

Families Nearer Heaven Eli's Family—Correcting Bad Behavior

Intro: Chuck Swindoll suggested that the real goal of parenting is to model God's role of authority until your child reaches the point where there is a natural transfer of that authority from you to God. Surely we all hope that our influence will be such that our children experience that transfer and will grow up to honor God and be obedient to Him.

However in the family we're considering today that transfer did not take place. As we look at Eli's family we see a man who lived to see his two sons judged for their rebellion against the Lord. What went wrong and what can we do to avoid this happening to our children?

God's judgment of the house of Eli

Eli held an important position in the house of Israel. Being descended from Aaron he was given the awesome responsibility to be high priest of Israel, teaching them God's law and officiating at the tabernacle of the Lord. In addition Eli was Israel's judge for forty years (1 Sam. 4:18). Thus Eli occupied a position of great privilege and great responsibility. But Eli was also a father of two boys who were subject to his parental guidance and discipline. Their names were Hophni and Phinehas. Hophni and Phinehas in spite of whatever influence their father tried to exert upon them grew up to be spiritual renegades.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the Lord (1 Samuel 2:12)

There is something terribly ironic about that. These two boys had grown upon in the shadow of the Lord's house; but never appeared to grasp anything about the character of the Lord.

In addition Samuel reveals other habits that indicated their lack of regard for their role as priests.

Instead of honoring the proper proportions of the sacrifice due them as Levites, they simply arbitrarily took with a 3-pronged fork whatever came out of the pot of those preparing feasts to be observed in the presence of the Lord. Thus they abused the people who came.

In addition they would force people to share a portion of their sacrifices before the fat had even been burned to the Lord.

Thus Samuel describes them:

Thus the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for the men despised the offering of the Lord. (1 Samuel 2:17)

Finally their disregard for God's sacrificial laws indicated a rebellious spirit that transferred to their obedience to his moral laws. Thus, we are told that they even committed fornication with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting (! Sam. 2:22).

Eli, though himself a high priest and judge of Israel, had failed as a parent to instill within them a knowledge of God and respect for His law.

When the Scripture reveals his reaction to reports circulating about their immorality, the best he could offer was not much more than a verbal slap on the wrist.

And he said to them, "Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all these people? No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the Lord's people circulating. If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him? But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the Lord desired to put them to death. (1 Sam. 2:23-25)

Yes, all that Eli said was true; but clearly the time for speeches had long passed, and Eli neglected to bring a halt to their sinful practices.

Later God would pronounce his own judgment concerning Eli as well.

God sent a prophet to warn him with these words:

'Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me, by making yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of My people Israel?' (1 Sam. 2:29)

And when through Samuel God for the second time pronounced his judgment on Eli's house, he acknowledged Eli's culpability in failing to deal severely enough with them to halt their behavior.

In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them. (1 Sam. 3:12-14)

That judgment was to come upon Eli's sons. They would both be killed in battle the same day and the ark of covenant, the symbol of Lord's presence, would be captured by the Philistines. When Eli heard the news, he was so shocked by it that he fell backward and broke his neck and died from the injury.

Clearly the whole story is a story of family disintegration and disaster; and serves as an object lesson of what not to do! Of course, it is important to note that Hophni and Phinehas were grown men responsible for their actions and not merely little children. But clearly Eli too was culpable, failing to heed the warning signs of rebellion and failing to act firmly and decisively in opposing their bad behavior.

What can we learn from Eli's family?

People of great responsibility must not overlook the sacred trust of leading their own families.

Was he too busy in his role as priest and judge to spend time teaching his own sons? We must not let that happen in our lives. If we occupy great positions of leadership we should be all the more sensitive to the need to not neglect the smaller spheres of leadership.

Proximity to spiritual things doesn't make us spiritual.

Did Eli assume that his children would know the Lord simply by their presence around spiritual things? We must do more than bring them to church or put in the company of good young people. We must take time to instill spiritual principles in them.

We need to respond correctly to the warnings of others.

Do we realistically view what is going on in our children's lives? Do we become defensive when a teacher or other person responsible for their care issues a concern to us? Do we immediately take our children's "side" against the one who has authority over them?

With God, failure to oppose bad behavior is tantamount to condoning it.

As parents we need to define behavioral boundaries and enforce them. When children rebel against those boundaries we need to respond decisively and with sufficient punishment to discourage the behavior in the future.

Conclusion: Let us learn the lesson of Eli's family. It was a lesson that would need to be repeated. Solomon undoubtedly saw similar cases in his role as judge of Israel and was prompted to utter this proverb for posterity:

Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death. (Proverbs 19:18)

Let us work and pray that the transfer of authority from ourselves to the Lord will indeed occur so that we may not only have the joy of godly children but so that they will have the hope of eternal life. Only then can we be a family nearer heaven.