

The Guilt and Consequences of Parental Unfaithfulness

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"For I have told him, that I will judge his house forever, for the iniquity which he knoweth: because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering forever." 1 Samuel 3:13, 14

These words compose a part of the first revelation which was made by God to his prophet Samuel. This eminent servant of Jehovah was directed to begin his ministry by denouncing God's judgments against a sin which, it seems, was but too common then, as it is now; the sin of neglecting the moral and religious education of children. It was this sin which drew down the most awful threatenings upon the house of Eli. Eli was in many respects an eminently good man; but, like many other good men, he was in this particular grossly deficient. His sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. We may be ready to think this a small and very pardonable offence; but God thought otherwise, and he made Eli to know that he did so in a most awful manner. Behold the days come, said he, when I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house. And the man of thine, whom I shall not cut off, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart; and all the increase of thy horse shall die in the flower of their age. And as for thy two sons, they shall both die in one day. These awful threatenings, addressed to Eli, were farther confirmed by the ministry of Samuel. I have told Eli, that I will judge his house forever, for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. Therefore have I sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of his house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering forever.

It may perhaps appear strange to some of you, my friends, that we have chosen such a subject as this for a day of public fasting and prayer. But we are not without hopes that, before we have done with the subject, you will be convinced that we could not have chosen one more important, nor more suitable to the present occasion. We are assembled this day for the purpose of humbling ourselves before God, for our personal and national sins, and praying for public and private prosperity. Now I firmly believe, that no sin is more prevalent among us, more provoking to God, or more destructive of individual, domestic, and national happiness, than that to which we propose to call your attention. Could we trace the public and private evils, which infect our otherwise happy country, to their true source, I doubt not we should find that most of them proceed from a general neglect of the moral and religious education of children. And if our civil and religious institutions should ever be subverted; and this nation should share the fate of many other once flourishing nations of the earth, our destruction, like

that of the house of Eli, will have been occasioned by this very sin; a sin, which is the parent of innumerable other sins, and which, consequently, directly tends to draw down upon those nations, among whom it prevails, the judgments of offended heaven. Surely, then, no subject can be more important, or more suited to the purposes for which we are now assembled. In farther discoursing on this subject, we propose to consider the sin mentioned in our text, the punishments denounced on those who are guilty of it, and the reasons why this sin is so provoking to God, as it evidently is.

I. We are to consider the sin here mentioned. Eli's sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. It is not said that he set them a bad example. It is evident, on the contrary, that his example was good. Nor is he accused of neglecting to admonish them; for we are told that he reprov'd them in a very solemn and affectionate manner, and warn'd them of the danger of continuing to pursue vicious courses. In this respect he was much less culpable than many parents at the present day; for not a few set before their children an example positively bad; and still more entirely neglect to admonish and reprove them. But though Eli admonish'd, he did not restrain his children. He did not employ the authority with which he was clothed, as a parent, to prevent them from indulging their deprav'd inclinations. This is the only sin of which he is accused; and yet this was sufficient to bring guilt and misery upon himself, and entail ruin upon his posterity.

Of the same sin those parents are now guilty, who suffer their children to indulge, without restraint, those sinful propensities to which childhood and youth are but too subject; and which, when indulg'd, render them vile in the sight of God. Among the practices which thus render children vile, are a quarrelsome, malicious disposition, disregard to truth, excessive indulgence of their appetites, neglect of the Bible and religious institutions, profanation of the Sabbath, profane, scurrilous, or indecent language, willful disobedience, associating with openly vicious company, taking the property of their neighbors, and idleness which naturally leads to everything bad. From all these practices it is in the power of parents to restrain their children in a very considerable degree, if they employ the proper means; at least, it is in the power of all to make the attempt, and to persevere in it so long as children remain under the paternal roof; and those who neglect to do this, those who know, or who might know, that their children are beginning to practice any of these vices, without steadily and perseveringly using all proper exertions, to restrain and correct them, are guilty of the sin mentioned in the text. Nor will a few occasional reproofs and admonitions, given to children, free parents from the guilt of partaking in their sins. No, they must be restrained; restrained with a mild and prudent, but firm and steady hand; restrained early, while they may be form'd to habits of submission, obedience, and diligence; and the reins of government must never, for a moment, be slacken'd, much less given up into their hands, as is too often the case. Nor will even this excuse those parents who neglect family religion, and the religious instruction of their children, and who do not frequently pray for the blessing of heaven upon their

