

### Are Parents Responsible for their Children's Behavior?

*(1 Samuel 3:8-14) The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. {9} So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. {10} The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." {11} And the LORD said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. {12} At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family--from beginning to end. {13} For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them. {14} Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"*

The past few weeks, our sermon series has been focusing on God's wisdom for your family. We've looked at the first family, the perfect family, we've looked at our church family. Today we turn to one of the relationships inside the family, namely, the relationship between parents and children. And so my question to you is simply this, do parents bear any responsibility for the behavior of their children? For example, if your 2 year old is having a meltdown in the grocery aisle or worse yet in the church pew, is that your fault as that child's parent? Should you somehow share the blame for what's happening there? If your son is sitting in jail right now, does that reflect on your parenting skills? What if your daughter tells you that she no longer believes what the Bible says, is that an indictment of the Christian training that you did or didn't give your child? Does God hold parents accountable for the things their children say and do?

I mean, if you think about it, doesn't God say, *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Eph. 6:4)* Or you think of Proverbs 22:6. *Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it.* I mean, if that is true, shouldn't the flip side of that coin also be true? Namely, if a child turns away from the right path, it's because someone didn't properly train him or her in the first place? My friends, if you've ever struggled with questions like these, if you've ever wondered whether God judges you on the basis of your kid's behavior, if you felt like other people are judging you on the basis of your kid's behavior, you're not alone. In fact, that's why, today, on the basis of God's Word, we're going to take up the question:

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Now, if you are like me, you're thinking to yourself, does Scripture provide any answers to that question? Are there any Bible stories where it seems like parents were punished for the behavior of their children? Actually there are. We have one that serves as the background to our Old Testament lesson today. It's the story of Eli and his two wicked sons Hophni and Phinehas. If you remember the story, God rebukes this father for failing to properly discipline his sons and in the end, all three of them end up dying on the same day. At first blush, it looks very much like God basically punished a parent for the sinful behavior of his children. But is that really what happened? To answer that, we need to take a little closer look at the account of Eli and his sons. The account is recorded for us in 1 Samuel chapters 2 to 4. There we read that Eli was a priest of

the one true God. His sons Phinehas and Hophni were also priests. But notice how the Bible describes Eli's sons: 1 Samuel 2:12. *Eli's sons were wicked men* (literally, they were good-for-nothing men). *They had no regard for the Lord.* In other words, they were unbelievers, pagans serving in the role of priests. And their unbelief showed in their behavior. The holy writer explains. {13} *Now it was the practice of the priests with the people that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice and while the meat was being boiled, the servant of the priest would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand. {14} He would plunge it into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot, and the priest would take for himself whatever the fork brought up. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh. (1 Samuel 2:13-14)*

Now understand, what the priests were doing there was not wrong. It's one of the ways that God directed the priests to earn a livelihood. After the most valuable portion of the meat, namely, the fat, was offered as a burnt offering directly to God, the priest would then stick his fork in the pot and whatever random piece he got, that was his portion. But notice how the sons of Eli kind of hijacked the process. We read, {15} *But even before the fat was burned, the servant of the priest would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give the priest some meat to roast; he won't accept boiled meat from you, but only raw."* {16} *If the man said to him, "Let the fat be burned up first, and then take whatever you want," the servant would then answer, "No, hand it over now; if you don't, I'll take it by force."* (1 Samuel 2:15-16). Call it extortion, call it robbery, these sons of Eli were not just stealing what didn't belong to them. They were stealing what belongs to God. And that was no minor offense. Scripture tells us: *This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt. (1 Samuel 2:17)*

You know, I think about those words and I wonder how often people are still doing the same thing today, basically saying, "I don't want to give God the first cut. I want the first cut. I'll let God have the leftovers." Whether we see that attitude in ourselves or in our children, the question is, how should we deal with it? How did Eli deal with it when he saw it in his children? Scripture tells us. *Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.* (Oh yeah, and add that to their litany of sins.) {23} *So (Eli) said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. {24} No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the Lord's people. 1 Samuel 2:23-24.*

