

Eli's Sons – 1 Samuel 2:12-17

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Son of a Gun*

1. Though not used much anymore, there was a phrase many of us heard a lot growing up.
2. It was to describe someone as a “son of a gun.”
3. Just what does that mean – where’d such a phrase come from?
4. Its origin was on British naval vessels.
 - a. Though technically women weren’t allowed aboard British ships, many officers turned a blind eye to their presence in an attempt to keep peace among the crews.
 - b. We’ll just refer to these women as “professionals.”
 - c. And returning to port after months at sea, they were often pregnant.
 - d. Since there was no way to know who the fathers of these children were,
 - e. They were listed in the birth registers as a “child of a *military man*,” or a “son of a *gun*.”
5. Because there was no father to raise them, & mother was inordinately immoral, these children nearly always grew up to be corrupt, wicked criminals.
6. So, a son of a gun was synonymous with a worthless brute who lived for himself & who’s only rule was might makes right.

B. *Today*

1. We’re going to encounter a couple of real sons of guns in our study today.
2. What makes their story so tragic is that their father was supposed to be the godliest man in all Israel.

II. TEXT

A. V. 12

12 Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the LORD.

1. Eli was the *high priest* of Israel, the spiritual leader of the 12 tribes.
 - a. His potential to influence the nation for good was incredible because 3 times a year all adult men went to Shiloh to celebrate the holidays commemorating the Exodus.
 - b. During these times, Eli could have taught the people *how* to walk with God.
 - c. But from what we read about him, it seems he’d grown lazy & had become little more than an office-holder.
2. His laziness extended beyond his role as high priest to his role as father.
3. His sons are described as *corrupt*; literally in Hebrew, it’s “sons of Belial.”
 - a. ‘Belial’ means *worthless, without moral value* = we’d say *naughty*!
 - b. To be called a ‘son’ of something referred to one’s nature, the inner disposition.
 - c. Eli’s sons, who in ch. 1 are named Hophni & Phinehas, were *thoroughly nasty*; rotten to the core!
 - d. They weren’t mostly good kids who *occasionally* got into trouble; they

- were naughty sons of guns!
4. Obviously, as v. 12 says, they didn't know God--meaning they lived without any reference to Him.
 - a. As the sons of the high priest of Israel, of course they'd **heard** of God.
 - b. They'd knew Israel's history; they'd heard of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob, their bondage in Egypt, the Exodus, crossing the Red Sea, & the Conquest of Canaan.
 - c. But it was all just **a story** to Hophni & Phinehas.
 - d. They made no connection between the God of Israel's past & the reality of their daily lives.
 5. And what they lived for was enjoying the perks of the family business – being priests.
 6. They'd watched their father Eli long enough to know they could go through the **motions** of their office without any reality behind it.
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7. As the story of Eli unfolds we discover that while he was far from the ideal of a high priest, he did believe in God.
 - a. It's just that his own comfort was more important to him than God's glory.
 - b. While believing in the Lord, Eli allowed his decisions to be shaped more by what was convenient & fashionable, than what was right before God.
 8. Why, we see this in the **names** he chose for his sons.
 - a. Hophni & Phinehas are Egyptian, not Hebrew names.
 - b. At this moment, the Egyptians were once again exerting their influence northward into Israel.
 - c. After years of internal trouble, they'd regrouped & were once more flexing their economic & cultural muscles.
 - d. Eli was attracted to the luxuriant Egyptian culture & goods the caravans traded throughout the land.
 - e. Enamored with Egypt, he gave his sons foreign, or we could say **worldly** names.
 - f. Since names were often descriptive of a parent's **wishes** for his/her child, it's not surprising Hophni & Phinehas grew up to be **ultra worldly!**
 9. It's oft been said that when it comes to raising children, values are more often **caught** than **taught**.
 - a. Parents can profess faith in God & go to church.
 - b. But what children see & put more stock in is what **values** shape Mom's & Dad's **choices**.
 - c. Dad, you **say** you believe in God. When you make decisions regarding business or work, does God effect those decisions? Johnny's watching.
 - d. Mom, you go to church on Sunday. But do you **enjoy** TV programs during the week that glorify immorality? Suzy's listening.
 10. It's unfortunate but true that while it takes months & sometimes years to build a **good reputation**, only a moment of failure can destroy it.
 11. So it's crucial that parents be **honest** with their children about their **struggle** to live a godly life in the midst of a corrupt world that makes sin easy.
 - a. Our children are going to see us fail.
 - b. If we're prompt in our repentance, & resist the temptation to cover up or

deny our sin, even our failures can be turned to good in training our children.

B. Vs. 13-16

13 And the priests' custom with the people was that when any man offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged fleshhook in his hand while the meat was boiling. **14** Then he would thrust *it* into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; and the priest would take for himself all that the fleshhook brought up. So they did in Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.

