

Introduction

Throughout the pages of Scripture, judgment begins at the House of God. The narrative of Hophni and Phinehas, the wicked sons of Eli, confronts us with the harsh reality that even those who stand closest to the altar can abuse their position, treat holy things with contempt, and harden their hearts to God. Their story is a sobering reminder that God's holiness cannot be mocked, and His justice will not sleep forever.

Yet, amid the darkness of their corruption, a glimmer of light emerges in the faithful service of a young boy, Samuel, whose obedience in His Father's house stands in stark contrast to the depravity of Eli's house. This passage calls us to examine our own lives and consider whether we worship and Love God with our whole heart, or, like the sons of Eli, fall into patterns of selfishness and destructive sin.

The Wicked Sons of Eli

"Then Elkanah went to his house at Ramah. But the child ministered to the Lord before Eli the priest.

¹² Now the sons of Eli, the sons of Belial - they did not know the Lord. 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. 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."

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

The sons of Eli are called sons of Belial—a term that not only reflects their wicked and worthless character but also equates Eli with Belial. By failing to discipline his sons and give due reverence to God, Eli aligned himself with the worthlessness of Belial. He, too, became a symbol of corruption, threatening the sanctity of the Lord's name in Israel.

Hophni and Phinehas, remind us of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who offered unauthorized fire before the Lord in Leviticus 10. God's judgment was swift and terrifying: He consumed them with fire for their irreverence. Like Nadab and Abihu, Hophni and Phinehas treated God's holy sacrifices with brazen sacrilege. Their actions made it clear, even before we reach verse 25, that God was going to put them to death.

In typical fashion for those dark days, these priests did what was right in their own eyes. But in doing so, they committed great evil in the eyes of God.

What exactly were these *sons of Belial* guilty of? They flagrantly disregarded the sacrificial liturgy that God Himself had prescribed. According to the law, the priests were to receive specific portions of the animal sacrifices: the cheek, the breast (including the stomach), and the right thigh. These were their rightful portions, ordained by God.

The portion that God himself would get was the fat that covered the internal organs, along with the internal organs. And the worshiper would get the rest of the animal.

But Hophni and Phinehas had no regard for these divine instructions. They sent their servants with three-pronged forks to plunge into the boiling pots of the worshipers,

taking whatever they wanted. By stealing from the people, they not only robbed the worshipers of their rightful portions but also despised the portion God Himself had graciously allotted to them.

Worse still, they defied the sacred symbolism of the offering of the internal organs and the fat, which belonged exclusively to God. The organs themselves signified the inner man, even the heart. And the fat signified the best we have to offer to God.

Now, men, you know how glorious it smells when the fat sizzles on the grill. That aroma is part of what was to rise to heaven as an offering to the Lord. And the fact that it is joined to the internal organs tells us that the best part that God desires is our heart and inner man.

But Hophni and Phinehas, greedy and irreverent, demanded raw meat from the worshipers *before* the fat was burned. If anyone dared to object and insisted that the fat be given to God as commanded, these corrupt priests would threaten violence.

Imagine the scene: a worshiper, standing before the altar of the Lord, attempting to honor God with the first born of his sheep, but he is surrounded by greedy priests wielding knives, swords, and machetes. They demand he gives them

the fat before it is sacrificed to God. The worshiper protests, but ultimately he is forced to comply to their demands, fearing he might be the next to bleed if he continues to resist.

Thus, verse 17 concludes with a tragic indictment: “*The sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for men abhorred the offering of the Lord.*”

What should have been a holy and joyful act of worship became a source of dread and disgust because of the corruption of these priests.

Samuel’s Childhood Ministry

Now we see a striking contrast between the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas and the faithfulness of young Samuel.

Verse 18 tells us, “*But Samuel ministered before the Lord, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod.*” While Eli’s sons dishonored the priesthood, Samuel was quietly growing in his service to the Lord. His linen ephod—a priestly garment—symbolized his dedication to God’s work, even in his youth.

We’re also given a tender glimpse into his family life. Each year, when his parents came to Shiloh to offer the annual

sacrifice, Hannah would bring Samuel a little robe she had made for him. This seemingly small detail carries profound significance. It points to the transfer of spiritual authority and office from Eli's corrupt household to Samuel. As Samuel grew physically, he also grew in responsibility and favor with the Lord. And as responsibility increases, so does authority.

