

Dear William and Nicholas,

This letter may not be fully relevant to our family for some time. I'm sure a lot of my attitudes and perspectives about aging and dying will change as I grow older myself. But there's one perspective that will not change, at least as long as I remain committed to the Biblical view of family and community. While I want both of you to have meaningful lives unencumbered from undue stress, I want to make it very clear to both of you that, someday, I will want to be a burden to my kids.

I often hear folks express that they don't want to be burdens to their family. Not me. Not after all the burdens I have borne and will undoubtedly bear for you:

- the burden of holding you, bouncing you, walking back and forth for hours while you cried with colic
- the burden of embracing you during immunizations
- the burden of wiping your noses, wiping your diapers, wiping the tears from your eyes when life seemed so unfair to you
- The burden of installing car seats and trying to concentrate on my driving as you kept crying: "Buckle off! Buckle off!"
- The burden of setting up nearly-impossible-to-construct toys after preaching three or four Christmas Eve services
- The burden of caring for the new pets you begged to have.
- The burden of parenting through your adolescence
- The burden of college tuition

So you'd better not bristle someday if your mother or I one day become burdens for you!

Please understand a couple of very important things. First of all, the burdens we've borne for you (as well as the ones we undoubtedly will bear in the future), while inconvenient and, at times, troublesome, are all part of the privilege of parenting. It's a joy to have you both as sons, and no burden could ever diminish my love for you.

Second, let me make clear that there are many end-of-life issues related to your mother and me that I don't want you to be burdened with.

- We will do our best to manage our possessions, cleaning out and giving things away when necessary, so that you won't have to sort through a ton of our stuff when we're gone;
- We will arrange through financial advisors for our possessions and investments to be disbursed after our death as smoothly as possible;
- We will define our personal wishes for end-of-life medical decisions.
- We will express in writing what we want for our memorial services and the handling of our earthly remains.

Some of the specifics on these things will change as we revisit these important decisions in years to come—but I can assure you that you won't be burdened with any of these matters.

But I do want you to bear the burden of honoring me until the day I meet the Lord face-to-face. And even though I remind you of the burdens I've carried for you both, I don't expect you to bear my burdens as some sort of payback. I want to be a burden to my kids because God's understanding of community requires adult children to honor their aging parents.

The Bible teaches the values of community, family, and the interaction between generations to develop a cohesive and compassionate society.¹ Nowhere is the Biblical imperative about caring for your aging parents more explicit than in the Ten Commandments.

The first four commandments all involve our relationship with God—honor God above everything else; don't worship idols; revere the Lord's name; honor the Sabbath day that God has set apart from the other six days of the week. The remaining six commandments focus on our relationships with the rest of humanity. And at the very top of this list of commandments is the Fifth Commandment: "Honor your father and your mother."

Forgive me, guys, if I ever misused this commandment to implore you to obey me when you were kids. While that's often the way this commandment is explained, that wasn't the original meaning of the sacred law. The Commandments were directed first of all to the adult members of the Israelite community. The Fifth Commandment has less to do with disobedient children and more to do with negligent or self-centered adults.

At the time of Moses, elderly parents were often considered to have no consequence because they were frail and aged, making no contributions. Nobody got a pension or Social Security in those days. Imagine the hardships of aging without the benefits of modern medical science. Cataracts in the eyes meant certain blindness. No hearing aids to compensate for hearing loss. Injuries and broken bones must have had dire consequences. According to Jewish tradition, to honor one's parents meant to devote special care to parents when they could no longer care for themselves; to "serve food and drink, provide clothing and shelter, and lead them in and out" as long as the parent is alive.²

Also, we should remember that the Biblical concept of "family" has always been bigger than individual households, so the Fifth Commandment speaks to the whole community of faith, issuing the moral imperative to care for all older adults—and to look out in particular for any who are especially lacking care or support.

¹ Rabbi Richard F. Address, "Jewish Perspectives on Valuing Older Adults as a Source of Life Lessons." *Forum on Religion, Spirituality, and Aging*. Fall 2003.

² Laura Schlesinger, *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God's Laws in Everyday Life*, page 138.

The root of the Hebrew word for honor means to “weigh heavy.” To “honor” means to recognize the heavy weight of our responsibility towards our parents—and, in a larger sense, the heavy weight of a community’s responsibility toward all older generations. These responsibilities are not easy or convenient; but God constantly shapes us and grows our character by having us learn to deal with the unwanted and unexpected interruptions to our plans.

I can recall your great-grandfather (“Poppy”) remembering how his grandmother came to live with his family when he was a boy. They made a little bedroom for her. The family cared for her. And when death approached, she was right there in their midst. This familial care of older relatives continues today in many cultures around the world.

For many in this country, it’s no longer necessary to bring an older parent into the home, due to the development of nursing homes, assisted living centers, and retirement communities. The fact is that first-rate nursing homes and assisted living facilities can sometimes provide a quality of care that a family is not equipped to provide.

But wherever I’m living, you’d better visit me ... often. My heart will forever hurt for the many residents of nursing homes where I’ve worked who hardly ever had anyone come to visit them. And this loneliness is not relegated to nursing homes. I’ve seen a lot of parents whose kids never bother to check in—whether the kids are too busy with college, too busy with jobs, too busy with their own kids, too busy traveling, too busy being busy.

Honoring your parents takes many different forms. It is much more than greeting cards and flowers on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.³ You can honor your mother and me when we are older—you can honor the Fifth Commandment—by:

- Keeping us connected to family
- Talking with us and listening to us
- Helping us to fill our days with purpose and meaning
- Providing us with the best possible care and quality of life—even if that means kicking in some of your own money to supplement whatever resources we may have ourselves
- Speaking clearly and distinctly, repeating things as often as necessary in order to be heard and understood
- Listening one more time to a story that we’ve told you before
- Exercising kindness and patience when our steps are slower and our minds may be unclear
- Overlooking our faults as much as you can and focusing on our good points and our happy times together
- Trying to correct the mistakes we made with you by not making the same ones with your family

³ From “Honor Your Father and Mother.” Christians.org. “Commandments for Christian Living.”

Thank you in advance, my sons, for honoring your mother and me. God will give you whatever grace and strength you need should the time arise when you feel burdened with care for us.

It will be my privilege to receive your care and support one day, as I allow you to honor the Fifth Commandment and to fulfill the New Testament command: "Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will carry out the law of Christ."⁴

Love,
Dad

This letter is from Pastor Chris Romig's sermon, "Fear of Becoming a Burden," preached at Venice Presbyterian Church, Venice, Florida on May 9, 2010.

⁴ Galatians 6:2