

## **Permissive or Priestly Parents**

When I was a child, one of the most popular child psychologists was a man by the name of Dr Benjamin Spock. Spock had been publishing for about 30 years by that time, and his books were extremely popular. Spock encouraged parents to allow a child to express himself, and never, under any circumstances, to spank the child. He developed a more child-centred, permissive and sympathetic approach to raising children. He said things such as “The child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering.” “What good mothers and fathers instinctively feel like doing for their babies is usually best after all.” “Trust yourself, you know more than you think you do.”

Spock died in 1998, but before he died, after having gone through a divorce, he allegedly made this confession: “We have reared a generation of brats. Parents aren't firm enough with their children for fear of losing their love or incurring their resentment. This is a cruel deprivation that we professionals have imposed on mothers and fathers. Of course, we did it with the best of intentions. We didn't realize until it was too late how our know-it-all attitude was undermining the self assurance of parents.”

Permissive, passive parents aren't something that began after Benjamin Spock. They are as old as humanity itself. Something went wrong with Cain's upbringing that he felt the way to deal with sibling rivalry was to murder. And throughout the Bible, we find a very long list of parents that failed.

In fact, looking through the Old Testament, you struggle to find fathers who are exemplary. Abraham often lacks leadership, Isaac permits all kinds of evils by Esau, and by Jacob, Jacob's household is an all-out soap opera. Joseph we assume would have been a good father, but we know very little about how Manasseh and Ephraim turned out. Moses nearly loses his sons to divine judgement for failing to circumcise them. Aaron's sons bring strange fire and get destroyed on almost day one of their service as priests. Through the book of Judges we meet parents, even judges, such as Gideon, whose children do not grow up to love God. Samuel's sons run riot. The kings aren't much better – David's household is a mess, Solomon's wisdom didn't extend to his son Rehoboam who was a fool, and the same is true for the kings that follow. I can think of only one man in the Old Testament who is explicitly shown to be a responsible, godly father.

I would like us to study both the worst and the best in parenting. I want us to begin with one of the worst examples of parenting, and see the errors and the sins that the Bible makes clear he committed. Then, by contrast, we'll look at the one man in the Old Testament who modelled a godly example.

### **I. Eli the Permissive Parent**

In 1 Samuel 2 we are introduced to Eli and to his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Eli was the high priest during the time of the judges. Eli lived in a time when Israel was in a bad state spiritually. He was supposed to lead the way in restoring devotion to God.

Eli's two sons were wicked and rebellious. They were greedy for food and defiled the sacrifices which earnest worshipers brought. They were immoral, and profaned the tabernacle with their wickedness. Instead of being a preservative during a wicked time, Eli's legacy was that his sons were adding to the evil and the confusion. The Bible makes it clear though, that much of the problem lay with Eli. Eli was a permissive parent. We can take from Eli two characteristics of the permissive, passive parent.

## 1) Eli did not restrain his children.

**1 Samuel 3:11-14** *Then the LORD said to Samuel: "Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. <sup>12</sup> "In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> "For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and **he did not restrain them.** <sup>14</sup> "And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."*

That's God's verdict on Eli. Eli did not restrain his children.

What is meant by *restrain*? Stop. Prevent. Correct. Change. If a horse is going the wrong way, you restrain it. If a dog is not walking by your side – you restrain it. It suggests that your will overcomes the other's will. The Lord's words do not suggest a negotiation, a deal, an agreement, some kind of treaty. *Restrain* is one party preventing another from having its own way. That's the relationship between parents and children, when those children are at home.

Eli was the one responsible to stop his children's sinful behaviour. Eli did not intervene, and actively train his children to fear the Lord and to hate evil. It didn't make a difference if Eli had said some scolding words here and there. Eli did not act decisively and consistently enough to require obedience. It was clear he failed to do that when they were children, and he did not act now that they were adults.

In the end, because Eli would not apply earthly discipline, God applied His.

**1 Samuel 4:4** *So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.*

**1 Samuel 4:10-11** *So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. <sup>11</sup> Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.*

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Eli could have prevented this, if he had embraced the pain of training his children.

Eli, like every parent who refuses to restrain and train, thought he was avoiding pain, but he was just delaying it. He avoided the pain of displeasing his children, but eventually he had to face the pain of his sons' sin and its consequences. No such thing as pain-free parenting. Parenting is a mercy of God, where your rod, used in love trains them to hate sin and flee it. What would you prefer for your child, the pain of your spankings, or the pain of eternal hell?

