

"Generation Gap"

1 Timothy 5:1-2

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Introduction:

All of us here this morning know at least something about the challenges of growing older. In our own family, as of two weeks ago, we have been blessed with knowing what it is like to be the parents of a teenager. Not only that, but several months ago (as I have already told several of you), our youngest asked me whether I was going to die soon. I wondered whether she had some kind of plan that I didn't know about, but I gently took her in my arms and asked her why she was concerned about that, and she said, **"Because you have grey in your beard!"** And with that, I grew a few more! And yet even with a bit of grey here and there, so much of my life seems as if it happened only yesterday, and most of you could probably say something similar. Even up until just a few years ago, my 80-something year old grandfather would ponder his age, but then he would always say, **"But I don't feel old."** Here he was in a wheelchair, unable to hear, unable to leave his apartment due to health concerns, but he did not **"feel old."** And so even if we are not regularly hit with the full force of what it really means to mature, we still understand, though, at least something about the challenges that are involved in growing older. One of those challenges is that as we mature, we start to realize that there are people younger than we are, and then, if we are wise, we start to understand that we face some serious challenges in communicating with generations other than our own. We sometimes refer to this as the **"generation gap,"** the idea that there is tension between people of different ages.

One reason for this conflict is that all of us face our own unique challenges and obstacles, depending on how old we are. As I was preparing this morning's lesson, for example, I ran across an interview with a 104-year old woman who was asked by reporters, **"What is the best thing about being 104?"** And this elderly woman very quickly replied by saying, **"There's no peer pressure!"** In other words, this woman was in a very unique position. Or maybe you can remember the interview done several years ago with the world's oldest person at that time—I believe she was around the age of 120. On her birthday, reporters asked her about her vision for the future, and she responded by saying, **"Very brief!"** And so we find that her outlook on life was very different than that of someone in her 20's or 30's. Her concerns in many ways were unique to her age group. And certainly we understand that some of these differences between the generations at least have the potential for great conflict. In our own nation, we look around us and we discover several generations:

- These dates are not set in stone, but generally speaking, the oldest among us are part of what is sometimes referred to as the **“Greatest Generation,”** born between 1915 and the mid-1920’s. These are those who grew up in the Great Depression and fought in World War II. Those in the Greatest Generation are now between the ages of 85 and 95.
- We then see what is commonly referred to as the **“Silent Generation,”** those who were born from around 1925 to 1945—those now between the ages of 65 and 85—too young to have fought in the war, but old enough to have fathers who served in the war, some of whom still remember the Great Depression from when they were very young. The crew of Apollo 11 were all members of this generation.
- We then come to the **“Baby Boomers,”** those who were born from roughly 1946 through the mid 1960’s, those who are now roughly between the ages of 45 and 64, many of whom have just started to retire.
- We then see what is sometimes referred to as **“Generation X,”** those who were born from around the mid 1960’s through 1981, those who are roughly between the ages of 29 and 45.
- We then run into what is commonly referred to as **“Generation Y,”** those who were born from the mid to late 1970’s to the early 1990’s, generally speaking, the children of the Baby Boomers—roughly between the ages of 19 and 34.
- Then we come to **“Generation Z,”** those who were born from the early 1990’s to the late 2000’s, those who are just a few years old up to those who are in their late teens—sometimes referred to as the Internet or the Net Generation.
- And then right here at the end, we have those who were born after the financial crisis in 2008, and those who will be born through roughly 2025. For now, the name **“Generation Alpha”** has been proposed, and those in this generation are obviously 2 years old at the oldest right now.

But the point of this brief summary is to emphasize that we are now living among people of at least seven different generations! I know that some of this generation stuff may be a little difficult for some of us to understand. I have never been good with dates and numbers. And so for us, perhaps I could suggest only four basic generations: 1.) Those who are young enough to believe in Santa Claus, 2.) Those who are old enough not to believe in Santa Claus, 3.) Those who are Santa Claus, and 4.) Those who look like Santa Claus. And yet whether we take this as our guide or whether we go with the standard definitions, as you can imagine, there is a tremendous potential for conflict among all of these different generations. And what has come to be known as the **“Generation Gap”** continues.