endeavors. If we neglect our duty to our heavenly Father, we surely cannot wonder or complain, if he suffers our children to neglect their duty to us; nor, if we do not ask his blessing, have we any reason to complain should it be withheld. In this, as in all other cases, exertion without prayer, and prayer without exertion are equally vain. To sum up all in a word, every parent who is not as careful of the morals, as he is of the health of his children; every one who takes more care of the literary, than of the moral and religious education of his children, is certainly guilty of the sin mentioned in our text. How much more criminal, then, are those parents who set before their children an irreligious, or vicious example; who join with the great enemy of their peace in tempting them to sin, and thus, instead of restraining, inflame and strengthen their sinful propensities. The parent who starves or poisons his children, is innocent in the sight of God, compared with once who thus entices them into the path of ruin.

Having thus briefly considered the sin mentioned in our text, I proceed to notice,

II. The punishments denounced against those who are guilty of it. It will soon appear, that these punishments; like most of those with which God threatens mankind, are the natural consequences of the sin against which they are denounced.

In our text these punishments are denounced in a general way. I have told Eli, that I will judge his house forever, for the iniquity which he knoweth. The particular judgments here alluded to, are described more at large in the preceding chapter, to which this passage evidently refers. God there declares to Eli,

1. That most of his posterity should die early, and that none of them should live to see old age. The increase of thy house, says he, shall die in the flower of their age, and there shall not be an old man in thine house forever. Now it is too evident to require proof, that the sin, of which Eli was guilty, naturally tends to produce the consequence which is here threatened as a punishment. When youth are permitted to make themselves vile, without restraint, they almost inevitably fall into courses which tend to undermine their constitutions, and shorten their days. It is indeed a well known fact that, in populous towns, comparatively few live to become aged, and that a much larger proportion of mankind, especially of the male sex who are most exposed to the influence of temptation, die in the flower or meridian of their days, than in the country where parental discipline is less generally neglected, and youth are under greater restraints. If parents wished that their sons should drag out a short life of debility and disease, and die before they reach half the common age of man, they could not adopt measures better calculated to produce this effect, than to cast loose the reins of parental authority, and suffer them to follow their own inclinations, and associate with vicious companions without restraint. We may, therefore, consider the premature death of ungoverned children, as the natural consequence, as well as the usual punishment, of parental neglect.

2. In the second place, God declares to Eli, that such of his children as were spared should prove a grief and vexation, rather than a comfort to him. The man of thine, whom I shall not cut off, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart. How terribly this threatening was fulfilled in the case of Eli, you need not be told. Nor was it less terribly fulfilled in the family of David. Though he was in many respects an eminently good man, yet with respect to the government of his children he was grossly deficient. We are told respecting one of his children, that his father had not displeased him at any time, saying, Wherefore hast thou done? We may then conclude that he was equally culpable in his treatment of his other children. And what was the consequence? One of his sons committed incest with his sister, and was in revenge barbarously murdered in cool blood by his brother Absalom. This same Absalom afterwards rebelled against his father, compelled him to fly for his life, and was cut off in the flower of his age, and in the midst of his sins. A third son rebelled against him in his old age, and endeavored to wrest the sceptre from his feeble hands. How keen were the sufferings which this conduct of his children occasioned, we may infer from his bitter lamentation on account of the death of Absalom. O, my son, my son Absalom! would to God I had died for thee, my son, my son! Well therefore might it be said of him that his children were to consume his eyes, and to grieve his heart. The fact is, this part of the threatened punishment, like the former, is the natural and almost inevitable consequence of the sin, against which it is denounced. If parents indulge their children in infancy and childhood, and do not restrain them when they make themselves vile, it is almost impossible that they should not pursue courses and contract habits, which will render them as bitterness to their fathers, and a sorrow of heart to those that bore them. If such parents are pious, their hearts will probably be grieved, and their eyes consumed with tears, to see their children rebelling against God and plunging into eternal ruin. If they are not pious, and care nothing for the future happiness of their children, they will still probably have the grief of seeing them idle, dissolute, undutiful, bad husbands, bad fathers, and bad members of society; for it can scarcely be expected that he, who is a bad son, will act his part well in any other relation of life. Especially will such parents usually meet with unkindness and neglect from their children, if they live to be dependent on them in their old age. It is in this, as in almost every other instance, the case that, as a man sows, so he must reap. They that sow the seeds of vice in the minds of their children, or who suffer their to be sown by others, and to grow without restraint, will almost invariably be compelled to reap, and to eat with many tears the bitter harvest which those seeds tend to produce.