Tell me, what do you think of this father's response to his children's behavior? Is dad coming down on them too hard? Or is he treating them with kid gloves? Kind of giving them a verbal slap-on-the-wrist? Sounds more like the latter than the former, doesn't it? Eli lays down no consequences for their behavior. He doesn't talk about what their sin is doing to their relationship to God. He doesn't terminate their call into the public ministry. Eli actually sounds more concerned about what everyone else is saying about their behavior. *"It is not a good report I hear spreading among the Lord's people."* But in the end, Eli doesn't do much about his sons' behavior. Not that it would have mattered. Scripture tells us, *Eli's sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death.*

Now, don't misunderstand those words. That doesn't mean that these boys were unable to repent because God had already determined that they were to die. No, it's the other way around. Because they had persistently refused to repent, God judged them before they actually breathed their last breath. For them Judgment Day had already arrived. You might say that God, through the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, lets us in on what's coming for the sons of Eli. But it didn't take him long to also share that message with Eli. God sent a prophet to Eli and he tells

him this: *The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your family line...all your descendants will die in the prime of life. {34} And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you--they will both die on the same day.*

Now, if we were to jump ahead a couple of chapters, we'd see that prophecy fulfilled. In one day, both sons of Eli's sons were killed in battle, and when Eli learns of their demise, and more specifically, when he learns that the Lord's Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, Eli falls over dead. All three of them died on the same day. The question is, was the death of Eli a penalty that he had to endure because his sons were so wicked? Did God punish Eli for the sins of his children? Or to go back to the question we started with, do parents bear any responsibility for the misbehavior of their children?

The answer to all those questions is...absolutely not. God doesn't hold people accountable for sins that they have not personally committed. Actually, let me clarify that. Other than the sin we inherited from Adam and Eve, God doesn't hold us accountable for the sins that we have not committed. In fact, that's the point that God makes in Ezekiel 18:20. *The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.*

Now, to a certain extent, that passage right there is good news. It means that as a parent, God is not holding my child's sin against me. It means that I'm not defined by how my kid behaves. Granted, if my 5 year old drops an F bomb in kindergarten class, it may not make me look good. It may cause a few suspicious looks to be thrown my way. I may get a phone call from the principal. But the fact is, God is not holding that child's sin against me. He's not holding me accountable for what my son did or my daughter said.

But here's the thing. While it's true that God doesn't hold me accountable for my child's behavior, God does hold me accountable for my behavior. And there's the real problem. You see, I've done more than enough to put myself in real trouble with a just and holy God, a God who hates sin, a God who by nature, must punish sin. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we're all in trouble with a God who demands that we be holy as he is holy. We've all fallen short of what God intends a Christian father or mother to be. Too often we've committed the same sins our children are committing. We throw our own little adult temper tantrums. We pout when we don't get our way. We refuse to show respect to those who have authority over us. We allow our friends or our free time or our sports schedule to become more important than spending time in the Lord's House. We argue and fight and hold grudges. And for all these sins, God holds us accountable under his holy and unchanging law.

But now here's the truly good news. All those sins that God should have rightfully charged to our account—instead he has transferred to Jesus' account. What we were all once accountable for, Jesus is now accountable for. What God should have punished us for, he instead punished Jesus for, and he did it all on the cross.

You realize what that means? It means that, for Jesus sake, not only will God not punish you for your children's sins. For Jesus sake, he will not punish you for your own sins either. That means that your identity as a parent is not tied to how well your kid behaves. But rather it's tied to how well Jesus behaved in your place. Jesus lived the perfect life. He kept all his Father's commands. And because he was the perfect child of God, now in God's eyes, so are you. For Jesus' sake, you are all right with God. And by God's grace, through faith in Jesus, so are your children. May God keep us all under that umbrella of grace, until we are united with all of God's

family in the mansion above, in Jesus name. Amen.

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