Parenting is never easy. Nobody in this fallen world has mastered it.

And when it comes to raising children in the fear of the Lord, fathers shoulder the greatest biblical responsibility—being accountable to God as the heads of their homes (Ephesians 6:4; 1 Timothy 3:4–5).

The need to learn and grow in the role of fatherhood never ceases, and Scripture is our richest source of parental wisdom. It offers clear instruction and furnishes us with powerful role models.

And it’s not just the good dads that we can learn from. In fact, the bad dads of the Bible may well teach the most profound lessons of all.

Eli is certainly a prime example. He was a priest and judge over Israel during one of the lowest points in its history—at the end of the era of judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Eli’s life is a great lesson for us because his key failure was a relatively obscure sin that runs rampant in the church today—a passive approach to parenting.

Eli was no reprobate. He had good desires for the people of Israel (1 Samuel 1:17), reverence for God (1 Samuel 3:18), and a hatred of evil (1 Samuel 2:22–24). But his hatred of evil didn’t produce any active response—at least as far as his sons were concerned. His passive approach brought disastrous results for his family and the nation of Israel. Along the way he displayed a severe deficiency in three critical qualities that all fathers need.

**Failure to Discern**

John MacArthur was once asked “what is the greatest need in the church today?” He responded directly and succinctly: “It’s simple for me to answer that. The biggest problem in the church today is the absence of discernment.” And Eli’s life is proof that the lack of discernment is not an exclusively modern problem.

Eli accused a pious woman (Hannah) of drunken behavior because she prayed silently in the tabernacle (1 Samuel 1:12–14). But he was seemingly oblivious to his own sons who were abusing their priestly office by fornicating (1 Samuel 2:22) and stealing sacrifices (1 Samuel 2:12–17) right under his nose!

Eli eventually did confront his sons. But it was only after their wicked conduct became common knowledge among the Israelites:

Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with
the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. He said to them, “Why do you do such
things, the evil things that I hear from all these people? No, my sons; for the report is not good which
I hear the Lord’s people circulating. If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a
man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their
father, for the Lord desired to put them to death. (1 Samuel 2:22–25)

Fathers need discernment. An aversion to conflict and the concealing of sin can temporarily hide the
truth, but eventually the sin will bear undeniable consequences.

However, discernment only identifies the issue. Once sin is identified it must also provoke swift and
decisive action.

Failure to Discipline

Eli may have confronted his sons (though under duress) but he never took any disciplinary action
against them. He may have thought he had a loving attitude towards his sons, but Scripture says it
was a practical hatred: “He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him
diligently” (Proverbs 13:24).

Remember Solomon’s counsel: “Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death”
(Proverbs 19:18). “While there is hope” suggests that there comes a time when it is too late for the
disciplinary process to do any good. In the case of Eli, he was very old by the time he confronted his
sons. And he only did so because of the grievous testimonies he heard among the Israelites.
Moreover, the concluding warning of the proverb—“do not desire his death”—is not some empty
divine threat. Consider the concluding and soon to be fulfilled words of 1 Samuel 2:25: “The Lord
desired to put them to death.”

Furthermore, the behavior of Eli’s sons is exactly what the Bible warns will happen if fathers don’t
discipline their children: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who sets his own way brings
shame to his mother” (Proverbs 29:15). “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of
discipline will remove it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15).

Eli’s disapproval of his son’s behavior was meaningless because he didn’t back it up with discipline.
In fact, his passive attitude toward their sin revealed a lack of passion for his God. And God sent a
prophet to confront Eli about his passive parenting: “Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My
offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me, by making
yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of my people Israel?” (1 Samuel 2:29).

A failure to discipline children demonstrates a lack of love for them, and even more disturbingly, a
lack of love for God.

Failure to Divide

A former pastor of mine once told me about attending a housewarming party for a couple who were
living in sin. When I questioned him about why he would support such an event, he responded: “I
made it clear to them that my presence there was not an endorsement of their lifestyle.” That pastor
may not have verbally endorsed their sexual immorality, but he was certainly sending the message
that it wasn't that big a deal to him.

In the same way, Eli's delayed objections to his sons' behavior ring hollow. God had rebuked Eli, asking him why do you "honor your sons above me?" (1 Samuel 2:29). God equated Eli's passive approach with "kick[ing] at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded." The outrageous scandal of Eli's ministry was that he failed to make a clear separation—a division between the priesthood and his disqualified sons.

Eli allowed his sons to continue ministering as priests in the Lord's house. How could he claim to represent God among the Israelites while he repeatedly ignored the blasphemy of his sons as they abused their priestly office? And Eli's passivity was not a temporary failing in his life. It lingered well into his old age (1 Samuel 2:22) while his sons maintained a relentless pattern of blasphemous conduct—worthy of death according to Mosaic law.

I believe Eli's overweight physique (1 Samuel 4:18) also reveals his failure to divide from the sinful activities of his sons. While he paid lip service to abhorring their sin, it seems he willingly partook of the spoils. Scripture does not make a definitive connection, but the mention of Eli's weight implies his willing indulgence in eating the meat sacrifices that his sons were stealing. God included Eli with his sons by saying, "making yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of my people Israel" (1 Samuel 2:29, emphasis added).

Eli's story teaches us that the opposition of evil must extend beyond righteous rhetoric. It also demands division with those who persist in their iniquity. The apostle Paul reminds us:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? . . . “Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean.” (2 Corinthians 6:14–17)

Eli failed to discern his sons' sins, failed to discipline them for it, and failed to divide himself from their wicked activities. There is no happy ending to his story. God's judgment came to pass: He used a pagan army as His instrument of wrath to put Eli's sons to death—along with thirty thousand Israelite soldiers. Then Eli collapsed and died when he heard news of the carnage (1 Samuel 4:10–18).

It's possible to take the Eli approach to child rearing without such a large death toll, but Scripture reminds all who tread his path that precious souls are always at stake: "You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from Sheol" (Proverbs 23:14).

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