Eli would bless Elkanah and Hannah, saying, "*The Lord give you descendants from this woman for the loan that was given to the Lord.*" The loan is a reference to her son Samuel. She gave her son to the Lord, and so Eli prayed that God would give her more children in place of Samuel.

Well, the Lord heard Eli's blessing, and He honored it. Hannah, who had once been barren, went on to bear three more sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, Samuel continued to grow "*before the Lord*" (or, as the literal translation suggests, *with the Lord*), an intimate phrase that underscores Samuel's adoption into God's house as a son of God.

The Blessing of a Sinful Priest

Now you might ask, how could Eli, a corrupt priest, bless Hannah? Doesn't his sin invalidate his blessing? This question recalls the Donatist controversy of the 300s in

North Africa. During Roman persecutions, some clergy, labeled *tradidores* (traitors), renounced their faith or handed over scriptures to avoid death. Afterward, debates arose about whether sacraments administered by these compromised clergy were valid.

The Donatists argued they were not, claiming the purity of sacraments depended on the moral integrity of the minister. St. Augustine opposed this view, teaching that the Church is a mix of sinners and saints and that sacraments derive their validity from Christ, not the minister's worthiness.

Similarly, Eli's blessing was effective, not because of his character, but because God works through the offices He establishes. Baptism and the Eucharist remain valid regardless of the minister's flaws because their authority comes from Christ.

We are not Donatists. The authority of the Gospel ministry rests on the holiness of Christ, the Lord of the Church.

Eli's Hearing and Failure to Act

The narrative now turns to Eli's response—or lack thereof—to the wickedness of his sons. The theme of “hearing” dominates this section.

²² Now Eli was very old; and he **heard** everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. ²³ So he said to them, “Why do you do such things? For I **hear** of your evil dealings from all the people. ²⁴ No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I **hear**. You make the Lord’s people transgress. ²⁵ If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?” Nevertheless they did not **heed** the voice of their father, because the Lord desired to kill them. ²⁶ And the child Samuel (God hears) grew in stature, and in favor both with the Lord and men.

Eli “heard” of his sons’ evil deeds—how they abused the sacrificial system and violated the purity of the women serving at the tabernacle. Yet, it’s noteworthy that he acted only after hearing complaints from the people.

Surely Eli had seen their wickedness firsthand. He must have known what was happening under his roof. Why, then, did he wait so long to confront them? It seems Eli’s motivation to act stemmed not from zeal for God’s holiness, but from the pressure of public outcry. His rebuke was feeble and far too late.

Hophni and Phinehas, turned the sanctity of the sacrificial system into a means of personal indulgence and defiled the virgin women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle.

These women symbolized the purity and security of God's house. Their chastity was a living emblem of the sanctity and protection of Israel under God's covenant. By violating these women, the sons of Eli metaphorically and spiritually "opened the door" violating the house of God and opening it up to His wrath.

This truth resonates beyond the text: **sexual sin brings impurity and opens us up to judgment – personally, and nationally.** From the tabernacle of ancient Israel to the moral decay of modern societies, the corruption of God's design for sexual purity has always invited His righteous judgment.

Eli's rebuke of his sons contains a profound theological question: *"If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him. But if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?"*

This question pierces to the heart of humanity's dilemma. All of us have sinned against the Lord. We have transgressed His commandments, fallen short of His glory, and rebelled against His holiness. Who, then, will stand in the gap? Who can intercede for sinners before an all-holy God?

This question finds its ultimate answer in Jesus Christ, the one true Mediator between God and man. But for Hophni and Phinehas, there was no repentance, no intercession. They “*did not heed the voice of their father because the Lord desired to kill them.*”

The Law of God, as outlined in **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**, provides the backdrop for understanding this chilling statement:

¹⁸ “*If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who **will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother**, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them,*” ¹⁹ *then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city.* ²⁰ *And they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; **he will not obey our voice**; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’* ²¹ *Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.*

Hophni and Phinehas embodied stubborn rebellion. They were gluttonous, stealing from the offerings of the people, and defiling God’s house with their sins. And when confronted, they would not obey the voice of their father. According to the Law, they deserved death. As Judge of Shiloh and High Priest of Israel, Eli was duty-bound to act

and put his own sons to death. Yet, he failed to fulfill his responsibility.

When leaders neglect their duty to confront and correct sin, especially in their own families, corruption festers, and judgment looms. Eli's failure underscores a sobering truth: Leadership requires moral courage and unwavering commitment to justice.

