
What Leading in the Home Is Not

1 Samuel 2:12-36

Devon Berry

Introduction Those of you who have heard me preach in the past know that I favor long and involved introductions. Tonight is a departure from that pattern. I have too much in the body to allow for a long intro. So we'll start this sermon off simply with the famous words of one of my favorite preachers: Please open your copies of God's Word to 1 Samuel 2.

As you are turning there, let me remind you that this month we are considering leadership in the family. Last Sunday evening Pr. Tim spoke on What Leadership in the Home Is. This morning you heard Pr. Chad speak on the positive pattern for leadership in the home, namely leadership in the church. Tonight, I have the assignment of addressing What Leadership in the Home is Not.

When it comes to spiritual leadership, whether it be in the home or in the church, we must always remember that *failure is an option*. Success is not inevitable. Neither "hard-earned experience" nor nearness to religious activity (i.e. I've been in church all my life) is a guarantor of a good outcome. The story of Eli is one such example. [PRAY]

The Story of Eli

Let's first get ourselves situated in Israel's historical timeline. Eli comes on to the scene after the exodus from Egypt with Moses, after the conquering of Canaan (the promised land), after Joshua, after the approximately 300 year period of the Judges and right before Israel got their first King, King Saul. This is the time when Israel would transition from having Judges to lead their nation to having Kings lead their nation. Israel has the Law, the sacrificial system has been put into place, the priesthood has been established, and as a general description of the state of affairs, we are told that, *Everyone did what was right in their own eyes* (Judges 21:25).

Eli is the high priest during this time and he has two sons, Hophni and Phinehas (pee-nek-haws), who are also priests to the people of God. The sons apparently oversee the sacrificial activities that the Israelites would have been regularly involved in. One day a man named Elkanah came to make his annual worship and sacrifices. He brought with him his two wives Peninnah (pen-in-naw) and Hannah. Hannah is not able to have children and each year she prays to God and asks for a son. In fact, she goes so far as to promise to the Lord that if he gives her a son, she will give the son to be a servant of God. As most of you know, Hannah goes on to have a son and she calls him, "Samuel," which means "I have asked for him from the Lord." In keeping with her promise, after Samuel is weaned she gives the boy to Eli. Hannah's parting words are a beautiful prayer to God, praising him and telling of his faithfulness. It is in this context of a family's faithfulness and humility before God, that we are introduced to a very different kind of family... indeed, it is the family Eli, the High Priest of Israel.

Let's pick up the story in 1 Samuel 2:12. We'll be reading together a fairly long passage and we'll do some skipping along the way. I'll let you know when we fast forward.

[**READ:** 2:12-17; skip to 2:22-36; skip to 3:11-19; skip to 4:1-4; skip to 4:10-18]

What We Can and Cannot Learn from Eli's Family

I want to take a moment and talk about the use of this passage for a sermon on leadership in the home. We must be clear that 1 Samuel is a very different kind of text than Ephesians 6, or one of the many Proverbs that address family life. The primary purpose of 1 Samuel is not to teach us about family life. And although this is not a sermon how to read your Bible, I think taking a moment or two to address this point will help us as a body put into practice so much of what we have been taught about interpreting the Bible.

If we force the story of Eli's family to be a text that teaches us directly about our homes and how they should operate, we are going to end up saying something bizarre like, "*If your kids grow up and go out and do bad things because you didn't raise them well, then God will kill you, your kids, and curse the next five generations of your family.*"

If however, we see the story of Eli's family as being one of a myriad of Old Testament stories which illustrate and bring to life principles from other parts of Bible which are intended to address the home (such as all those texts that teach about body life), we will do well. We will do even better, though, if we pay very careful attention to how God describes the behaviors and the hearts of the characters involved. Now for those of you sitting in on the ABE series on the heart presently, you will be well prepared to glean much from this passage. You see, when God's Word describes situations, events, people, attitudes, motivations, etc., we can always be sure that the descriptions are dead on – perfectly accurate. This is far better than any counseling case study we will ever read – which are never "dead on" because we cannot, like God, see the heart. From these Bible descriptions of people, their hearts and their actions, we can see a multitude of biblical principles illustrated that would not have otherwise been immediately obvious.

Let me try to put this in clearer terms. Let's say I wanted to teach Reuben, my son, about how internal combustion works. I'm probably going to try and find an engine for us to look at – because an engine has fuel, pistons, and sparks. If in the process of explaining internal combustion to Reuben I convince him that the purpose of an engine is internal combustion, I will have misled him pretty significantly. The purpose of an engine, in plain terms, is to make things go. Internal combustion just happens to be one of processes that is taking place while the engine is doing its intended work of making things go. Internal combustion is integral to the function of the engine and it demonstrates some pretty cool principles of physics – but it is not why the engine exists.

