

GA Seminar 2023 : Honoring our Parents as they Decline

Bill Davis, Professor of Philosophy, Covenant College (davis@covenant.edu)

Case #1 – Edith and Grant

Edith is 91 years old and a widow. She is Grant's grandmother, but Grant is Edith's only living child or grandchild. Edith has been living in an assisted living facility for the last seven years. The staff make sure she takes her meds, and while she is forgetful and often confused, she recognizes her great grandchildren who visit her weekly with Grant, their father. Edith is able to afford her room, board, and ordinary medical care out of the money she has saved. A week ago, Edith fell, breaking her hip. The doctor and the assisted living facility have told Edith that if she falls again during rehab, it could be fatal. Because she is forgetful, the risk that Edith will try to stand up and walk when she is alone is very real. Hiring a full-time sitter to keep Edith from trying to stand up would ensure that she does not fall again (and die); but Edith cannot afford to hire a full-time sitter. Grant has money that he has saved for the education of his three children and for his own retirement. **Does the fifth commandment (to honor his [grand-]mother) obligate Grant to use his savings to hire a full-time sitter to protect Edith from falling again when she is confused?**

Case #2 – Roger and Hannah

Roger is an 81-year-old widower. He is Hannah's father, and lives in the basement of Hannah's house. (Hannah's husband, Steve, is often away on business; and Steve and Hannah's teenage son also lives in the house.) Roger's dementia has progressed to the point that his memory regularly mis-fires. He recognizes Hannah and Steve, but he is foggy about who their son is. He also has trouble remembering that his wife has died. At least once a day, Roger asks Hannah or Steve when his wife will come home. Early on, Hannah tried to be careful to answer his questions truthfully. "When is your mother coming home?"... "Dad, mom died three years ago." Or "Did your mom say when she would be coming home?... "No, Dad, she died. You'll see her in heaven." Every time Roger is told that his wife has died, he reacts the way he did the first time he heard: he is devastated, weeps uncontrollably, and refuses to eat or be consoled. Some of Hannah's friends think she should give evasive answers that mislead Roger. **Does the fifth commandment obligate Hannah to answer questions about her mother "coming back" completely and truthfully?**

Case #3 – Sam and Brian

Sam is a 79-year-old widower who lives in the memory care unit of a local nursing home. Sam's wife of 47 years also lives in the memory care unit in a separate room. Sam was faithful to his wife before his dementia advanced. His wife's dementia also leaves her unable to remember Sam or their life together. Brian is Sam's son, and the only close relative who lives nearby. He is the agent with the power of attorney to direct Sam's care. On a recent visit to the nursing home, Brian found Sam kissing and, um, fondling with another resident of the memory care unit (a woman named "Fiona"). Brian managed to control his anger and led his father—without Fiona—back to Sam's room. Brian was livid. After calming down, he asked the manager of the memory care unit why no one was stopping his dad from "canoodling" with a strange woman. The manager said, "Sam has very few true pleasures left. We don't want to deprive him of relationships that give him joy. Neither he nor his wife remember they are married." **What does the fifth commandment call Brian to say to the manager?**

Case #4 – Mary and Erica

Mary is a 77-year-old widow. Her husband died three years ago, and since his death, Mary has grown more and more foggy about the details of her life. Mary lives with her daughter, Erica, and Erica's family. Erica makes sure Mary is safe, active, and keeps up with Mary's medications and doctor visits. Mary has a modest bank account and a stock portfolio that she and her husband built together, and a consistent part of their life together was faithfully tithing on their income (from work and their investments). Erica has the legal authority to manage Mary's money, and she has kept Mary's accounts separate from hers. Erica realizes that Mary's portfolio continues to generate income. She also has no idea how long Mary will live, and thus can't tell how long Mary's assets will cover her expenses (mostly for medications). **Does the fifth commandment obligate Erica to continue to tithe on Mary's income from her investment portfolio?**

Please submit an anonymous story from your own experience on the colored paper provided!

Biblical Guidance (extended commentary on Exodus 20:12)

- Leviticus 20:9
- Proverbs 6:20-24
- Matthew 15:1-9
- Ephesians 6:1-3
- I Timothy 5:1-8

Honoring as children, as adults (for hale parents), and for parents in decline.

Three Narrative Options – Clarifying what story we are in when our parents are cognitively diminished and dependent:

Guardian Narrative

Custodian Narrative

Advocate Narrative

What to discuss *now* to prepare:

- A. What you have done to prepare for the expense of caring for you when you cannot make decisions?
- B. Get to know your parents' values, priorities, wishes, and projects before cognitive decline makes it impossible
 1. What limits do you/your parents want caregivers to set on your activities (food, physical contact, driving, etc.)?
 2. What your priorities are for the use of your assets (money, connections, property)?
 3. How are you/your parents thinking about being cared for in assisted living facility or nursing home?
 4. What should be indicators that it is time not to live independently? (Diet, medication management, frailty, mobility, etc.)?
 5. What hopes do you/your parents have about how your children/siblings will share the task of keeping you/your parents safe and flourishing if you decline cognitively?