

A Comparison of Contrasting Approaches

1 Samuel 2:11-36

“...Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”

Introduction: If you were asked what the biggest concern or threat to Christians in Southern California in the future, what would you expect to hear? Undoubtedly there would be a conversation about the shift of government policy and polarization, moving from a foundational ideology of a Sovereign God, right and wrong, and absolutes in morality to the shifting sands of an ideology that puts man at the center, truth that based on whims and feelings, and an overall rebellion against God’s design and rule of mankind. Or perhaps you’d expect a discussion on the indoctrination in education, training children as early as pre-school that men can marry men, parents are not their ultimate authority since the teacher knows best, and that they can change how they were born. Or maybe the argument would be made of the economic challenges, both with rising prices and inflation as well as what tax dollars are being used to fund. Each of these is concerning. Each of these (and many others) are valid threats. But there are greater threats than these that we must be aware of, since these happen OUTSIDE of us. No, the greatest danger to faithful believers is the **breakdown of the home and church, a decay from the inside out, which leaves every believer open to attack and loses distinctiveness from the culture we are placed in.**

As goes the home, so goes the church. As goes the church, so goes the home. Scripture intentionally melds these two institutions, creating beautiful overlap of how each function. Each has designated leadership, mutual encouragement and service, equipping, training, a place of love and discipline, where truth can be modeled and when maturity is reached, sending out is a goal. Again, there is no doubt that these are both under attack, but also that strong churches and homes would be the absolute solution to most of the mental health crisis we are facing, to curbing crime, upholding authority, and valuing things like hard work, toughness, kindness, generosity, and selflessness. God designed a family to be the greatest place and system to raise children to become helpful members in society to the glory of God, and God designed the church as the family of God that equips everyone for the work of ministry to the glory of God. Looking for ‘solutions’ to problems outside of these two leads to a multiplication of ignorance and proliferation of immorality, which is detrimental to everyone.

As God gathered Israel in the Promised Land, they were constantly surrounded by enemies and influences. All through 1 Samuel we’ll see the Philistines were a coastal power who was a constant thorn in the side of Israel. This created a paradigm of faith, for when the people were faithful to walk with God, He fought for them and “was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel” (1 Sam. 7:13). There were also wicked influences around, which would continually creep into the land, including idol worship, marriages to pagans, and even child sacrifices to foreign gods. The test for Israel was simple: would they walk faithfully with their God, trusting Him at His word in active and joyful obedience or take matters into their own hands. When they were strong in the Lord, there was **success, peace, and victory**. When they were weak in faith, there was **loss, havoc, and misery**.

1 Samuel 2 is a pivot point in the book as a whole and in Israel’s history as a whole. God was stepping in to change direction for the nation, from a weak priesthood to a new and faithful one, from directionless leadership to a centralized monarchy. When God makes changes it is a blessing, but often comes with discomfort and pain. This is seen in the **structure** of how 1 Samuel 2 was written, as a

comparison/contrast between Hannah and her son Samuel and Eli, the priest, and his two wicked sons. Hannah was a no one from nowhere, was a barren woman with no authority or position in a terrible family situation, but proved to be **faithful, lived a Godward life of true worship, and produced a faithful son who would become a leader of the nation**. Eli was from a priestly family and line, had an influential position, was fertile, but proved to be a failure as a spiritual leader and parent, with God ultimately **removing him and his family** from present and future leadership. Hannah was a picture of Israel's barrenness spiritually up until this point (Judges 21:25), but also of God's faithfulness and the hope of Israel's future, with Eli representing the lack of faithfulness with all the blessings God had given them. The chapter is long, but it's important to see the flow:

v. 11 – **Samuel** ministering to the LORD

vv. 12-17 – **Wicked sons** of Eli functioning in vain worship

vv. 18-21 – **Samuel** ministering and God blessing Hannah

vv. 22-25 – **Eli** confronting his sons, God condemning them

v 26 – **Samuel** growing in stature and favor with the Lord

vv. 27-34 – God rejects **Eli** and prophesies of the sons death

vv. 35-36 – God will raise up a sure priest and faithful house

In this comparison, we see a stark contrast of pathways: one born out of faithfulness and the other a lack thereof. The text focuses in on Eli's failure of faithfulness, and our challenge will be to learn from him and hold fast to the principles of leadership and parenting that he lacked.

