



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Declining with Grace  
(*Aging*, pp. 36-42)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# Declining with Grace

When facing the losses of old age, some people “handle” the change from competency to dependency with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. Gratitude and generosity—virtues that acknowledge we are not all strength and independence—prepare us for better adjustment in situations of loss.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

### Responsive Reading†

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

**In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.**

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

**But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.**

### Reflection

The Apostle Paul reminded the Colossians that in their baptism, they “have died” and “been raised with Christ.” He appealed to their memories of disrobing and donning baptismal clothes: “you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9b-10). Their new self, celebrating its interdependence within the “one body” of Christ, should generously brim with love, humility, and patience, and literally sing with gratitude!

In her hospice care practice, Elizabeth Roberts has noticed that “older persons who have ingrained in themselves, by long practice, the patterns of gratitude and generosity, handle disability better than the resentful and the grasping.” They display spiritual maturity in facing their dependency and weakness, have better relationships with caregivers, and can enjoy the good things in other’s lives. Developing gratitude and generosity, she and Bob conclude, “is a kind of long-term care insurance that we can practice every day of our lives, as is natural for those who are daily growing up in every way into him who is the head, our generous Lord Jesus Christ.”

- ▶ *Gratitude* is more than “positive thinking,” or looking on the bright side of events; it is gladness to be in relation *with* and receiving good things *from* someone. The Roberts distinguish the grateful person from a “deserver” who needs to feel entitled to the good things he receives. “The truly grateful



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person, by contrast, has a sense of not deserving the good she receives, and above all she does not insist on deserving all that she has." The grateful person differs from both an "ex-changer" who feels demeaned by any gift he cannot "pay back," and from a "grubber" who welcomes gifts but doesn't pay much attention to the givers. Christians are in an ideal position to become grateful persons, because "every good we have, both material and spiritual, is from the hand of a personal God who has given us these things without our deserving them," the Roberts write. "We are in no position to pay God back, and in no position simply to be heedlessly grubbing up all the goods we can."

- ▶ *Generosity* is a disposition to *give* graciously, just as gratitude is a disposition to *receive* graciously. The generous person gives freely from the heart, without a sense of the pressure of obligation, and with a loving attitude toward the recipient. "The grateful Christian will be generous" because she believes "that everything ultimately belongs to God, who showers us with his grace; if we are to be like him, we must become little showers in our own right," the Roberts write. "The practice of giving away, of sitting loose to one's possessions and time, and of seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others, is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us. It is a practice of detachment from ourselves that prepares us to move on, freely and gladly, to whatever God has in store for us."

### Study Questions

1. Who, among the older people you know, are responding with grace to the dependency that attends old age? Do you see signs of gratitude and generosity in their lives?
2. Do you know older people who have been overwhelmed by the losses and suffering they must endure? How can your congregation serve them?
3. Comment on J. R. P. Schlater's observation: "Old age has many compensations, but it is always a discipline. The process by which God pries our fingers loose from their clutch on things material is not entertaining. The closing of the senses, the increasing feebleness of the physical powers, and the pathetic loneliness of great age make up a process of detachment which is stern in its mercy (cf. the frank depression of Ecclesiastes 11:7-8)." (Quoted by Stephen Sapp in *Aging*, p. 21.)
4. How can we prepare, during younger and middle-age years, to be more grateful for God's gifts and more generous with our resources in our later years?
5. Folliot S. Pierpoint's beloved hymn, "For the Beauty of the Earth," celebrates the gifts from a generous Creator. For what is the hymn writer thankful? How is this hymn a model for our gratitude?

### Departing Hymn: "For the Beauty of the Earth"

† James 1:17-18, 22-25 (NRSV).

# Declining with Grace

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the practices of gratitude and generosity can help us cope with the dependency that accompanies old age.
2. To reflect on how, throughout our younger and middle-age years, we can become more grateful for God's gifts and more generous with these resources.
3. To appreciate the models that older people can be in our lives, showing by example how we can 'decline with grace.'

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth" in your church's hymnal. See the website [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org) for the eight original verses of this hymn.