3. In the third place, God forewarns Eli, that his posterity should be poor and contemptible. They that despise me, says he, shall be lightly esteemed; and it shall come to pass that every one that is left in thy house shall come and crouch to another for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread. Here again we see the natural consequences of Eli's sin in its punishment. Children who are not well instructed and restrained by their parents, will almost inevitably in such a place as this, contract habits of idleness, instability, and extravagance, which naturally

lead to poverty and contempt. Were we well acquainted with the private history of those individuals among us, who are idle, intemperate, unstable and despised, we should probably find that in almost every instance, they were the children of parents who neglected to restrain them when they made themselves vile.

Lastly; God declares that none of the methods thus appointed to obtain the pardon of sin, should avail to procure pardon for the iniquity of his house; I have sworn unto Eli, that the iniquity of his house shall not be purged away by sacrifice nor offering forever. This awful threatening conveyed a plain intimation that his children should die in their sins; and, of course be miserable forever. This too was the natural consequence of his conduct. He had suffered them to follow without restraint those courses which rendered them unfit for heaven, until their day of grace was past, and the door of mercy forever closed against them. They were now given up to a hard heart and reprobate mind. They could not now be brought to repentance; and, of course, no sacrifice or offering could purge away their sins. My friends, it is still the same, and there can be no room to doubt, that there are thousands now in the regions of despair, and thousands more on their way to join them, who will forever curse their parents, as the authors of their misery.

My friends, the terrible punishments denounced against this sin sufficiently show that it is exceedingly displeasing in the sight of God. Let us then inquire as was proposed.

III. Why it is so? To this we answer, it is so,

1. Because it proceeds from very wicked and hateful principles. Actions take their character in the sight of God principally from the motives and dispositions in which they originate. Now there is scarcely any sin which proceeds from worse principles and more hateful dispositions than this. For instance, sometimes it proceeds from the love and the practice of vice. Openly vicious and profligate parents, who do not restrain themselves, cannot, of course, but be ashamed to restrain their children. Such parents, whatever their children may do, dare not reprove them, lest they should hear them reply, Physician, heal thyself. In other instances, this sin is occasioned by secret impiety and infidelity. Those who live without God in the world, who think his power of no consequence, and feel not the force of those motives, which the Scriptures present to us, will be disposed to view the sins of their children with a favorable eye, and consider them as merely the common foibles of youth, which require little censure or restraint, and which they will renounce voluntarily. Even if such parents sometimes restrain the grosser vices of their children, they will give them no religious instruction; they will never pray for them, for they never pray for themselves; and without religious instruction and prayer, little or nothing effectual can be done. But in religious parents, this sin almost invariably proceeds from indolence and selfishness. They love their own ease too well to employ that constant care and exertion, which are necessary to restrain their children, and educate them as they ought. They

cannot bear to correct them, or put them to pain; not because they love their children, but because they love themselves, and are unwilling to endure the pain of inflicting punishment, and of seeing their children suffer; though they cannot but be sensible, that their happiness requires it.

There is also much unbelief, much contempt of God, and much positive disobedience in this sin. Parents are as expressly and as frequently commanded to restrain, to correct, and instruct their children, as to perform any other duty whatever. Great promises are made to the performance of this duty; awful threatenings are denounced against the neglect of it. Yet all these motives prove ineffectual. The commands are disobeyed, the promises and threatenings are disbelieved and disregarded, and thus parents honor their children more than God, and seek their own ease rather than his pleasure, as Eli is said to have done. It appears, then, that this sin proceeds from open wickedness, which renders parents ashamed to restrain their children; or from impiety and infidelity, which causes them to think it needless; or from indolence and selfishness, which make them unwilling to do it. Now these are some of the worst principles of our depraved nature; and therefore we need not wonder that a sin, which proceeds from such sources, is exceedingly displeasing to God.