In view of the potential for misunderstanding, people have tried dealing with the generation gap in many different ways. Perhaps some of you are familiar with the **“Mindset List”** that has been compiled by two professors at Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin, for several years now. Each fall, mindful that their fellow professors may have a hard time connecting with the incoming freshman class, these two professors have made a list—a list of things for their fellow “old guy” professors to keep in mind as they teach the incoming class of college freshmen. The most recent list, for example, points out that most of those in this past fall’s freshman class were born in 1991.

- For these students, the Green Giant has always been Shrek, not the big guy picking vegetables.
- They have never used a card catalog to find a book.
- Salsa has always outsold ketchup.
- They have been preparing for the arrival of HDTV all their lives.
- They have never had to “shake down” an oral thermometer.
- McDonald's has always been serving Happy Meals in China.
- Most communities have always had a mega-church.
- For one reason or another, California's future has always been in doubt.
- There has always been a computer in the Oval Office.

I don't know about you, but just thinking about some of that started making me feel just a little bit old! And so perhaps we struggle when it comes to understanding a generation other than our own. But the Mindset List, nevertheless, has been one very valuable tool that has allowed those of us in older generations to at least try to relate to the latest generation that is younger than our own.

Others have taken the generation gap and have tried to use it to their advantage. Several weeks ago, I noticed in Madison that several companies had come together to sponsor what they labeled as “**Boomer Fest.**” It was basically a conference, a big party, for Baby Boomers. They had all kinds of guest speakers—various financial planners, and relationship coaches, and advice for starting small businesses, they emphasized that the over-40 crowd is “**aging with attitude,**” and they were all upbeat about how great it is to be a Baby Boomer, and then I flipped the page and noticed their biggest sponsor, “**Brought to you by Gunderson Funeral Homes!**” Ouch! And yet advertisers understand the value of advertising to a particular age group.

In the church, some have tried to take advantage of the generation gap by keeping the generations separate. And so some churches may have a senior Bible study during the week, we may have youth activities for the kids, and then during the Bible class hour most of the classes are also divided by age. As the caption to this cartoon says, “**Come along quietly, Carl. Your latest birthday puts you with the Middle Agers.**” And so those age boundaries are sometimes enforced. And certainly there is a value to learning with people of the same age, and yet there is also a danger. There is potential for conflict.

And so with that, we come to this morning's lesson: Building Better Relationships with Other Generations. As most of you know, this was the topic that was assigned to me for the lectureship in Minnesota several weeks ago. I enjoyed doing the research for that lesson, a lot of you had a part in that, and so I wanted share with you some of what I learned in the process of preparing that lesson. Certainly I could have focused on all of the latest scientific research, and yet since our authority is the Bible, it makes sense that we should focus our attention on the Scriptures. This morning, then, I would invite you to turn with me to a rather short but powerful passage of Scripture that was written by the apostle Paul to a rather young preacher who was serving in the ancient city of Ephesus. I am referring to **1 Timothy 5:1-2**.

Sometimes the Lord's church is pictured in the Scriptures as a body, or a building, or a kingdom, or a vine, or a flock, or a temple, or a priesthood, or even as a holy nation, but this morning we remind ourselves that the Lord's church is also pictured as a family. And as the family of God, the Bible has something to say about how we interact with one another—especially when it comes to those in a generation other than our own.

As we look at this very brief passage, I should point out that all of us in this room are covered by the words of Paul to the young preacher Timothy. If I were to ask you to raise your right hand if you know someone OLDER than you in the church, and if I were to ask you to raise your left hand if you know someone YOUNGER than you in the church, I would imagine that all of us would have both of our hands raised. Everyone in the church is either older or younger than we are. This passage, then, is for all of us, and it is extremely simple. We do not need to figure out whether someone is in Generation X, or the Greatest Generation, or Generation Alpha, or whatever, but we simply need to know whether they are older or younger than we are. With that in mind, please look with me at **1 Timothy 5:1-2**...

¹ Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, ² the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.

What a simple passage! As we focus our thoughts on these two verses, I would like to divide this lesson into two parts.

I. First of all, I would like for us to consider the fact that WE ARE TO APPEAL TO THOSE WHO ARE OLDER THAN WE ARE AS IF THEY WERE OUR PARENTS.