First Samuel is like this engine. The purpose of 1st Samuel is to teach us about God's intentional work in the unfolding of redemptive history as it moves toward Christ and the salvation of his people. The story of Eli's family, in the manner we are considering it today, is like internal combustion. It happens to be taking place in 1 Samuel. It is integral to the story line and it is a cogent example of some principles of the heart taught elsewhere in Scrip-

ture, however, like internal combustion, it is not the purpose of 1st Samuel. If we confuse the illustration of these biblical heart principles with the point of 1st Samuel – we’ll make big errors in the use of this text. We’ll reduce the engine to a demonstration of internal combustion and the engine will forever sit up on blocks – not fulfilling its intended purposes.

So, this is a long digression, but an important one. We certainly can use our OT Bible texts this way, and we even find encouragement to do this in the Scripture itself (see for example 1 Corinthians 10:1-21). However, we must be careful that in doing so that we do not “fiddle” with the text in a way that repurposes its primary use to that for which it was not intended. With this said – let us see how this perfectly accurate snapshot of Eli’s family illustrates principles taught elsewhere in the Bible, and how this illustration can inform our leadership in our homes.

Three Observations on Eli’s Heart

We are going to make three observations from the text on what we see happening in Eli’s heart and behavior. As we do this, keep in mind we are looking to see the heart behind Eli’s actions as a window into our own hearts.

Eli Honored Men (His Sons) Over God

In 2:27, when the man of God comes to Eli to deliver a prophecy, he does not waste much time getting to the heart of the matter. After reminding Eli of God’s gracious choice of his family to serve as priests, he asks Eli a very blunt and pointed question: (v.29) *Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?* The sins of Eli’s sons – which we’ll discuss more in a moment – were blatant and certain. There were no questions about what was really happening. And this man of God speaks the truth – he calls sin, sin. Eli is not given the opportunity for explanation – there is no explaining away about morale in the tabernacle, or Eli’s debilitating age, or wanting to keep relationships good with the sons for the sake of the grandkids.

Matthew 10:34-39 comes to mind as we consider this passage: *34 Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

The gospel is to have an ordering effect on one’s loyalties and there is no doubt that the choices will, in certain situations, be very hard. For some reason, and perhaps not such a mysterious reason, this had not occurred in the heart of Eli. He was not ready to

lose his life. He chose to honor his sons above God, and in doing so, he despised God (2:30).

He Appears To Have a Controlling Lust (or an idol)

We are not left without *any* explanation of why Eli honored his sons' sins. I believe that in this passage we are given reason to believe that Eli was directly benefitting from his sons gross abuse of their ministry-post. Did you catch it as we read through the passage earlier?

Recall 2:12-17. Eli's sons were greedily stealing meat from the sacrifices that the Jews would bring to the tabernacle. For those of you familiar with the sacrificial rites of the Jews, the offerings referred to were likely either a burnt offering, guilt offering, or peace offering¹ – the “custom” that Eli's sons had established was a clear violation of the instructions for sacrifices given in the book of Leviticus. This is despite a very generous provision by God through the people for the priests' food needs. Now recall what the man of God, the one who brought the prophecy to Eli about the downfall of his family, said to Eli in 2:29, *Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?* You see, it wasn't just a wayward band of priests eating the stolen offerings – it was Eli himself. But we are not done yet – if that is the smoking gun, then this is the dead body (literally!). Remember when the man came running from the battle with the Philistines? The one in which 30,000 Israelites fell in defeat, Eli's sons were slaughtered, and the Ark was taken by the Philistines? We learn a very interesting final fact about Eli in the moment of his death. In 4:18 we read, *As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy.*

Behind, at least in part, Eli's honoring of his sons over God, was an idol, a controlling lust. Eli had made a god of his stomach and his sons' sins provided for his sins. Eli was a glutton and his gluttony was part of the web of sins which rendered ineffective his leadership in the temple.

Paul describes people like Eli in Philippians 4:18-19, *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* And in describing false teachers in love with money, Paul gives us a category for those in ministry overcome by love for worldly things, 1 Timothy 6:6-9, *Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food*

¹ See Leviticus 6-8. The sin offering is not mentioned here because the priests already had a right to eat the entire offering after cooked (Leviticus 6:26), making a “custom” such as the one described in 1 Samuel 2:13 unnecessary. In the case of the burnt offering, the entire offering was to be burned to ashes. In the case of the guilt offering, all of the fat was to be burned (Leviticus 7:3-4). In the case of the peace offering, the thigh and the breast had already been given for the priests to eat, the remaining portion was to be eaten by the one offering the sacrifice after it had been cooked (Leviticus 7:15-16, 31-35).

and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

Is it any surprise then, overcome by sin, Eli's ability to lead in the temple is reduced to less than that of an old nag – he has sacrificed his credibility, integrity, and strength... indeed, he is a miserable, fat, old man who has given up the ephod (2:18), receives his visions through others (2:27ff, 3:1ff), has resolved himself to his family's pending demise and final destruction (3:18), and has no control whatsoever in the temple he has been charged to oversee (2:25).