## Begin with a story

Read or retell the stories of the two hospice patients, George and Steve, who have very different reactions to their losses and suffering at the end of life. The stories are at the beginning of the Roberts' article, "Declining with Grace" (in *Aging*, pp. 36-37).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would give members thankful hearts that are open to seeing and welcoming our daily dependence upon God's love.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:12-17 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Allow the scripture reading and responsive reading to set the stage for the discussion of gratitude and generosity. In Colossians 3:12-17 the Apostle Paul reminds us that gratitude to God and one another, and generosity of spirit expressed through patience, bearing with one another, and forgiveness, are central to life in the Christian community. These virtues are to be "put on" as we grow into and live out our baptism.

James begins by saying that generosity defines God's character, and we are to become like God—"a kind of first fruits of his creatures" who have been given birth "by the word of truth" (James 1:17-18).

Both passages emphasize that our deeds, and not merely our speech, should be thoroughly informed by these virtues. James warns us to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22). Paul writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" so that "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:16-17).

Gratitude is a *virtue*, or a pattern and practice of living rather than a momentary feeling. The Roberts highlight four distinguishing features of the practice of gratitude: (1) we welcome the relationship with the one who is caring for us; (2) we receive this care as a gift, rather than as something we deserve; (3) we do not interpret the care as fulfillment of a contract, or as an action that we must “pay back” in order to “even the score”; and (4) we keep our focus on the giver and our relationship, rather than on the accumulation of the gifts.

The *virtue* of generosity has much in common with gratitude, though generosity involves giving rather than receiving. The generous person (1) welcomes relationship with the recipient, (2) gives freely and without the pressure of obligation, (3) does not expect “pay back,” and (4) stays focused on the loving relationship instead of keeping score of the amount given.

The graciousness at the heart of these virtues is good preparation for the losses and suffering that accompany old age. A life of gratitude prepares us to accept the care that we need from others, without any need to deny our dependency or push the caregiver away. A generous person, who sits loose to possessions and time, knows how to turn loose of these when they may be denied in our later years. And she knows the value of relationships built through giving and receiving of care.

### **Study Questions**

1. Encourage members to mention relatives or friends who are responding with grace to the dependency that attends old age. The four features of gratitude (and generosity) in the lesson suggest signs to mention: (1) *welcoming of relationship* with those who care for them and whom they care for; (2) *giving and receiving in love*, rather than obligation; (3) *avoiding thinking in terms of reciprocity* (i.e., “score-keeping”); (4) *focusing on relationship* rather than on the gifts received or given.
2. Older people who suffer chronic illness, disability, loss of a spouse, separation from family members, and so on, may be mentioned. In their grief they may have become bitter and withdrawn, demanding or suspicious of others. Did they exhibit gratitude and generosity earlier in their lives, but now have been changed by their suffering? Or did adversity bring out patterns of behavior that were present before? (If it is difficult for members to discuss people whom they know, focus attention on the stories of George and Steve in *Aging*, pp. 36-37.) What support does your congregation offer? What support could it offer?
3. Do members agree that loosening our “clutch on things material” in our later years is a “discipline” from God? If so, is this sometimes, or always the case? Notice that Schlater calls it is a “stern mercy.” It is obviously “stern.” How is it a “mercy”?
4. Organize the discussion around one or several of the four features of gratitude and generosity: How do we become more welcoming of relationships with those who care for us? How do we enter friendships based on love rather than other relationships based on contract or obligation? How do we learn to avoid “score-keeping”? etc.
5. Pierpoint mentions the enjoyment of earth and sky, especially the beauty of changing time (verse two); the pleasure of sense experience, especially the “mystic harmony” that mysteriously unites our various sensations of touch, sight, and hearing into an experience of one moment (verse three); the joy of care and friendship (verse four); and the Christian community that loves us and all people (verse five). All of these joys are foretastes of eternal life with God, “flowers of earth and buds of Heaven” (verse eight). The hymn ranges widely over our dependencies that produce joyful relationships: our senses combined in experience, temporal moments conjoined into movement through time, persons linked in caring relationships, and individuals incorporated into the Kingdom of God by the church.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.