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DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILDREN ARE?

Today's Text: (1) 1 Sam., Chaps. 2-3 (2) Lk 2: 41-52

Extracts:

1. "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord. Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. Then came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, I said in deed that thy house, and the house of thy father should walk before Me forever; but now the Lord saith, be it far from Me; for them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed. And this shall be a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day, they shall die both of them" [1 Sam. 2: 12, 22, 27, 30, 34]
2. "Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and His mother knew not of it. But they, supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day's journey, and they sought Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. And when they found Him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him" [Lk 2: 41-45]

There is the story of a judge who was an advocate of parental responsibility for their children's public conduct. He was always known to have harsh words for parents each time young suspects came before him for trial. He used such occasions to blame parents who were now paying more attention to their material pursuits to the detriment of their parental duties to their children. One day, the police raided a brothel where pornographic movies were being filmed. The teenage girls were arraigned before this judge, all hooded to disguise their identity in accordance with the local ordinance. After the judge had made unsavoury comments about the girls' conduct and their parents' role in it, he ordered the hoods to be removed. To his shock, the girl in front turned out to be his 17 year-old high school daughter that had left home for school that morning!

Before you laugh over the matter, let me ask you a simple question: do you know where your children are right now? Do you know what they are doing? Will you be proud to know? In Trinidad & Tobago, there is currently a big uproar over the action of a youth's advocate group that went into a high school premises to distribute condoms to teenage boys and girls. The group is basing its audacity on the alarming research report that children in the country were sexually active from the age of nine and that HIV/AIDS infection was on the rise. The parents and school authorities are protesting the violation of their responsibilities to those children.

Do you know where your children are? In today's lesson, we shall use the story of Eli the priest and his children to examine and understand the problem.

1. The sons of a priest desecrate the house of God!

Under the Law of Moses, the priest played a key role in the house of God. The priesthood came from the tribe of Levi of which the first priest was Aaron, the brother of Moses [**Lev. 8: 1-13**]. Eli came from that lineage [**Ex. 29:9; 1 Sam. 2: 30**]. Eli had two sons named Hophni and Phinehas. Their father received reports that they were misbehaving in the temple. Among the charges against them were the following:

- 1) They stole the choice parts of offerings made by worshippers *before* they were presented to God [**1 Sam. 2: vv. 13-17**]
- 2) They had immoral relations with female worshippers right “at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation” [**v. 22**].

Eli called his sons and said to them, “Why do ye such things for I *hear* of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: *ye make the Lord’s people to transgress.*” In spite of that warning, they refused to listen to their father [**vv. 23-25**].

When they refused to change, did their father remove them from their privileged positions? Did he demonstrate in any way to the congregation that he did not accept his children’s misconduct? He did not. Yet, he was the same man who raised Samuel “and the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men” [**v. 26**]. It is so true even of us, too, that we tend to cover up our children’s misconduct while exposing other people’s children! Some parents teach their children how to cheat and lie their way to success at examinations and other tests of life. The day that they are caught, such parents will be the first to claim that their children have been framed. Some mothers have been known to encourage their daughters to be sexually active at an early age because the experience is good for them in this modern age. When such teenagers then return with unwanted pregnancies or STDs [sexually transmitted diseases], their parents try to hide the result, such as procuring abortions or unorthodox treatments. Are we really better than Eli?

Well, since Eli was not prepared to discipline his sons, God sent a prophet to ask Eli the following question: “Wherefore kick ye at My sacrifice and at Mine offering, which I have commanded in My habitation; and *honourest thy sons above Me*, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel My people?” [**vv. 27-29**]. God’s judgment on Eli and his family was swift:

- 1) Eli’s lineage lost the priesthood “for them that honour Me, I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed” and “the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering forever” [**vv. 30, 35; 1 Sam. 3: 14**].
- 2) Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, would both die on the same day [**v. 34**]. In deed, at the battle with the Philistines not quite long

afterwards, both of them were killed. When Eli heard of his sons' death, he himself fell off the chair and died. He was 98 years old. His daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was pregnant. When she heard of the death of her husband and father-in-law, she went into labour and died at childbirth [1 Sam. 4: 11-20].

