was ready to brag about my father. I still am. He's a good man, the best I've ever met. But here's the thing: When you are a child of God, your Heavenly Father is your greatest glory. "God is my Father." That's the teaching of the Christian faith. And that is the greatest boast that you or I could possibly make. A similar claim got Jesus crucified. It might do the same for us. But regardless of the consequences in this life, the claim is true for everyone who believes in Jesus. You are a child of God; He has become your Father in Christ. And therefore, you have

the most glorious status one could hope for. This adoption, this becoming a child of our Father in Heaven, is the foundation of everything that we've said about living righteously and believing righteously. If your Father is not the most important reality in the world to you, then you are not a Christian. If you don't glory in Him, then you aren't His son. But if you do glory in God, if you do exult in the reality that He is yours, that you have become His Son through faith, then you can live that patient, content, wise life that we've been talking about.

Are you more proud of being a Christian than of anything else in the whole world? Is the Fatherhood of God the foundation of your identity? Put another way, can you pray the Lord's Prayer and mean it?

Already in this age your Father should be your greatest glory. And in the age to come, that will only be more true. "The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory" (Isa 60:19 ESV). If He's going to be your glory then, glory in Him now. Don't be ashamed of Him, and I promise that you will have a glorious old age. Amen.