But God, in His providence, always raises up a faithful servant to restore righteousness. In this case, Samuel, the child growing in favor with God and men, would fulfill that role. Samuel's rise marks the dawn of a new chapter in Israel's history, where justice and holiness would be restored in God's house.

Heard of God

Once again, highlighting the contrast between Samuel and the sons of Eli, the last verse in the section says:

²⁶ And the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favor both with the Lord and men.

The name Samuel finds its origin in the Hebrew שְׁמֹעֵאל (Shemuel), which is traditionally understood to mean "God has heard" or "heard of God." His name is built from two Hebrew elements: שָׁמַע (shama), meaning "heard" or

"hearing," and **לֵךְ** (El), meaning "God." In the context of 1 Sam. 1, when Hannah named him, the name Samuel emphasizes that God had heard Hannah's heartfelt prayers for a child.

Yet, the story of Samuel invites us to see another layer of meaning. 1 Samuel 3, the boy Samuel responds to God's voice with the words, *"Speak, for your servant hears."*

Samuel is one who listens to God. And being contrasted with Hophni and Phineas who did not listen to the voice of their father, Samuel's name can be interpreted to mean *"he who hears God."* Either way, the Lord is raising up a new leader in Israel who would hear the voice of his Father, and hear the word of the Lord.

²⁶And because the child Samuel heard God, *he grew in stature, and in favor both with the Lord and men.*

And this is almost the exact same thing that was spoken about Jesus in Luke 2:52 when he was 12 years old. When Jesus stayed behind after the feast in Jerusalem and he told his mother and father, *"Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"* And Mary treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."

Application

Let me now lay down some points of application from all this.

Firstly, Fathers, discipline your children in love and faithfulness to God. Eli's tragic failure as a father serves as a sobering warning. In 1 Samuel 2:29, God rebukes Eli, saying, "*Why do you honor your sons above me?*" Eli cared more about maintaining peace with his rebellious sons than about honoring God. His refusal to discipline them brought disaster upon his household and dishonored the Lord.

The Danger of Avoiding Discipline:

Many parents today, like Eli, shy away from conflict with their children, choosing temporary peace over godly correction. Proverbs 29:15 warns, "*A child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother.*" When we overlook or excuse our children's sin, we dishonor God. True love for our children requires discipline, as Proverbs 13:24 says, "*He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.*"

God's Wisdom in Discipline:

God's Word recognizes the need for discipline because folly is bound up within the heart of child (Proverbs 22:15). For some children, verbal correction may be enough, and for others a mere glance will suffice. But for

others, firm and loving physical discipline is necessary to drive away rebellion. As Proverbs 26:3 reminds us, “*A whip is for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools.*” Discipline teaches wisdom through consequences, while reasoning and yelling often fall on deaf ears.

Discipline as Love:

Failing to discipline our children is not love—it is hatred. Proverbs 19:18 warns, “*Discipline your son, while there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death.*” Neglecting discipline is akin to setting our hearts on their destruction. Without correction, children grow into adults who persist in sinful patterns, as seen in Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

And by the time your children grow up, it is too late for physical discipline. You have only a small window of time before spanking your child is inappropriate. And if you have neglected your duty while they are young, you are going to find that your instruction and discipline and counsel will mean very little to them when they are old.

By disciplining your children when they are young, you are preparing their hearts not just to obey you now, but to receive your counsel in the future when they are older. Don’t rob your children of future wisdom because you

were afraid to drive the foolishness from them when they are young.

Disciplining Adult Children:

Another word needs to be spoken here to parents who open their homes up to their adult children. While parents cannot control or be held responsible for the actions of adult children once they are independent, we are responsible for them while they are living under our roof and receiving our support. Eli was responsible for the sins of his adult sons because they were working under his authority in the Priestly service.

Many parents in our day are proving their adult children with rooms, board, vehicles, insurance, cell phones, and money, in spite of the fact that their adult children are sexually immoral, lazy, financially irresponsible, and abusing substances. While such parents may nag and whine like Eli, they are afraid to take away their support or to kick their adult children out of the house, which makes them enablers who are bringing God's judgment upon their homes.

Parents, take courage in fulfilling your responsibility to lovingly correct your children, whether young or grown, so

that they may walk in the fear of the Lord and not bring shame upon your home or God's name.¹

There is also a lesson for children in this passage to learn. Children, you are responsible for your choice between obeying the Lord and obeying your sin, and you can't blame your parents for how you turn out. While Eli had his own failures as a father, Hophni and Phineas were still held responsible for their own sinful choices. They chose to reject the wise instructions of their father.