2. This sin is exceedingly displeasing to God, because, so far as it prevails, it entirely frustrates his design in establishing the family state. We are taught, that he at first formed one man and one woman, and united them in marriage, that he might seek a Godly seed. But this important design is entirely frustrated by those parents who neglect the moral and religious education of their children; and therefore God cannot but be greatly displeased with a sin which renders his benevolent measures for our happiness unavailing.

3. God is greatly displeased with this sin on account of the good which it prevents, and the infinite evil which it produces. He has taught us; that children properly educated will be good and happy, both here and hereafter. He has also taught us that children, whose education is neglected, will probably be temporally and eternally miserable. At least, it will not be owing to their parents, if they are not. He also compels us to learn from observation and experience, that innumerable evils and miseries do evidently result from this sin; that the happiness of families is destroyed; that the peace of society is disturbed; that the prosperity of nations is subverted, and that immortal souls are ruined by its effects. Now the anger of God against any sin, is in proportion to the evils and the misery which it tends to produce. But it is evident that no sin tends to produce more evils, or greater misery than this. It is the fruitful parent of thousands of other sins, and entails ruin upon our descendants to the third and fourth generation. With no sin, therefore, has God more reason to be angry than with this.

Lastly; this sin is exceedingly displeasing to him, because those who are guilty of it break over the most powerful restraints, and act a most unnatural part. He

knew that it would not be safe to entrust such creatures as we are with the education of immortal souls, unless we had powerful inducements to be faithful to the trust. He, therefore, implanted in the hearts of parents a strong and tender affection for their offspring, and a most ardent desire for their happiness, that they might thus be induced to educate them as they ought. But those who neglect to restrain their children, do violence to this powerful operative principle, and may be said to be like the heathen, without natural affection. It is true they may have a kind of blind fondness for their offspring, like that of the irrational animals; but it does not at all resemble a virtuous, enlightened affection, and is altogether unworthy of a rational, and still more of a Christian parent; and, therefore, instead of prompting them to seek the real happiness of their children, it is but too often made an excuse for neglecting it.

Thus, my friends, have we endeavored to describe the sin mentioned in our text, with its punishment, and the reasons why it is so exceedingly displeasing to God. And now let us improve the subject,

1. By inquiring whether the sin does not greatly prevail among ourselves. But inquiry is needless. It most evidently does. I am inclined to believe that it is the greatest and most provoking sin among us. And, my friends, you must allow that the speaker has had sufficient opportunity to form something of a correct opinion on this subject. He has resided in this place three years as an instructor of youth, and almost nine years as a preacher of the gospel. In this capacity he has had free access to families of every class, in all circumstances, and he has had very considerable opportunities of witnessing the manner in which children are treated; he has felt disposed to avail himself of these opportunities, and he is constrained to declare thus publicly, that he has found but comparatively few families in which there is not a gross and evident neglect of the moral and religious education of children. He has but too often witnessed in his parochial visits attempts to restrain children, while he was present; attempts, which were evidently unusual, and which were of course unsuccessful, and which only proved that the children, and not the parents, ruled. But it is needless to mention these circumstances. Our streets, and the vicious conduct of but too many of our youth are open witnesses against many among us, that their sons make themselves vile and they restrain them not. You well know that it is almost impossible to walk our streets, without having the ear wounded by profane and indecent expressions from lips which have but just learned to speak. You need not be told, at least many of you need not, that there are many haunts of intemperance and every kind of wickedness in this town, to which boys resort to learn and practice the vices of men; where they soon learn to glory in their shame, and to get rid betimes of the troublesome restraints and reproaches of conscience. You need not be told, that our annual days of fasting are, by many of the young, considered and treated as days set apart for sinful and almost riotous amusement, and that the language of their conduct seems to be, We are determined to fill up the measure of our national sires, as fast as our parents empty it. In fact, I suspect that there is more sin committed on our days of fasting,