As God's people, we are a family, and as we all know, families can have a little friction from time to time. Paul is not saying, therefore, that we need to ignore our differences, that we need to sweep things under the carpet, that we need to pretend that there is not a generation gap, but what he is saying is that we need to treat those who are older with respect—even when we disagree. Sometimes, those who are older than we are will have strong opinions, and sometimes those opinions will be wrong. Sometimes they may be right, but we are wrong. And so, in **verse 1**, Paul reminds Timothy that he is not to ***“sharply rebuke”*** an older man. A sharp rebuke is a rebuke that is done in anger. The word itself is only used here in the New Testament, and it literally refers to ***“striking out”*** at someone with our words. And so we are talking about harsh words spoken with a critical spirit, a correction spoken violently with contempt or disgust, a verbal punch. As a younger man, perhaps Timothy would have been tempted to lash out, to lose his patience with the older members of the congregation.

But in contrast to a sharp rebuke, Paul tells us, instead, to ***“appeal”*** to someone who is older ***“as a father.”*** We are to appeal to the older women ***“as mothers.”*** We are to ***“appeal”*** to them; that is, we are to call them to our side, and we are to work it

out together. Perhaps we could say that we are to ask instead of tell. We are to make a case and plead with that older member as if he were our father, as if she were our mother. What an interesting concept! Nearly every culture around the world promotes at least some level of respect towards those who are older, but especially towards our parents.

And so when it comes to dealing with differences between ourselves and an older generation, we are to remember that those who are older often have more experience and more wisdom in dealing with life. And again, this does not mean that they are always right. They are not. We can confront when necessary, but we are to do it as if we had to gently correct our own parents, realizing that they have the benefit of already having been where we are now. Mark Twain summarized the generation gap pretty well when he said, **"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."** In other words, when we are young, we have the tendency to be strong and perhaps even harsh, but wisdom comes over time.

Timothy, therefore, needed a reminder: Those who are older are not to be ignored, they are not to be treated harshly, but they are to be honored, and we are to relate to them with the utmost of respect. Or, as Paul would go on to say in **Ephesians 6:2**, ***"HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise)."*** Treat the older members of the congregation with the same respect that we would have toward our own parents.

As the Bible says in **Proverbs 16:31**, ***"A gray head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness."*** As Job said in **Job 12:12**, ***"Wisdom is with aged men, with long life is understanding."*** And as the Bible says in **Leviticus 19:32**, ***"You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the LORD."*** And for those of us who are younger, let us realize that respect is what the older generation really wants. They do not want to hold us back, they do not want to dampen our enthusiasm, but they do want to be respected. They want to be valued. They want to be consulted. They want to contribute. As the elderly Psalmist wrote in **Psalms 71**, ***"Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails... O God, You have taught me from my youth, and I still declare Your wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come"*** (**Psalms 71:9, 17-18**).

How do we show respect for those who are older than we are in the congregation? Perhaps we can stop by for a short visit. Maybe we could get in the habit of calling those who are shut in on our way home from worship on Sunday morning. In an effort to keep our older members from being excluded from much of the conversation in the congregation that takes place on-line these days, perhaps we could print out some of those e-mails and come over to explain some situation face-to-face. Perhaps we could bring a laptop over so that they can see the church's website or the church's Facebook page. When we stop by for a visit, perhaps we can ask a simple question:

What can I do for you while I'm here? Sometimes that question can get you into trouble, but so many times, our elderly members are doing pretty well, but there's that one towel bar that needs tightening, or maybe a light bulb in the hallway that's been burned out for three weeks, and they need some young guy to just reach up there to change that bulb. Or maybe that smoke detector has been beeping through the night. It takes about a minute to put in a new bulb or change a battery, but sometimes that seems to mean so much. In the newspaper this week, I noticed that some local senior apartments had some kids come over to teach the residents how to use a Wii, and everyone had a blast! Those 10-year old boys loved having a skill that they could teach to those who were older. Perhaps we could offer to have one of our youth devotionals in the home of an elderly member. We did this several years ago, and it was one of the most enriching fellowship activities that we have ever had. The singing was outstanding, and both the young and the old were encouraged.