But Samuel, on the other hand, was one who listened to the Lord and so grew in favor with God and man. If you dishonor your father and mother, and despise their wisdom, teaching, and instructions, you will place yourself under God's judgment. But if you listen to God, and seek to hear His word and obey it, you will be blessed and experience the favor of God upon you.

Secondly, verse 12 tells us that Eli's sons were "sons of Belial"—wicked men who did not know the Lord. Their contempt for God was evident in how they treated His sacrifices, taking for themselves what was holy and defiling the temple precincts with sexual immorality. Their great sins brought judgment, leading to the destruction of the

¹ See Jim Newheiser, *Opening Up 1 Samuel*, 27-33.

temple at Shiloh and their ultimate death by the will of the Lord.

This is a solemn warning for us under the New Covenant. As God's people, we are now His temple, and we serve as priests within it. If we defile God's house, we invite judgment upon ourselves. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17:

"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are."

While I, as a pastor, serve a priestly function for this congregation, these warnings are not limited to pastors. Every believer is part of God's royal priesthood, called to steward the temple of their own body and soul. Romans 12:1 exhorts us, *"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship."*

Reflect on the parts of the animal sacrifices that were offered to God under the Old Covenant—the fat and the internal organs. These represented the inward person of the heart. Today, as the body is the temple of God, it is the heart that we are called to offer as a holy sacrifice to Him.

Psalm 51 reminds us, “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise.*”

Loving God with all our heart is the only way to worship faithfully before Him. This is why we pray the Collect for Purity at the beginning of worship:

"Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

This prayer reminds us that only those who fully give their hearts to the Lord truly know Him and are known by Him. Hophni and Phinehas did not know the Lord. They kept what belonged to God for themselves, defiled His sacrifices, and paid the ultimate price.

Let us learn from their failure. Do not be a hypocrite in prayer and worship. Do not defile the temple of the Holy Spirit with dissembling and cloaking your heart, and by committing sexual immorality. Instead, offer your heart to God as a living sacrifice, holy and sincere.

Remember, the fire of the Holy Spirit burns on the altar of our hearts, consuming whatever we place upon it. What does your heart love? That is the offering you give to God.

You are either offering to Him a heart of love for Jesus—or you are withholding what is rightfully His, giving mere lip service while keeping your heart for yourself. Only one of these is a pleasing aroma to the Lord. The other is an affront to Him, and if unrepented, will lead to judgment.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, offer your heart's love of Christ as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. May He be pleased to dwell within you and make you a temple for His glory.

Thirdly, let us answer Eli's question: *If a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?* This Christmas season, we can joyfully proclaim that the answer is Jesus Christ. He is the greater and faithful High Priest who offers Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice for sin, and who intercedes between God and Man.

As Hebrews 7 says:

²³ Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. ²⁴ But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶ For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the

heavens; ²⁷who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.

Because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, He entered the world without sin—Yet He was born for a purpose: to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

In His great love, the sinless Son of God became sin for us, that we sinners might become the righteousness of God. On the cross, God's beloved Son bore the weight of our rebellion, becoming like a son of Belial so that we, sons of Belial, might become beloved sons of God. This was the will of the Father—to send His Son to die in our place, that we might live in His presence forever, because He lives forever, and always lives to make intercession for us before the Father.

Conclusion

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus this Christmas, let us remember that He came to offer Himself to God for those who did not know Him, to intercede on our behalf, to

enable us to hear and obey the voice of our Heavenly Father.

He came to make it possible for us to grow in God's presence and in favor with both God and man, just as the greater Samuel, Jesus Christ, did through His perfect obedience.

Let us carry a renewed reverence for God's holiness and a commitment to guard the sacred trust He has given us—offering our hearts to God as acceptable sacrifices.

Let us be thankful that God is always raising up faithful servants, even when corruption seems pervasive.

Let us be diligent in disciplining our children early, and children, be mindful to hear your parents' voice, that you may live long in the land.

Finally, let us remember that Jesus is our childhood's pattern—day by day, He grew like us. Will we, like Him and Samuel, grow in favor with God and man? Or will we, like Eli's sons, squander the sacred calling for the sake of self? Let us choose to honor God's calling and grow in His favor, following the example of Christ our Savior. Amen.