

Age, Achievements and Acceptance

Dear Roberto,

It seems appropriate, as I approach another birthday, that I address the relationship that age has with our perceived ministry accomplishments. You, of course know Paul's admonitions to his young friend about not allowing anyone to look down upon him because of his youth (1 Timothy 4:12) and not to be timid (2 Timothy 1:7). While it is probably not just a structure of our culture that links us so strongly with our peer group, we often see ourselves in competition with them, and with our biological clocks.

If we are doing better than we estimate most of our age group is doing, we feel affirmed and relieved. For naturally competitive people, as perhaps most people are until they fail repeatedly, comparison within an age group is most common. If you have a family background that demanded more discipline and expected more excellence than most, the early returns when comparing your achievements with peers may rate you high above average. This manner of comparison can be a morale booster most of your life if you do well in conventional terms. It only starts to fail when you get into your 40's and there are people much younger who are *out-achieving* you. Then the fallacy of this approach becomes apparent.

Therefore, we need to watch out for several pitfalls of the age-peer-group-comparison tendency. First, many young adults tend to settle for mere survival in

their early years. But survival should never be our goal, not even in the most dire conflicts (let alone everyday life). Ironically, aiming only at survival ensures failure. We were made to make a positive difference that no one else can make. We are all as singular as Adam in the garden. Yet, I see ministers my age still just trying to survive. They have carried that mind-set since they began pastoring. What a waste!

Another age-peer-group-comparison pitfall is that we begin to believe that God's timing is connected to our calendar. Success is cumulative, but it is not consecutive. There is some validity to the adage *nothing succeeds like success*, but it is not true that one success always leads to another. In my experience, it simply means more people are becoming aware of what you had to offer in the first place. For some people awareness can develop quickly, but success that is consistent over the long haul, takes a long haul.

I am amazed at how some of our colleagues are bothered that they are not being *more successful by now*. They speak as if accomplishments were connected to some sort of spiritual seniority. Watch out at any age for an imagined scenario that has you any place without a basin and towel.

The last pitfall I'll mention is this: Unlike any little league sport, the competition is never your peers. The competition is always who he's always been, whether in serpent form or slithering whisper. It is his lies that you need to leave behind in the dust. It is the attitude: *If I can achieve this, I can relax*, rather than, *if I can do this, I can be in a better position to help even more*. You need to

check it out. The point is, your peers and allies are other Christian leaders and churches. The competition is whatever stands between them and Jesus.

I celebrate this birthday relieved that I haven't messed up royally in these 51 years. Given my nature, and my past, this is literally a miracle of God's grace.

I'm glad I don't have to be afraid of growing older; in fact I am looking forward to it. I can't understand people's fear of the imaginary milestones of mortality. Some people freak out at thirty, or forty-five, or fifty, or sixty-five. Why? I would not go back to any age for anything. I've got a wonderful wife, great sons, a terrific daughter-in-law and a grandson who appears to me to be as close to perfect as is humanly possible. I've earned my gray hair and wrinkles, and in spite of looking more like a Share-Pei dog, I'm a pretty good bet to add a little good for years to come.

The glory of aging, especially in professions where the mind is capital, is credibility. And credibility really comes from two sources: faithfulness and wisdom.

Faithfulness is doing the same helpful things week after week, year after year. When our forefathers (as pictured in the Bible) wanted to remind each other of God's credibility, they would repeat how faithful His acts of grace were over hundreds of years. Young people, without much of a record of faithfulness may try to substitute promises. Don't do that; there is no substitute, so just keep helping consistently.

The other source of credibility is wisdom. The older you get, the more you can tell the difference between knowledge that is good for the moment and

wisdom that is good forever. Keep pursuing wisdom, friend, and your credibility will grow.

Personal reward, peace and acceptance are found not so much by achievements touted by others, but through faithful service in each stage of ministry. May our Lord continue to bless you over all the seasons of your Christian leadership.

Yours because I'm His,

Joel Hunter

Northland Church, Longwood, Florida

. . . Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10b