1. God had given instructions on what portion of the various sacrifices belonged to the priests.
2. For the peace offering they received the breast & right shoulder.
 - a. The rest was given **back** to the worshipper to eat with his family.
 - b. Hophni & Phinehas had devised a more convenient way to secure their portion.
 - c. They sent their servant after the person who took his meat back to his family for the special meal.
 - d. Once it was cooking, they'd thrust a long fork-like implement into the pot, rake around, then pull it back.
 - e. Whatever the fork held was returned to the priests for their consumption.
3. Hophni & Phinehas wanted better cuts than just the breast & shoulder.
4. And they didn't want to go to the **bother** of cooking; how much easier to just eat off another's plate.
5. In high school, there was this guy named Lee who never brought or bought his own lunch.
 - a. He just mooched off everyone else.
 - b. At first, he politely asked if anyone had anything extra they wanted to give him.
 - c. Then, after a few weeks, he started parking himself next to someone who had something **he** wanted.
 - d. Not long after, he'd just help himself to other people's lunches.
 - e. He was brazen about it, even though he knew we didn't like it.
 - f. He developed an attitude that everyone **owed** him.
 - g. We got so tired of it, when we saw him coming, we'd shout out, "MOOCH!"
6. Eli's sons were serious mooches – spiritual leeches who were bleeding the people of Israel.
7. But this wasn't the worse of it . . .

15 Also, before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who sacrificed, "Give meat for roasting to the priest, for he will not take boiled meat from you, but raw." **16** And *if* the man said to him, "They should really burn the fat first; *then* you may take as *much* as your heart desires," he would then answer him, "No, but you must give *it* now; and if not, I will take *it* by force."

8. When the offerings were made, the Law said the fat was to be given to God on

- the altar *first*.
- a. The fat was considered the most luxuriant & best part of the meat.
 - b. Since God deserves the best, He gets the fat, *first!*
9. But Hophni & Phinehas' servants were going to those who were bringing their sacrifices & demanding a cut of the best meat before *any* of it had been offered.
- a. Some commentators believe they wanted to take this raw meat quickly so they could sell it in the marketplace before it spoiled.
 - b. This was a source of income for Hophni & Phinehas, a way to line their pockets off the people's desire to worship.
10. If someone resisted them, they used the threat of violence to coerce them.
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11. Let's put this in modern terms . . .
- a. You come to church one Sunday with your tithe check.
 - b. It's something you bring once a month & it's always a joy.
 - c. You can't wait for worship when the ushers bring round the offering bags so you can drop your gift in as an act of cheerful devotion to God.
 - d. But that day, you drive your new car into the lot, park, get out & start to make your way toward the front door.
 - e. Halfway across the lot you're confronted by 3 very large men who stand across your path & say, "Not so fast there pal, ma'am. Give us the keys to your car."
 - f. When you ask why, they tell you they're the new offering deacons & they're working for the pastors.
 - g. When you back up to get away, they quickly surround you making escape impossible.
12. You tell them that your offering is in your wallet or purse and will gladly show it to them.
13. But they lean in & with menace say, "We'll take what *we* want, *besides* what *you* want to give!"
14. Tell me, are you ever going back to church? Look at v. 17 . . .

C. V. 17

17 Therefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for men abhorred the offering of the LORD.

1. You often hear that all sin is the same before God.
 2. Yet here we read that the sins of Hophni & Phinehas were *very great* before God.
 3. What made them so hideous was that the common people who were getting ripped off by them had come to abhor worship!
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4. Worship of God is the consummate act a human being can engage in.
 - a. Worship is the essence of what we were created for – To know God & enjoy Him forever.
 - b. Worship is where the knowledge & enjoyment of God *meet*.
 5. Jesus said the *greatest* commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind & strength.
 6. At no time are we more engaged in that than when we're lost in the worship of

Jesus.

7. Now, let's think about this . . .
 - a. Wouldn't the greatest sin be to break the greatest commandment?
 - b. If the greatest commandment is to love God with all we have & are,
 - c. The greatest sin is to fail at this – to withhold our love.
8. The act of worship *is* the consummate expression of love for God.
9. So when people abhor offerings, which are a form of worship, it's a grievous sin.
10. But here, the greater culpability goes to the sons of Eli whose corruption had sullied God's name.
 - a. These men, who represented God, had by their greed & corruption tarnished God's reputation.
 - b. And God was ticked!