He Failed to Restrain Blaspheme in His Area of Oversight

We can observe a final failure in Eli's leadership. In 2:22 we are told that Eli was given substantial evidence that his sons were "worthless men" (2:12), who forced worshipers to violate the sacrificial laws (2:16), that their sin was great and that they treated the sacrifice with contempt (2:17), and that they were sexually promiscuous (2:22) – he knew these things because the public kept telling him! This was not a secret, it was not an isolated event, it was systematic and sustained, it had reached the status of *custom*! (2:13). God describes them as blasphemers (3:13) who despised him (2:30). Sin and perversion has actually become a tolerated *custom* on Eli's watch as high priest... What was Eli thinking? Why didn't Eli act? Why did he sit idly by and allow people and ministry to be destroyed while getting fat off of the "extras" that his sons brought in? Where was the righteous wrath and indignant anger that should have been overflowing from Eli? Where was his love for God's glory?

What *did* Eli do? All we have recorded is a single verbal rebuke that many commentators believe to have been weak and insufficient: (2:23ff) *Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons; it is no good report that I hear from the people of the LORD spreading abroad. If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?* As one commentator puts it, "What he said was right, but it was not enough²."

In the prophecy given to the young Samuel, God says of Eli's behavior, *And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them* (3:13).

Eli's disposition to his sons' sins should have been similar to that of Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 upon learning of the Corinthian church's tolerance of gross sexual immorality... *Let him who has done this be removed from among you* (v.2). Or again the stern warning in 1 Timothy 5: 19-20: *Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 20As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.* But this is not Eli. Eli has failed. He has failed to lead in his area of ministry oversight.

² Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible

I know an old man who swallowed too much meat. I don't know why he loved his meat, perhaps he'll die. I know an old man who honored his son too much. I don't know why he honored them so much. He honored them much to get the meat. I don't know why he loved the meat. Perhaps he'll die. I know an old man who would not stop sin. I don't know why he would not stop sin. He would not stop sin, to honor his sons, he would honor his sons, to get the meat... I don't why he loved his meat. And now he's dead.

Applications on the Home Front

So, beyond nursery rhymes, what can we learn about leadership in the home from Eli? I think a number of things, so long as we keep our thinking straight. What we may not do is make direct conclusions about Eli's parenting, and therefore our own parenting. First, as we already noted above, that is not the primary purpose of this text. Second, Eli's sons are grown men functioning as priests in the temple, and third, we are told nothing about how Eli raised his sons. For all these reasons and more, we would be in error to use this text as a negative demonstration of Proverbs 22:6, *Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

We can be confident in our conclusions about Eli's heart because we know that we have an accurate description here given by God, who can see hearts perfectly. With this in mind, we have observed how a sinful heart can corrupt leadership in ministry. Because all believing adults are involved directly in ministry leadership in their homes, we can ask ourselves what risks are posed to our leadership in our ministry at home if we have Eli-like hearts.

Honoring Your Family Over God

What can happen when leaders in the home begin to honor people over God? Here are some specific examples

1. When your child (or as an adult child – your parents are) is disgusted with you or disapproves of you because you are doing what is right, you are anxious, worried, and battle with low self-esteem.
2. You love your child too much to make them get out of bed, or get home early Saturday night, to go to church.
3. You allow your home to revolve around sports, or other activities, to the extent that you cannot effectively minister to your family –because, you cannot bring yourself to deeply disappoint your child by saying no.
4. You are easily discouraged by your children's (or spouse's or significant other's) dismissal of your use of the Word in your home for training. You feel embarrassed when you try to speak to them with the Word in hand.
5. You will not confront your husband over his continual spending of money that should be part of your giving to the church.
6. You will not confront your husband over his continual saving of money and working long hours.

7. Your home is a well-guarded tomb on Sunday afternoons – nary a guest in your home because this is your wife’s nap time/ “me” time and you know that challenging this is certain to create an argument.
8. You only have \$3,000 to spend on your 16 year old child’s first car – but you spend \$8,000 because you cannot bear with their or your embarrassment in driving a clunker.
9. “Family-time” becomes a habitual explanation for your lack of participation in body life.
10. In a social situation, you will not remove your child for much needed biblical and appropriate discipline because you risk causing a scene or being embarrassed by acknowledging your child is out of control.