Wickedness of Worthless Sons (2:12-17; 22)

Short descriptions of people can speak volumes about them. "He would give you the shirt off his back and help you at the drop of a hat"..."she is nicest person you'll ever meet". But the description of Eli's sons was damning: *they were **worthless men**, literally "sons of Belial", and they did not know the Lord*. Now, it's important to differentiate these two descriptions. Eli was culpable for one but not the other. We cannot give faith to our children (I wish we could), but we absolutely have responsibility for how they act while in our house, how we discipline them, and teach them respect. The problem that was glaring for Eli's leadership is that his sons inherited the family business, but they had **no qualifications to do so**. Instead of stepping in, their sin only ramped up (as it always does). *What were his sons doing as 'priests' or spiritual leaders?*

- **Took advantage of their position for personal gain**- God had allowed priests access to parts of the sacrificial meat (Lev. 7:28-36), but they used a three pronged fork to reach in and take more than was allotted.
- **Created a culture of vain worship and corruption** – Not only did the boys do this, they had their "under priests" continue it on. When the people rightly protested, they would take the sacrificial meat by force.
- **Held the Sacrifices of God with Contempt** – This was the most condemning, as they stole the fat offering given to the Lord, and instead took it for themselves before it could be boiled.

- **Abused the people they were called to serve** – Spiritual abuse is terrible and far too prevalent, but it was clear that they were taking advantage of the women who were serving in the Tabernacle, committing open and known sexual immorality and adultery with them.

The summary statement: ***Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt.*** We remember there is nothing new under the sun as these actions are still prevalent in ‘churches’ today. When this happens, God will not bless, will judge, and that judgment is sure.

Ineptitude of a Passive Father (2:22-24; 27-30)

Eli was absolutely culpable at this point, not for the salvation of his sons but their actions. It’s interesting that **Mrs. Eli** is not mentioned, which either means he was a widower or that God held him primarily responsible. Either way, the focus was on his passivity as a father:

- **He heard continually what was happening, but took no action (22)** – Often leaders can express “willful or knowing ignorance”, decidedly looking the other way of clear actions. Eli was the one who had the responsibility and positional realities to step in, step up, and stop what was going on, and he did none of it.
- **He warned his sons, but did not levy consequences (23-24)** – His appeal to his sons was fine: “*why are you doing this? It’s not good what I’m hearing. You are putting yourselves under the judgment of the LORD Himself.*” But notice he DID nothing to correct or change, making his appeals a vain conversation.
- **Honored his sons rather than the LORD (29-30)** – This was the most damning and the crux of all other failures. He chose to try to please and pacify his sons primarily, choosing their temporal happiness over holiness, disregarding the holy otherness that Hannah knew so well (2:2). In fact, it seems clear that though Eli may not have directly participated in their sin, he was passively involved, as they were “*fattening themselves on the choicest parts of every offering*”, and Eli himself died an “*old and heavy man*” (4:18). By taking no action, he aided and abetted their actions, making him culpable.

Sure Judgment of the Holy God (2:25; 31-34)

As Hannah had known so well, God is holy, there is none besides Him, and He is a God of knowledge who weighs actions (2:2-3). God also “kills and brings to life” (2:6) who “will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness.” (2:9). God exercised justice and judgment on Eli, his sons, and the whole house.

- **God refused to forgive, hardened their heart, and decided to put them to death (25)** – Much like Pharaoh, we can harden our own hearts to a point that God will harden it. The judgment for the sons was their refusal to hear their fathers counsel and the eventuality of death.
- **God cut off Eli’s priestly line (33-34)** – Eli had all the advantages of God’s promises, but he passively rebelled and God was going to take away his privileged status into the future.
- **The sons would die on the same day (34)** – As a sign of his judgment, there was an appointed time that his sons would die on the same day. This is the worst punishment for any father, especially for one that made an idol out of his sons.

Promise of a Faithful Priest (2:35-36)

There may be stretches of time that the kingdom would suffer from arrogant, immoral, and unrepentant priests, but God WILL HAVE a faithful priest, and WILL fulfill His promises no matter how bleak it would seem in the moment. The faithful priest could certainly point to Samuel, but most likely it pointed to **1 Kings 2:27** where King Solomon banished Abiathar as priest, who was of the house of Eli, and replaced him with Zadok (1 Kings 2:35). Either way, it shows God's faithfulness. And just as He builds His kingdom, He will also build His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

Now, in light of all that went on in the life of Eli and his lack of leadership, it's good to pause and look at some of the positive principles of parenting/leadership that we glean here. This also applies to grandparents and those who work in any relationship, so it's applicable at some level to all.