- 3) A new priesthood was established through Samuel, ironically also raised by Eli! [1 Sam. 3: 19-21].

In the end, Eli lost everything that he had worked for in life, just because he failed to raise his children in the fear of the Lord.

2. Let us probe the matter more deeply

Eli *raised* three children: Hophni, Pinehas (his own sons) and Samuel (Hannah's son). We can *presume* that all three were fed the same earthly and spiritual meals. So, why did Samuel turn out differently from the other two? To adequately answer the question, let us examine the following cases:

a) *Bad parents raise bad children*

A general expectation is that we reap what we sow [Gal. 6:7]. Parents who show their children bad examples in immorality and unprincipled conduct should not be surprised if their children follow in their footsteps. Ahab, the husband of Jezebel, was said to have done more "to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel before him" [1 Kgs 16: 33]. When he died, he was succeeded by his son, Ahaziah and "he did evil in the sight of the Lord and *walked in the way of his father and in the way of his mother*" [1 Kgs 22: 52-53].

In many homes, there is no culture of fear of the Lord. They do not pray together. In fact, God is hardly mentioned. The parents speak rudely and in cursing language with their children whose response is not any gentler. In many supposedly Christian homes, the children see so much hypocrisy in their parents' lives. They see so much emphasis on rituals and Churchianity without any spirituality. They see their parents cutting corners in tax payments and business deals. They call in sick to their offices only to spend the free time on personal pursuits. The phone rings and a parent tells the child to inform the caller that he/she is not home, thus encouraging the child to lie. The children see their single parents practising fornication/adultery only to turn around to preach abstinence/continence to them. Is it then surprising that the number of homes without God is growing? According to a recent AP report, the percentage of Canadians who profess that they are secular [i.e., without any faith] has grown from 12% in 1990 to 16% in 2001. Of the growing number of such people, 40% are aged 24 or younger. Can you imagine the children that will be raised by such atheists?

b) *But good parents can wind up with bad children and vice versa!*

Sometimes, we find ourselves in a situation where we have tried to raise our children in the fear of the Lord but they wind up at the other end. For example, if Eli were that bad, Hannah would not give her child of promise, Samuel, for him to bring up. Samuel himself was a good child who later became the father of two sons, Joel and Abiah, both judges in Beersheba. However, “his sons *walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment*” [1 Sam. 8: 1-3]. Where did they learn that?

A related possibility is that good children sometimes come out of bad parents. Children of prostitutes can become paragons of moral excellence, just as wicked parents can have children who fear God. For example, Amon was a wicked king of Judah like his father, Manasseh. He reigned for only two years and was slain by his servants at the age of 24. His son, Josiah, was only eight years old when he became king and he reigned for 31 years. Interestingly, “he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, *and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left*” [2 Kgs 21: 17-26; 2 Kgs 22: 1-2]. We also remember the story of Saul who was hell-bent on killing David. Yet, his son, Jonathan, did all in his power to save David and they became inseparable friends [1 Sam. 20: 1-42].

The above suggests that our success in raising our children in the fear of the Lord goes beyond our human effort.

c) *In general, good parents raise good children*

Every rule has exceptions. In general, however, we would expect that children that are raised in a spiritually enabling environment are more likely to turn out good than those raised elsewhere. Samuel was influenced by his mother’s faith-filled environment whereas he raised his own children in the polluting environment of Eli’s priesthood! Compare that with Jehosaphat’s experience. His father, Asa, was king of Judah when Ahab was made king of Israel. He died four years later and his son, Jehosaphat, succeeded him, and “he walked *in all the ways of Asa his father; he turned not aside from it, doing that which was right in the sight of the Lord*” [1 Kgs 22: 41-43]. What did he do? Here is a sample:

