

Building Respect for God (Or How to raise a rebel)

Intro: The OT is full of intriguing stories, all of which can give us insight into human nature and the principles of God's rule. Our lesson today concerns the perennial challenge of parenting. How do we raise our children to have respect for God?

The story of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will give us insight into the challenging of raising children that love and respect God. Let's turn to 1 Samuel 2.

The disrespect of Hophni and Phinehas

The prophet Samuel presumably was guided by the Holy Spirit to report the events that led to the death of the two sons of Eli. Though they had been honored to serve as priests they abused their position and committed various acts of disrespect for God.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the Lord and the custom of the priests with the people. (1 Samuel 2:12-13)

The expression in Hebrew suggests men whose character was worthless. One translation says "scoundrels". Later the term was used as a proper name for the devil himself! The statement on the face of it is astounding. Two boys who had been raised in a high priest's family did not know the Lord. Clearly they could not have avoided knowing about God. The prophet apparently means to say that they did not understand God's nature and character such that their behavior was affected. The prophet gives us a sample of some of their offending behaviors. First they did not respect the worship of God.

When any man was offering a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand. Then he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. Thus they did in Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.

You remember from your Bible readings in Leviticus that some offerings were eaten by the people. The procedure was clearly laid out. The priest was to receive a portion of the animal (a leg and breast portion). However in this case, while the worshipper was preparing his own meal to eat in God's presence the servant of the priest would come and take an additional portion. Thus the people were being robbed of their portion. But there's more:

Also, before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give the priest meat for roasting, as he will not take boiled meat from you, only raw." And if the man said to him, "They must surely burn the fat first, and then take as much as you desire," then he would say, "No, but you shall give it to me now; and if not, I will take it by force."

Here the priests were forcing people to give them their priestly share before the fat was removed and burnt on the altar as God had prescribed. In this the priest were robbing God.

Thus the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for the men despised the offering of the Lord. (1 Samuel 2:14-17)

But there is more! Disrespect for God in worship is usually the outward symptom of a condition of heart that affects the moral life of the worshipper as well. Hophni and Phinehas did not respect the moral law of God.

Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. (1 Samuel 2:22)

It is hard to imagine such callous disrespect for God and for His tabernacle by two young men.

Who are we to blame for such bad behavior?

God placed the blame upon the father

Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Did I not indeed reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh’s house? ‘And did I not choose them from all the tribes of Israel to be My priests, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, to carry an ephod before Me; and did I not give to the house of your father all the fire offerings of the sons of Israel? ‘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?’

“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. “And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever.” (1 Samuel 3:13-14)

God placed the blame upon the sons as well.

Though Eli had more recently made some attempts to correct his sons, his words were quite mild and it is clear that their attitudes have hardened beyond repentance and God has already purposed their destruction.

“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 Samuel 2:25)

An unnamed prophet of God proclaimed that both would pay a terrible price for their failures:

Therefore the Lord God of Israel declares, ‘I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever’; but now the Lord declares, ‘Far be it from Me—for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed. ‘Behold, the days are coming when I will break your strength and the

strength of your father's house so that there will not be an old man in your house. 'And you will see the distress of My dwelling, in spite of all that I do good for Israel; and an old man will not be in your house forever. 'Yet I will not cut off every man of yours from My altar that your eyes may fail from weeping and your soul grieve, and all the increase of your house will die in the prime of life. 'And this will be the sign to you which shall come concerning your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas: on the same day both of them shall die. 'But I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in My heart and in My soul; and I will build him an enduring house, and he will walk before My anointed always. 'And it shall come about that everyone who is left in your house shall come and bow down to him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread, and say, "Please assign me to one of the priest's offices so that I may eat a piece of bread."' (1 Samuel 2:27-36)

Hopefully the sad account of this family will serve to help us avoid disrespect for God and its consequences.

Four valuable lessons we must learn!

Merely placing a child in a spiritual environment doesn't make a child spiritual!

The two sons of Eli had more exposure to spiritual activities than any child raised in Israel; but that was not adequate to ensure their respect for God.

Sometimes parents assume with good intentions that "bringing them to church" will guarantee faithfulness. If we rely solely on this, we will be very disappointed with the results. "I don't know where we went wrong. We brought him to church every Sunday".

Irreverent behavior must be consistently rebuked and corrected.

From the time children are young they need to understand that spiritual things are important and that God should be honored.

I could almost predict the young people who would grow up to have little regard for God. Their parents let them run up and down the church pews, tear apart the song books, almost knock older people down running around the building and scuffling after services, never get a Bible class lesson, wear the shabbiest clothing they have, and sit on the back row and talk and pass notes during the worship service. If such behavior is not corrected at each stage of life, then young people learn that God and things related to God are not that important and that their wishes and desires are more important.

Of course, parents will also deal with moral misbehavior and attach consequences to improper deeds outside the worship services.

Parents should proactively give their children "the knowledge of God" instead of hoping for "second generation" osmosis!

We can easily convince ourselves that our children will believe because we believe. We take it for granted that because we go to church every Sunday, they will. I've got news for you! They probably will not! God doesn't have any "grand-children". Our example is important; but it must be accompanied by meaningful discussion of God and His will in our daily lives.

If children are to honor God, their parents must honor God above the children!

If we are to instill respect for God in our children, we cannot make them little gods whose every whim and desire is catered to. Eli's mistake was that he was apparently afraid to displease his children and he allowed them to put their personal pleasure over the will of God. In God's words, "he honored them above God".

Parents sometimes are afraid that their children will not "like" church. For example, if Bible class is too much like school, then they'll "hate" Bible class like they "hate" school. We don't want that to happen, so we turn our heads when they don't prepare and we shrug our shoulders when they misbehave. We tolerate what we would dare tolerate in a school classroom. Is this not honoring children above God?

Spiritual things should be given priority over recreational activities.

Give a child a choice, "Would you like to study the Bible or play?" The answer is obvious.

Of course, many children would prefer playing sports to going to Bible class; but what message are we sending when we enroll them in an activity that guarantees that they will consistently miss church?

Conclusion: The truism is, those who don't learn from other's mistakes are destined to repeat them. God wanted us to learn something from the account of Eli and his two sons. Let's learn and apply those lessons so that our children grow up to respect and obey God.