

# 119

## MINISTRIES

*“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”*

### **Honor Your Elders (Leviticus 19:32)**

Honoring one’s elders is a fundamental value in the lives of those who follow the God of Israel. The Torah expresses this value in Leviticus 19:32.

#### **Leviticus 19:32**

You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord [YHWH].

The word translated “gray head” in this verse is *seybah*, which means, “gray hair, old age.” This meaning is reinforced by the term “old man,” which is used in the second part of this verse. “Old man” is translated from the Hebrew *zaqen*, which means “aged.” The word *zaqen* also carries the sense of “elder,” as in a community leader or judge, and is used in that sense more than 100 times in the Hebrew scriptures. This seems right, seeing that the elderly in the community often *were the elders* of the community.

The sense of the word in Leviticus 19:32 is not exclusive to community leaders but includes *any* elderly person. It also is not exclusive to elderly men. Jacob Milgrom points out that *zaqen* is sometimes a collective for men and women:

The rabbinic bias that this injunction is limited to men may not be the sense of Scripture. Note that *zaqen* is a collective for men and women in Josh 6:21; Jer 51:22; Ezek 9:6, and elsewhere.

-Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 17-22* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), p. 1703

That *zaqen* includes elderly women makes sense in light of the literary structure of Leviticus 19. The command to honor the elderly is modeled after the earlier command in verse 3 to revere one’s parents—both mother and father. Milgrom writes:

Vv. 30-32 not only use the same vocabulary as vv. 3-4, but also reveal how the one commandment to revere the parents (v. 3a) is extended to the commandment to respect all elders (v. 32a; cf. Philo, *Decalogue* 165-67, who includes elders in the fifth commandment).

- Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 17-22* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), p. 1599

*Zaqen*, old age, is also connected to having wisdom (Proverbs 16:31; Job 12:12; 32:7). The Bible consistently upholds wisdom as a desirable attribute to be pursued.

This verse has two commands, which both express the same idea. The first command is to “stand up before the gray head.” This could be translated literally as “In the presence of the elderly, you shall rise.” Standing up in someone’s presence was a sign of honor in the ancient world, which plays into the second part of the commandment to honor the elderly. Standing in the presence of the elderly, and thereby expressing honor toward them, was a way to acknowledge their wisdom. As Jay Sklar explains:

Such respect for the elderly was a way to acknowledge the wisdom and experience that comes with years (Job 32:4, 6; Prov. 20:29). Moreover, it was a way of showing respect for authority, since the elderly would often be one’s parents or parental figures in the community (Prov. 23:22; cf. 1 Timothy 5:1).

-Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 251

These commandments also have a humanitarian aspect. Sklar continues:

Such respect was also a natural impulse of those showing the Lord’s love to the disadvantaged, for we slow and weaken as we age and are in greater need of patient care and compassion.

-Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 251

In this verse, you’ll notice that honoring the elderly is directly tied to honoring YHWH: “...and you shall fear your God.” If we revere YHWH, we will honor our elders.

That’s a lot of information packed into this one verse! To summarize:

- The Torah commands us to stand in the presence of and honor the elderly.
- The “elderly” is a broad designation and not exclusive to community leaders. It includes any elderly man and elderly woman.
- Biblically, old age is connected to having wisdom.
- Honoring the elderly is directly tied to honoring YHWH.
- There is also a humanitarian aspect to the command to honor the elderly.

Treating our elders with honor and respect and acknowledging them as sources of wisdom is a big deal in the Bible. The New Testament repeatedly stresses this Torah principle. As the apostle Peter admonishes us:

### **1 Peter 5:5**

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Paul writes:

### **1 Timothy 5:1-2**

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

The prophets describe the failure of young people to honor their elders and how this characterizes an unstable society on the brink of social collapse:

### **Isaiah 3:1-5**

For behold, the Lord God [YHWH] of hosts is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and supply, all support of bread, and all support of water; the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counselor and the skillful magician and the expert in charms. And I will make boys their princes, and infants shall rule over them. And the people will oppress one another, every one his fellow and every one his neighbor; **the youth will be insolent to the elder**, and the despised to the honorable.

As believers, these passages ought to prompt us to ask the question: is our treatment of the elderly biblical? Do we acknowledge the wisdom that comes with age? Do we go out of our way to show honor and respect toward our elders?

Sadly, it seems that old age is not something that calls for honor and respect in our culture. The elderly are seen as out of touch and ignorant. “OK boomer” is a popular catchphrase that the current generation says to dismiss and mock our elders, those from the Baby Boom generation. When we use phrases like “OK boomer,” we are expressing the sentiment that Boomers just don’t get it. They are jokes and have nothing to offer us. We’ve reduced an entire generation to a meme.

As a culture, we’ve largely lost sight of the value of honoring our elders. Not only does this display a lack of love toward our elderly neighbors, causing them to feel insecure and worthless as they grow old, but it also does a massive disservice to the youth. We are deprived of the wisdom and direction of our elders. We are left to learn everything in life the hard way, or not at all.

We must get back to this Torah principle of honoring the elderly. So, how can we apply this principle? What does that look like in our time and culture?

Well, the Hebrew word for “honor” in Leviticus 19:32 is *hadar*, which simply means “to show respect” or “to prefer.” In short, we honor the elderly by respecting them and generally regarding them as better sources of wisdom than people our age or younger—*preferring* them.

Many might wonder how literally we should take the commandment to stand in the presence of the elderly. In the ancient world, this was a customary sign of respect. It’s customary in our own culture to do this in some situations as well. For instance, we rise before a judge during a court hearing. This is a way to express honor toward the judge.

In America, we customarily rise during the National Anthem. This is a sign of respect and honor for our country and those who fought and died to preserve our liberties. Some wealthy professional athletes have recently chosen to kneel during the National Anthem as a deliberate sign of *disrespect*. Why? Because they believe our country is not worthy of honor for whatever reason. The point here is that standing is still customarily a sign of honor in some instances, even in our own time and culture.

There may be times when literally standing in our elders’ presence makes sense in our time and culture

today as well, and we should do it. But this doesn't mean we just ritualistically stand every time we see an elderly person. For instance, you wouldn't stand up in the middle of a restaurant when an elderly person you don't know gets seated at the table next to you. Doing that would probably make them feel awkward rather than honored.

Remember, the intent of Leviticus 19:32 is to express *honor* for the elderly. That might mean standing in their presence in some situations, when doing so would express honor toward them. It also might mean not just standing but making it a point to walk up to the elderly person and warmly greet them as they enter the room. Maybe invite them to take your seat in a gathering. The point is to *do something* to show the elderly person honor. Train your brain to acknowledge their presence and go out of your way to honor them. Glean from their wisdom and experience.

Once again, by honoring our elders, we are honoring God. This is something we as believers need to take seriously. Disregarding our elders is one of the marks of an unstable and ungodly society. If we want a healthy society that benefits from the wisdom gained through years of experience, we do well to honor our elders.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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