As I was preparing this morning's lesson, I gave all of you an anonymous survey with two places to complete a sentence: 1.) I wish that those who are OLDER than me at this congregation would [BLANK], and 2.) I wish that those who are YOUNGER than me at this congregation would [BLANK]. What do the older members of the congregation really want out of those who are younger? Have we ever just stopped to ask that question? I'll tell you, I was pleasantly surprised by the answers. One older member wanted those who were younger, **"...to know they can come to me if they are struggling with something and to know I will listen and help them in any way I can, since I've probably experienced some of the things that they might be going through."** Another older member wanted those who were younger to, **"...bring their kids to Bible class whenever possible and be more involved in the church activities—especially when it comes to teaching and helping the elderly."** One of our middle-aged members says that she wants those who are young, **"...to continue to grow in faith and serve others in the congregation."** One older member says that he wants the younger, **"...to be willing to seek the advice of those who are older."** One older member says that he wants the younger, **"...to enjoy serving the Lord—they have a long time to do it."** Someone else wished that the young would **"...study and memorize Scripture; watch out for the elderly—no running near those of us who are lucky to be at church services. I wish that the younger would put God first in their lives."** A Christian woman in her 70's wished that the younger would, **"...step up and do more of the work that needs to be done—things that will make sure that a true church will be here in the future. Prepare to be strong leaders. A lot of sacrifice was made to establish the Four Lakes congregation—do not let it be in vain."** Someone else wished that the younger would, **"...ask more questions."**

If I could summarize: Those who are older want to be included, they want the church to be strong in the future, and they are looking for the respect of those who are younger. Those of us who are younger, therefore (as Paul says), are to appeal to those who are older as if they were our own parents.

II. There is a second aspect to these two verses in 1 Timothy 5, and that is, WE ARE TO APPEAL TO THOSE WHO ARE YOUNGER AS IF THEY WERE OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

And so we shift our thinking away from how to interact with those who are older than we are to how we interact with those who are younger. And again, as older people, it is tempting for us to sometimes be suspicious of the younger generations, to be nervous about the next generation coming in and taking on the role of leadership. Perhaps some who are older have the potential to be overly critical of those who are younger, and we know that this attitude has been around for many, many years. Think, for example, about one very influential professor from the secular world. This is what he said, **“Youth today love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, no respect for older people, and talk nonsense when they should work. Young people do not stand up any longer when adults enter the room. They contradict their parents, talk too much in company, guzzle their food, lay their legs on the table, and tyrannize their elders.”** That quote, of course, comes from Socrates, a man who was born nearly 500 years before the time of Christ! And so it seems that the generation gap between the old and the young has been around for a long, long time.

But consider how important it is for the older to patiently teach those who are younger. Think, for example, about all of the decisions that are usually made in that one decade after a child turns sixteen. We have several young adults here at this congregation who are just beginning to enter that decade. Here in our culture, during those ten years (starting at the age of sixteen) a child will make the transition from living at home to being a fully functioning member of society. During those ten years, a child will decide whether to go to college and graduate school. During those ten years, a child will make a career decision. During those ten years, a child will often fall in love and will decide whether to get married. During those ten years, many will start to bring children of their own into this world. Many will decide whether they will obey the gospel. In fact, many of the decisions that will affect the rest of their lives will be made in that one decade, starting at the age of sixteen. But on top of this tremendous pressure, we realize that this is the time of life when we are perhaps least prepared to make some of these huge and life-changing decisions. During those ten years, therefore, it would be so helpful for children to have some wise Christian adults (in addition to their own parents) to look up to in the church for advice and correction.

And so we go back to 1 Timothy 5:1-2, and we find that Timothy (even as a rather young man) is to appeal to those who are younger as a brother. Notice: He is not to look down on them as if they were children. Logically, we would think that if Timothy was to treat those who are older as his parents, that he should treat those who are younger as his children. But that is not the case! And so, this is not a matter of Timothy looking down his nose and shaking his finger at the younger people, but just as with those who are older, Timothy is to **“appeal”** to those who are younger. Literally, he is to call them to his side. He is to perhaps put his arm around them, and stand with them, and make a reasoned appeal. He is to use the same tone and

attitude as he did with those who were older, but now he is speaking with those who are younger, and he is to approach them as brothers and sisters.