than on almost any other day of the year. But it is needless to enlarge. My very soul sickens to think of the dreadful proofs of youthful wickedness and profligacy, which I almost daily hear or witness. Surely, if it be true, that a child trained up in the way he should go will not depart from it, but few, very few indeed of the rising generation are thus trained. I would not, however, be understood to mean, that all, or even a large proportion of the vicious children in this town are the children of this society. I do not now particularly recollect any one that is so. But, my friends, are there not many, even among us, who are grossly deficient in this respect, many whose sons make themselves vile, many who suffer their children to associate with vile companions and they restrain them not? Are there not many, who have already suffered some of the punishments with which the house of Eli was visited? Are there none, who have reason to fear that their children were cut off by an untimely death, the consequence, at least in some degree, of a neglected education? Are there none, whose children survive only to consume their eyes and grieve their hearts by their misconduct, and cause them bitterly to lament the consequences of their neglect now, when it is too late to repair it? It is indescribably painful to tear open the bleeding wounds of such parents, if such there are; but it must be done, if it be only to bring them to repentance and the enjoyment of pardon. It seems that if any sin calls for repentance, this especially does; and it becomes all of us, who are parents, to humble ourselves before God for our innumerable deficiencies, and to beg that he will not visit our sins upon our children. It may perhaps be too late with many to reform now. The children have become too old to be controlled; they have left the paternal roof, and perhaps gone to the world of spirits. The mischief is done and cannot be remedied. My friends, if anything can convince you of the need of an atonement, it must be this. Suppose a parent, by neglect or by bad example, has ruined his children; they die in their sins, and go to the judgment seat. After their death, suppose their criminal parent is brought to repentance, what can clear him from guilt? what can wash away his sin? He has destroyed an immortal soul, the soul of his own child; a soul which God committed to his care, and of which he will demand an account. Now what account can such a parent render? What atonement can he make to God for destroying one of his creatures! to that God who declares that he will require blood for blood, life for life, of everyone who unlawfully takes away the life of a fellow creature? Will his tears, his repentance restore the dead to life, or save the soul which he has ruined? No; nor would it avail should he offer thousands of rams, or ten thousands of rivers of oil; for God expressly declared that the sin of Eli's house should not be purged with offering nor sacrifice forever. What then can take away the guilt, and procure the pardon of such a parent? Is there any way, or must he perish? There is a way. The blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin; and surely such a parent needs it all, nor could anything short of this precious atoning blood, make satisfaction for this irreparable mischief which his neglect has occasioned. If then there be any present, who are guilty of this sin, any, who fear that by their bad example, or their neglect, they have occasioned the ruin of an immortal soul, we would point them to Christ for relief and pardon. By his blood even those who have destroyed others may themselves be saved from destruction, if their repentance be sincere;

for he has declared that all manner of sin and blasphemy, not committed against the Holy Ghost, shall be forgiven to the penitent. But if any, who are guilty of this sin, do not repent and apply to the Saviour for pardon, the oath of God stands against them, that their iniquity shall not be purged forever. My friends, let all who are parents think of this, and beware of this ruinous, this aggravated, this almost unpardonable sin. Chasten thy son, says the wise man, while there is yet hope, nor let thy soul spare for his crying; for he that spareth correction hateth his son, but he that loveth him will chasten him betimes. Thou shalt scourge him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

2. If there are any children or youth now present, whose parents do not restrain them, and who make themselves vile by indulging in vicious or sinful practices, they may learn from this subject, what will be their fate, unless repentance prevent. Children and youth, I am now speaking to you. You are deeply interested in this subject. Remember the character and the fate of Eli's sons. They made themselves vile, and God slew them. Remember that a quarrelsome temper, disobedience to parents, idleness, neglect of the Sabbath, and the Bible, profane and indecent language, falsehood, and every kind of vicious indulgence, render you vile in the sight of God, and are the high road to poverty and contempt in this world, and everlasting wretchedness in the next. Remember too that, if your parents do not forbid, and punish you for these sins, that will not excuse you in the sight of God. Eli did not restrain his sons, and yet God destroyed them. But if any of you, who have religious parents, pursue such courses in defiance of their admonitions, your doom will be still worse. There is no more certain forerunner of ruin in this world and the next, than habitual disregard to the counsels and warnings of such parents. We are told that Eli's sons hearkened not to their father, because the Lord would slay them; and if any children present refuse to obey their parents, it gives reason to fear that God intends, in like manner, to destroy them.

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