Being Idol-driven in Your Home

Often our honoring of people over God can be a sophisticated sin that has many layers. Similar to the case of Eli, there are often other sins feeding into the behavior. The sin of idolatry is one such sin. This can take on many forms in the home. Let’s take the ten examples just given of honoring the people in your family over God and imagine what idols might contribute to the motivations.

1. You have idolized being perceived as the perfect parent by your children. Your child’s disapproval is more important than God’s approval.
2. You have an idol of sleep. You know you can worship that idol and by making it appear that your child is the reason for the family taking the morning off.
3. You crave being with the “in” crowd at your children’s school. To do this, a slavish commitment to run your world around sports is necessary.
4. You deeply desire to be viewed as competent and intelligent by your spouse and children. Trying to integrate the Bible into your training in the home exposes areas where you lack skill.
5. You have an oversized affection for things. Although you disapprove of not giving to the church, you sure like the results of your husband’s lack of self-control.
6. You worship financial security. Your husband’s addiction to work, obsessing over money, and slowness to sacrificial generosity helps you keep your idol from toppling.
7. You value the absence of tension with your wife more than God’s call to hospitality.
8. You have an idol of appearing more financially successful than you really are (and your child does too).
9. Your family itself is your idol. You believe that the very best thing you can do for your family is to make it first in your life.
10. You crave the approval of other Chapel moms. You feel that as soon as you remove your child you are admitting that you are not doing your job at home.

Giving Up Authority in Your Home to a Degree that Allows Blasphemy to Become Commonplace

If unchecked, leadership failures in areas of ministry, including the home, can eventually spiral down to the level of blasphemy, contempt for the gospel, and a despising of God. Honoring family over God and the worshiping of idols in your heart can become so deeply ingrained into your home that you surrender any leadership, authority, or influence you have in your home. And things will go their natural way. Unthinkable sins take place and are tolerated in your home (e.g. cheating on taxes or stealing from an employer; gluttony or no stewardship of one's body; physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse; complete failure to manage your home resulting in interpersonal chaos, dilapidation and filth, and we could go on). There is no zeal for righteousness, no restraint, no rebuke, your home is a barely cloaked denizen of sin... and this occurs among those who are aware and even may have personally benefitted from the merciful work of God through Christ on the cross. It's not as hard to get there as you might think. In fact, undoubtedly, some of us have been there. Our homes are (or were) living contradictions to the gospel. As we said at the outset, failure is an option.

So is there hope? Eli's warning came too late. He had resigned to the corruption of the tabernacle, the central place of worship for Israel (3:18). It seems that he was simply waiting to die – not even willing to prevent the Ark from being taken out to the battle field as if it was some type of good luck charm or nuclear weapon. If Eli is what we are left with as a high priest, the highest spiritual position among the people of Israel... is there really any hope? The sacrifice he offers on behalf of the people is tainted by contempt and blasphemy – it is far, far from perfect or sufficient. Furthermore, Eli is no kind of spiritual leader. He is overwhelmed and beset by personal sin. Not able to even deal with his own sin, how can he offer sacrifice for mine let alone lead me out of it? Eli died old, powerless, defeated, acquiescing readily to great and horrible sin in his area of ministry oversight, he was fat on the juicy plunder of temple sacrifices. What power is here? What hope is here? As we lead, as we age, as we endure difficulty and battle with the sins in our hearts, will this be our end? Finally, we come to the primary purpose of the passages we have been considering this evening – and we will touch on it ever so briefly because to do so is to kiss the King.

In these first few chapters of 1 Samuel there is a very important pattern that emerges. I'll simply tell you what it is and you will have to discover and love it in your personal study. Each time Eli's sons and their sin is mentioned, the author quickly follows up with a description of Samuel. In one instance it sounds like this, *Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man* (2:26, cf Luke 2:52). Samuel was a *type* of son who came on to the scene through a *miraculous birth* (Luke 1:34) to a mother whose *song of praise* (Luke 1:46-53) is recorded for us. In addition, it is recorded that the *Lord was with Samuel* (3:19). As the story of Samuel develops, it becomes clear that he would become all that Eli was not – he would deal with idols, we would confront not only the King, but the nation in their contempt for God, and he would honor God – even when his sons, that's right Samuel's sons (8:2-3) did not. Yet, Samuel died. Da-

Conclusion

vid died. Solomon died. And the kingdom of Israel fell apart. Samuel, David, and Solomon all pointed to... to what? To 1 Samuel 2:35, *And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever.* This of course, in its ultimate fulfillment is Christ our King.

In the end, everyone and everything else fails except him. Where will we go to be freed from our Eli-like sin? To grow in our Samuel-like godliness? To find the power and forgiveness to lead our families well?

Hebrews 7:23The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. 26For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

1 Peter 2:24 says He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Hebrews 4: 14Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[PRAY]