And didn't Jesus tell us how to handle conflict between brothers? In **Matthew 18:15**, Jesus said that, ***"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."*** That is how I would like to be treated by the older members of this congregation. I hope that they would not all go out to Culver's and have a good laugh at my expense, but I hope that they would pull me aside and explain to me the way of God more accurately (**Acts 18:26**). The Golden Rule then tells us that if that's how we want to be treated, then we should go out and treat those who are younger than we are in the same way. If we want to get along with someone younger than we are, then we should take them out for breakfast. Have them over for dinner. Value their opinion. Include them in the ministry of the congregation. Or, as Paul said, treat them as brothers and sisters, and when they need to be corrected, do it in the form of an ***"appeal."***

We should notice a little bonus instruction (in **verse 2**) concerning the Christian sisters. Paul goes above and beyond the other instructions and tells us to appeal to the younger Christian sisters ***"in all purity."*** Do we understand the warning here? Do we understand the danger? Do we understand the opposite of ***"purity"***? I hope we understand here that sexual sin (even within the church) is not new, and so Paul says that we are to behave with ***"purity."*** As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:8**, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."***

So, with these comments in mind, how do those of us who are older try to bridge the generation gap with those who are younger? How do we interact with those who are younger in a brotherly way? The first possibility that comes to my mind is something that is done at the Henderson congregation in Henderson, Tennessee. They are in a unique position, being right next door to the campus of Freed-Hardeman University, but it is a program that perhaps we could try to get started someday. At the beginning of each school year, the church would have each college student put his or her name in a hat, and then the older couples at the congregation would pull out several names, and they would ***"adopt"*** those students for the rest of the school year. And especially for those of us who were hundreds of miles away from home, it was so nice to be able to go to those host families not only for food and the occasional load of laundry, but also for advice, as it was needed. It allowed those who were older to ***"appeal"*** to those of us who were younger. We do not have such a formal program here at this congregation, but I know that we personally have ***"adopted"*** several of the college students and the young adults who have passed through the Madison area over the past ten years, and perhaps we could do even more of that in the future.

As I see it, a lot of this also gets back to respect. Those who are older are also to respect those who are younger—to take them seriously and to give them advice as needed—brother to brother, sister to sister. Going back to that survey, when I asked those who were younger to anonymously tell me what they really wanted from those who were older, I was pleasantly surprised by those answers as well. From one Christian woman in her 40's, ***"I want those who are older than me to keep"***

encouraging me and to keep being a role model for me to look up to when I need some guidance. Also, to be there to listen when I'm having struggles and to guide me to make the right decisions. And to still be my friend if I'm not always perfect and make a mistake." From another 40-something Christian woman, "I wish that the older members of the congregation would let me know when they need something, to teach me to be a better Christian wife, mother, friend, daughter, and disciple." From a middle-aged member of our congregation, "I wish that those who are older than me would attend Bible class on Sunday mornings." From someone in their 60's, "I wish those who were older than me would let me help them and to continue to pass on their wisdom and example." Another comment from a middle-aged Christian, "I wish that those who are older than me would help with spiritual advice without seeming judgmental while doing it. Go ahead and bring some tough love correction—admonish when needed." From a Christian in his or her 50's, "I wish the older would correct the younger when they are doing something incorrectly." From another Christian in his or her 50's, "I wish those who are older than me would live forever. I wish they would be an example to younger Christians." From a Christian woman in her 30's, "I wish those who are older than me would make the time to teach in formal and informal ways. Do a buddy system by directly showing younger Christians how to serve the church with hospitality, giving, teaching, and preparing for classes, cleaning, and so on." From one of our pre-teens, "I wish that the people older than me at this congregation would become elders." From one of our teenagers, "I wish that people who are older than me in the church would realize that I'm smarter than I come off as." From another teen, "I wish that people who are older than me at church would listen to my opinions."

In other words, it seems that those who are younger are looking for the older generations to pull them aside and to appeal to them as brothers and sisters, to correct them, to include them in the work of the congregation. Imagine that! Our young people want exactly what Paul told us to do!

Conclusion:

In the church, the wisdom of the older comes together with the energy and enthusiasm of the younger. We close the generation gap by treating the older with respect and by treating the younger as brothers and sisters. May God help us to treat each other as we would like to be treated.

The gospel message is that Jesus came to this earth and died for our sins. We respond to that sacrifice by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you need the prayers of this congregation, or if you are ready to obey the gospel, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org