

Question: What responsibilities do children have toward their aging parents? Is it okay to put them in a nursing home, or should children care for their parents at home?

Jesus taught his followers that children always have a responsibility to “Honor your father and mother,” and he said that “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death” (Matthew 15:4). The word he used for “cursing” parents included things like insulting, speaking evil of or dishonoring them in any way (Deuteronomy 27:16; Proverbs 20:20 & 30:17). There is no reason to think Jesus meant this kind of behavior toward parents is acceptable once a child becomes a man or a woman.

In addition, Jesus accused the Pharisees of violating the law of God by a tradition that permitted a person to proclaim his property “devoted to God” in order to keep from having to use it for the care of parents (Mark 7:10-13). Jesus saw the law requiring honor toward parents as having a higher priority than such human traditions. He said to them, “Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”

In contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus provided for the care of his mother even when he was dying on the cross (John 19:25-27). Later in the New Testament, Christians are told: “If a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents. . . . If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:4, 8). Thus, we see that a failure to care and provide for our aging parents is unfaithfulness not only to our parents but also to God.

However, we are not told how best to fulfill this responsibility. In my experience, most mature children who love and honor their aging parents prefer to care for them personally as much as possible. This may be the loving and first option, but it is not always possible to care for aging parents in our homes. Sometimes the health needs of the elderly cannot be met best in a private home. We must also consider the needs of our own spouse and any children who may still live in our homes. God did proclaim that the relationship between a husband and wife should take precedence over the relationship with parents (Genesis 2:24).

Fortunately, we live in a time when excellent care can be provided in nursing homes and special facilities for the aging. However, to simply place parents in institutional care where their physical needs will be provided for is not enough. We dishonor them if we do not regularly visit and stay involved in their lives. We dishonor them if we do not exercise the greatest of efforts to see that the kind of care provided in our homes or in nursing facilities is safe, clean and respectful of them as human beings.

In view of what Jesus said, I believe the following suggestions are appropriate: (1) Elderly men and women should be in an environment in which they can participate in making decisions which affect them, to the extent they are capable. (2) The elderly must not be shut off from the mainstream of life in our society. (3) The elderly are entitled to be treated like adults, not children. Whatever decisions we make about the care of aging parents should be made carefully and prayerfully, realizing that Jesus will hold his followers accountable for any failure to honor, respect and care for them.

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