- 1) He appointed judges and warned them “take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord” [2 Chron. 19: 5-7]
- 2) He appointed priests and Levites and heads of the children of Israel and charged them to do their work “in the fear of the Lord, *faithfully and with a perfect heart*” [vv. 8-10]

- 3) In his cabinet, he put Amariah the chief priest over others “in all matters of the Lord” and Zebadiah, the ruler of the house of Judah “for all the king’s matters.” In other words, he separated ecclesiastical matters from secular matters. Yet, he enjoined both parties to “deal courageously, and the Lord shall be with the good” [v. 11]
- 4) Jehosaphat sent Levites who “taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the Lord with them, and they went about throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people” [2 Chron. 17:7-9].

So, for following in his parents’ good steps, “the Lord (e)stablished the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought to Jehosaphat presents, and he had riches and honour in abundance” [v.5].

3. Lessons for today’s parents

A ringing conclusion that we can draw from the analysis so far is that God is the foundation for a successful upbringing of our children for “except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it” [Ps. 127: 1]. If “children are an heritage of the Lord,” then we should trust Him to guide us how to play our own part. So, what has He told us on the subject? He has given us the formula in the following words: “*Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it*” [Prov. 22:6].

The training is both *physical* and *spiritual* and they are interrelated. It starts with the relationship between father and mother. When children do not see love, affection and mutual respect between their parents, what are they supposed to learn? It should be an open home where parents do not provoke their “children to wrath but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” In turn, the children obey their parents because they see it as right [Eph. 5: 1-4].

Disciplining the child has become a problem because of its legal implications in modern society. Yet, God says that “he that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him *chasteneth* him betimes” [Prov. 13: 24]. The rod here does not necessarily mean a stick but a firm and principled approach. Again, only God can lead us to such an approach for “through *wisdom* is an house builded; and by *understanding* it is established; and by *knowledge* shall the chambers be filled with all precious and pleasant riches” [Prov. 24: 3-4]. In a home where truth is valued and rewarded, where members are motivated to obey more out of conviction than compulsion or tradition, endearing values can be acquired and passed on to the succeeding generations. In turn, God extends His love and mercy “unto thousands of [generations of] them that love Me and keep My commandments” [Ex. 20:6].

4. Conclusion: Let’s learn from God the Father

A good way to end today's lesson is to trace the relationship between God the Father and His Son, Jesus, while He was on earth. The Father knew where His Son was *all the time*. At His birth, the Father sent angels to announce the good news to shepherds in the field [**Lk 2: 8-14**]. He commanded a star to guide the Wise Men from the East to come and worship His Son. When that action provoked Herod to conspire to kill Him (by eliminating all the children less than two years of age), the Father commanded the foster father, Joseph, to take Him to safety in Egypt [**Matt. 2: 1-15**]. At His baptism, the Father could not hide His admiration for His Son when His voice thundered from heaven saying "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" [**Lk 3: 21-22**].

How did the Son react to His Father's care? At age 12, He was already about His Father's business [**Lk 2: 49**]. In His ministry, Jesus never drew attention to Himself but to His Father. Just listen to this:

The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do; for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son also [**Jn 5: 19**]

He had been trained as a child and now that He had grown up, He did not depart from it. His Father was there in the shadows, occasionally coming out to let us know how much He admired His Son. He did it at the Transfiguration [**Matt. 17:5**] and while Jesus was preaching in the synagogue after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem [**Jn 12: 28**]. In spite of this overwhelming love, the Father "chastised" Jesus by letting Him suffer and die on the cross. In spite of that, the centurion was able to recognize who Jesus was: "truly this was the Son of God" [**Matt. 27: 54**]. The Father knew where His Son was at all times and in all circumstances!

Through your faith in Christ Jesus, you have become God's son or daughter [**Jn 1: 12**]. You have become the "apple of His eye" [**Ps. 17:8**] and His eyes are upon you as long as you fear Him [**Ps. 33:18**]. Can you now extend the same privilege to your own sons and daughters? Do you know where your children are?