1. **Discipline is imperative** – *"Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him"* (Prov. 13:24). It is clear that Eli had lost the initiative of discipline in his sons' lives. They had stopped listening and had gone their own way. Discipline has the goal to teach and train our children that **life is not about them**, they are NOT at the center of the universe, and that there is an authority over them. This requires us to start early with our children, exercising discipline often. We are all born into this world as wretched little sinners who want our own way, and the goal is to direct hearts away from self (which only leads to misery) and upward to our Savior. Parents must lean into the word **"no"** for their kids, helping reinforce the fact that getting everything our hearts desire will not produce the contentment and joy we crave. Even when we CAN provide something, this does not mean it's best for our kids to get it. When we deal with a stubborn heart of a child, a parent must win almost every battle. Failure to do so creates the impetus for our kids to continue to fight to get their own way as they get older (and more defiant). Little kids mean little problems, with big kids producing big problems (thanks Tim and Sue!). Discipline is a great form of love, and even our God disciplines those He loves (Heb. 12:6).
2. **Consequences are absolutely consistent with the gospel** – *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 6:23). Eli talked to his sons, appealed, and built a good case for them, but refused to levy out any consequences. This cheapens the conversation. God gives consequences even as He lavishes forgiveness, as we will see in the life of David after he committed adultery (2 Samuel 12). Now, giving out consequences WITHOUT explanation is ineffective and falls short of the goal, as consequences are a way of training and corrective. But any parent that is not willing to take away privileges or even willingly produce appropriate levels of pain/discomfort fails to stay consistent with re-directing hearts. Parents must be willing to have children feel the weight of disobedience so that they will also know the freedom of forgiveness, restoration, and correction.
3. **Consistency is a must** – One of the best things parents can do is to stay on the same page, to communicate with each other, and stay away from the good cop/bad cop scenario. Kids have an innate ability to divide and conquer, and they smell both fear and inconsistency. One of the most comforting and stabilizing forces for children is the knowledge that their parents mean what they say, expect obedience the first time, and always follow through. Whenever parents give in, do "countdowns" for obedience, or waver on what they said would happen, children learn that obedience is not important and they can merely wait their parents out. God is absolutely consistent with us. He always does what He says and follows through on His promises.

4. **Idolatry must be identified, repented of, and rooted out** – “*you scorn my sacrifices...and honor your sons above me*” (2:29). Idolatry is tricky because it turns a good thing, a gift, into something sinful. Here is how. God gives us good gifts to enjoy Him, like giving flowers to your spouse. But if we focus on the flowers INSTEAD of our spouse, we miss the point of the gift. We stated a few weeks ago that children make a terrible idol. We take the gift that children are and elevate them to the place that only God should have in our lives. Eli chose to try to make his kids happy rather than holy. He wanted them to be happy, to like him, and to have the things they wanted. On the surface these don’t seem to be bad motives, but these easily lead to subtle compromise and death by a thousand cuts. Parents begin to focus on their child’s achievements rather than the development of their character. They will compare themselves to all other parents around, busying themselves in 10 different activities but missing the most important ones. They will choose to pursue sports and scholarships over participation and service in the church, indirectly teaching them that the life in the Body of Christ is OPTIONAL or MARGINAL, not primary. Kids become idols when we want them to like us so much that we are unwilling to push them, to challenge them, or to make them upset by saying ‘no’. Because of the subtlety of idolatry, we must be proactive to identify it in our lives, evaluating often and asking for honest input from those who have gone before. Eli truly loved his sons, but that love was misplaced to the detriment of his family.

5. **A Godward life of worship is irreplaceable** – The difference between Hannah and Eli was palpable. Eli engaged in **compartmentalized** worship – he went through the motions of prayer but that did not follow him home or translate to the rest of his life. Hannah had a Godward life in every aspect – in pain, joy, hard circumstances, ease, barrenness and with multiple children. When worship is compartmentalized, we teach our kids that Jesus only matters *sometimes*; that God only wants *part of our hearts*, and that commitment to Him is *only nominal*. Again, giving our kids a model of seeking to glorify God in ALL areas of life is a great gift, one that does NOT assure salvation but displays faithfulness.

6. **Doing Hard things and Having Hard conversations is** – Parenting is hard. It is WORK. It is absolutely pleasurable, since we can honestly say there is no one on earth we’d rather be with than our kids, but it is work. Parents can easily fail when they think their job is done when they leave the place where they draw a paycheck, and go home to veg. Our job only just BEGINS when we get home! We have a finite amount of time with our kids, to help form their thoughts, philosophies, and theology. There is time to rest later. We must be present and engaged with our kids, which demands doing hard things. Eli failed on this front. He had a hard conversation, but it was late in the game. It is a sad reality when parents will AVOID doing the hard things (engagement in the lives of their kids – taking them with us – showing them how to work hard) and AVOID saying the hard things. I’ve observed that almost every family struggles with talking things out, with dealing with the real issues, and would rather avoid, draw conclusions, talk ABOUT to others, and stay bitter. Godly parents are willing to ask hard questions, confront real issues, and are quick to admit failures where needed.

In the end, life with our God is an act of faith. We believe and trust our heavenly Father that He loves us and loves our kids more than we do. We are called to be obedient, to model a godly life to them, to choose faithfulness over cultural pleasures, and see holiness as the greatest roadmap to happiness. We entrust our children, just like we do everyone in this church, to the Lord, knowing that He is the One to grant forgiveness, belief, and salvation. Our goal is to honor Him above all things. For as goes the home, so goes the church, and as the church goes, so goes the home.