

THE KIND OF OLD MAN I WANT TO BE

There are certain images of growing old I hope will never describe my old age. I don't want to be like those "Grumpy Old Men" portrayed by Jack Lemmon and Walter Mathau, for example. I don't want to be viewed by those younger than me as "out of touch" and unapproachable. I want to be an old man who is respected and whose counsel is sought by others. In fact, I don't want people to ever think of me as an "old man" at all, at least not in the sense of too old to be of any use or value.

As I now enter that period of my life when grandchildren are a vital part of my life, the question of what kind of old man I am becoming is heavy on my mind. John Piper wants to be an old man characterized by faith like that of the writer of Psalm 71. Gordon MacDonald wants to grow older with the wholehearted energy and faith of Caleb. What kind of old man do I want to be? And what am I doing now to become that kind of man?

In old age I want to be like those described in Psalm 92 — "still *bearing* fruit in old age..."(vs. 14). These are older people described with phrases like "fresh and green", and filled with praise. These descriptions are not just of any older person, but one who is righteous.

As I ponder this passage, there are several characteristics which identify what must be developing in my life if I am to become the kind of old man I really want to be — actually, the kind of old man God would want me to be. These characteristics describe those who are qualified to be called "the righteous". How well do I measure up?

1. THE RIGHTEOUS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY PRAISE AND JOY.

This is more than just the person who is always smiling and positive about everything because everything is going so well. The righteous man is able to be full of praise and joy because of his view of God and the world in which he lives. He has a true understanding of the nature of God, and of man, and is able to see the hand of God at work in every aspect of life. Every day is filled with the awareness of God's mercy and faithfulness, even when it seems like evil triumphs. It is in the crucible of tribulation and pain that we are most likely to have our character tested and refined. It is in those moments of life's "Monday mornings" that the real metal of our life is exposed. When I understand and know my heavenly Father for who He really is, I am able to stand in the midst of pain and proclaim, "but still I will worship You!" The righteous know pain and suffering, but also in Whose hands they reside. Like of the three children of Israel thrown into the blazing furnace, the righteous can declare with boldness and confidence that God is able to deliver, but even if He doesn't, He is God and we will bow down to no other. That takes, not only courage, but a genuine confidence in who God is.

2. THE RIGHTEOUS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY SENSIBILITY AND WISDOM.

The Psalmist makes it clear that the fool or senseless man does not understand the nature of God or see His hand at work. Though the wicked may flourish for a time, they are actually fools. The righteous, on the other hand, are characterized by a life of wisdom -the ability to see life as it really is and to understand the wondrous works of God in our lives. The Hebrew community knew that age did not automatically produce wisdom. Every man may grow old, but will it be as a sage or a fool? The righteous live life in the constant awareness of God's work

and power. Their decisions are consistently formed out of a framework of wisdom and sensibility. They know that immediate satisfaction does not produce long term joy. The senseless man lives for the moment without any comprehension of the end result. The righteous are not senseless, but sensible. They understand Who is sovereign and are focused on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, praiseworthy and excellent for they know God will reward those who seek Him and His righteousness. They are not pressed into conformity with the world's way of thinking, but live and move with a renewed perspective of God's purposes. The righteous know that wisdom is supreme and they seek it at all costs. (Pr. 4:7)

3. THE RIGHTEOUS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY FAITH AND PERSEVERANCE.

The righteous know that no matter how successful and triumphant the wicked may appear, their day will come. And knowing the kindness, greatness, and grace of God, the righteous are able to persevere by faith knowing that victory is in the hand of God. The righteous know in Whom they believe, and their faith is one that involves all their senses. Theirs is not a faith of convenience, but is firmly placed in the One whom they know intimately and deeply. They are able to persevere in the face of the fiercest storm because the Spirit of God is upon them with power. Like the words of this familiar hymn, their faith is anchored to the Rock...

*"We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows
roll; Fastened to the Rock that cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love!"*

4. THE RIGHTEOUS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY FRESHNESS AND FRUITFULNESS.

It's obvious, isn't it, when you are around true biblical "elders" - men and women who walk with God and radiate a freshness that smells of the fragrance of Christ. The righteous carry that fresh aroma with them through all of life. Age does not decay that freshness because it emanates from the presence of God. The Psalmist observes that the righteous "flourish in the courts of our God". Growing older does not diminish the fragrance, it only enhances it in the life of the righteous because they understand what it means to "abide" in Christ - to practice the presence of God. Theirs is not a shallow relationship with the Father, but one in which the roots are planted deeply in the "courts" of God. The world holds little attraction for them, for the Lord is their dwelling place.

The righteous are also fruitful. Their lives radiant the character of God and others are forever impacted by them. They do not live monastic lives hiding their light from the world. They are not buckets who keep all God's blessings for themselves. They are like pipes or conduits through whom God's grace and blessings continually flow and are forever replenished. And what is the "fruit"? It is a legacy of blessing for future generations. In Psalm 71 & 78, those who are old and gray never forsake their responsibility to "tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of God..." The first man and woman were commanded to be fruitful and multiply. The fruit of the righteous are the lives touched by God through their own lives as they live, not for themselves, but for those who come after. It is a generation to generation issue, and those who live in righteousness are surrounded by the delicious fruit of their labors, even when old and gray.

That is the kind of old man I want to be. I want to stay "fresh and green" bearing fruit in my old age - good fruit, not rotten fruit. I want to be surrounded by children and grandchildren and great grandchildren who are walking in righteousness because of my example. I want to stand before my heavenly Father one day after having finished the race and hear him say "well done, my good and faithful servant." I want to have the same epitaph as King David: "When he had served GOD'S purposes in his own generation, he fell asleep". (Acts 13:36)

A little boy was overheard praying: "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am." How about you? Are you having too good of a time to be concerned about what God wants you to be? That's the path of the fool. Have you considered what kind of old man or old woman you want to be? Perhaps the more critical question is... what kind of old man or old woman am I becoming?