III. CONCLUSION

A. *The Peril of Perverted Priests*

1. Hophni & Phinehas held religious office but they had no heart for God.
2. This is the perpetual peril of professional priests;
 - a. Of men who chose the pastorate as an occupation but aren't called or gifted by God.
 - b. The religious system makes it fairly easy for the uncalled to secure a job as a pastor.
 - c. All they have to do is go to seminary, get a degree, & apply at a local church.
 - d. Soon they're employed in the task of leading the flock of God.
 - e. Because they aren't equipped by the Spirit, they do the job with worldly tools & programs.
 - f. It may appear polished & professionally, but people just don't sense there's any life in it.
 - g. So in frustration, they leave.
3. In his latest book, *Revolution*, George Barna identifies what he believes is a growing trend in the modern church –
 - a. Mature Christians leaving the institutional church in favor of informal networks of small groups who are passionate about life-change & being effective in the service of God.
 - b. Barna says these believers are disillusioned with traditional local church.
 - c. The reason why they're disillusioned is because in many churches Christians have not been well-served by their leaders.
4. It seems we're regularly confronted with some new scandal of a well-known pastor who's stepped into the shoes of Hophni & Phinehas.
5. Many are the guys who start out well. God calls & blesses them in tremendous ways.
 - a. But the "Religious Machine" catches wind of that blessing & immediately starts calculating how to *profit* from it.
 - b. Write books, go on radio & TV. Launch a campaign.
 - c. Sell CD's & DVD's – hire an agent.
 - d. Rent a hall, make posters, do direct-mail.

- e. Hold meetings, take collections, then write more books & devise a new campaign for next year.
6. Soon the anointing of the Spirit has been traded in for commercial success.
 7. Many of the scandals that have rocked the Church in the last 20 years never would have happened if the men who fell had simply resisted the temptation of worldly success -
 - a. Of growing their ministry beyond the limits of God's anointing.
 - b. Success is seductive, & it takes a man or woman of strong character & devotion to God to resist.
 8. We all know what devastating consequences the public fall of Christian leaders has on the cause of Christ.
 - a. Just as people abhorred bringing their offerings to the Lord because of Eli's sons,
 - b. So today people are set back in their spiritual pilgrimage when leaders fall.
 9. We often meet people who say they fell away for the Lord or stopped going to church because their pastor fell or they were burned by people who called themselves Christians.
 - a. We reason with them by saying something like, "Yes, man will disappoint, but God will never disappoint."
 - b. "Don't look to people; look to the Lord, He's the only One Who's perfect."
 - c. While that's true, & I've said it myself--I'm not so sure anymore that's the right thing to say. Here's why . . .

B. Let Your Light Shine

1. In Matthew 5, Jesus said that the lost would see the evidence for God *through* His people. **Matthew 5:16** says:
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.
 2. In John 17, as Jesus prayed, He said that the world would come to know the truth about Him as His followers faithfully followed Him & walked in unity.
 3. In **John 13:35** He said:
By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
 4. Then of course in Acts 2 we see that it was the love & holiness of those first believers that led to so many coming to know God.
 5. In that well known passage in John 3 where Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, He says that while you can't see the wind itself, you know it's blowing because of its effect on the trees; their leaves move.
 6. In the same way, Jesus said, we can't see the Spirit, but we can see His presence by the *effect* He has in people's lives.
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7. Most here today aren't pastors or priests; you probably aren't what could be called a *leader* in the Church.
 8. Does this message & lesson apply to you? **Absolutely** – because while you may not be *employed* in full-time ministry – you **are a full-time believer**.
 9. And God has sovereignly positioned you to *lead* others to Him; so guess what, that makes you a *leader*.
 10. Here are Paul's words to young Titus, the pastor of the Church in Crete. **Titus**

2:1-8 – *New Living Translation*

- a. As I read this, keep in mind Paul was dealing with specific cultural issues & challenges the Christians there had to deal with.

But as for you, promote the kind of living that reflects right teaching.

- b. IOW – Practice what you preach! Walk the talk. Muscle the hussle.

² Teach the older men to exercise self-control, to be worthy of respect, and to live wisely. They must have strong faith and be filled with love and patience.

³ Similarly, teach the older women to live in a way that is appropriate for someone serving the Lord. They must not go around speaking evil of others and must not be heavy drinkers. Instead, they should teach others what is good. ⁴ These older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, ⁵ to live wisely and be pure, to take care of their homes, to do good, and to be submissive to their husbands.

- c. Catch this – he says -

Then they will not bring shame on the word of God.

- d. When they practice what they preach – when they follow through on their faith in Christ & put it to work in their daily lives.

⁶ In the same way, encourage the young men to live wisely in all they do. ⁷ And you yourself must be an example to them by doing good deeds of every kind. Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching. ⁸ Let your teaching be so correct [straightforward, forthright] that it can't be criticized. Then those who want to argue will be ashamed because they won't have anything bad to say about us.

11. When people want to argue *doctrine* with us, if we're living out that doctrine, they won't have anything to say!

12. Because no one can argue with love & holiness.

13. A few verses on we learn more about the wicked things Eli's sons were doing.

14. Right afterward is v. 26 -

And the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favor both with the LORD and men.

- a. Though he was being raised in Eli's home, the corruption of his sons didn't ruin him.
- b. As he sought the Lord, those around him were blessed.
- c. And so it is with you and I – it doesn't matter how corrupt the age may be.
- d. Like Samuel, we can find favor with both God & man.
- e. Being a sold-out follower of Christ doesn't automatically mean the hatred of others.
- f. Some will oppose us, sure: But not *all*, not even *most*.
15. While Eli's sons turned many away from God – Samuel grew up to be a powerful influence for good who sparked revival in Israel.