You see, permissive parents often believe if they restrain their children, it will harm them. They believe like Spock did: a child is like a homing pigeon who will find happiness and sensible living without too much interference. But what does the Bible say about the natural state of a child's heart?

**Proverbs 22:15** *Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.*

**Proverbs 29:15** *The rod and rebuke give wisdom, But a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.*

Fools destroy themselves. The way of a human's heart is a downward slope towards self-destruction. If you do not intervene, stop them, turn them around, and keep on correcting, the

human heart will just ride the current of its own desires downstream to hell.

To restrain your children means you care more about their ultimate direction, than about their opinion of you at the time. When you fear God more than you fear man, you can accept being the bad guy. You can accept being unpopular. You can accept being disliked by your children for a season. You can accept criticism and unhappiness, because you care more about God's glory and seeing your child know and love God than about your image. You have smashed the idol of being the supermom or the superdad who is always the hero to his or her children, always the bringer of fun and happiness, always associated with smiley-face joy. A lot of what looks like love for the child is really love for someone else. If my worst fear is that the child will dislike me if I restrain him or her, then what do I love most? I love my own image as good mom or good dad. I love being loved. I love myself.

If you love God first it sanctifies your love for the child, and you can love the child for Christ's sake, which sometimes means dying to your image and reputation, jumping into the painful world of confronting sin and dealing with it, being Mr Bad Cop, or Mrs Not-So-Nice .

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is as if God mercifully says to parents – you inflict the lesser pain, lest I have to inflict the greatest pain.

**Proverbs 23:13** *Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. <sup>14</sup> You shall beat him with a rod, And deliver his soul from hell.*

But look at the promise of Proverbs 29:17

*Correct your son, and he will give you rest; Yes, he will give delight to your soul.*

There was a second way that Eli was a permissive parent.

The Lord indicts Eli with these words, “1 Samuel 2:29 *Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and **honor your sons more than Me,***

## **2) Eli placed his children ahead of God.**

Now we must ask, in what way did Eli honour his sons more than God? He was the high priest, after all. His whole life was dedicated to the service of God. In the New Testament, this man would have been a pastor, a deacon, a recognisable man in the church. The answer is very simple – Eli cared more about pleasing his sons than about pleasing God.

God had given specific commandments regarding the sacrifice. It was the breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering that was for the priests. Hophni and Phineas took as much as they wanted. Also, the fat was supposed to be burnt up. But they would demand the raw meat as it was, for themselves. Even if Eli were not the father of Hophni and Phineas, as the priest, he had a responsibility to make sure it was done correctly. He chose to let disobedience go on instead of insisting upon obedience.

See, Eli had a choice every day. Obey God, which meant choosing against his sons' behaviour, or choose in favour of his sons' behaviour which meant disobeying God. He kept choosing his children over God.

How do you think such a thing happened? I don't think it happened overnight. It's an incredibly subtle thing – choosing your children over God. Parental love is such a natural thing. In fact, in the

New Testament, there is a particular Greek word for this – *storge*, which is translated *natural affection*. It's that very naturalness that makes this one of the hardest things of all to see clearly. Our children are so close to our hearts, and the desire to be a good, responsible parent is so close to godliness, that this becomes one of the hardest things to detect.

Think about it. Which parent do you know of who admits to placing the child ahead of God? None of us feel that way. Other parents are overprotective, we're just responsible. Other parents are child-centred, we're just affectionate. Other parents are besotted, we're just very proud. Other parents are spoiling, we're just generous.

No believer sets out to do this deliberately. No one decides to place children above God. But do you know it is entirely natural for the sinful heart to do so? The sinful heart sees children as not so much people who need to be shaped for God's glory, but as little expressions of ME, who must get the best, have the best, experience the best, and be the best. It is unnatural, it is supernatural to place God ahead of your children.

When Jesus says, 'He who loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me' when exactly does that ever show up in life? You can rationalise all your decisions and say that Christ is still your first love, but in the end, if the child gets all the yes's, and God gets the no's, if God gets all the 'sorry, we can't make it', but the child always gets the 'we'll be there', if God gets the 'no we can't afford that', but the child gets the 'well, it's high quality and she needs it', if God gets the 'I just can't fit that into the day' but the child gets the 'We'll make it work', judge for yourself, who is being honoured more? Ask yourself, has your child ever been inconvenienced for the sake of Christ? You'll inconvenience him for the sake of their education, for the sake of his extra-murals. Does she ever have to face some sacrifice, some inconvenience, some commitment because God comes first in your home? Will he ever hear you say, 'no' to him because there is a 'yes' to the things of the Lord?

We can always tell ourselves that in our sincere hearts we love Christ more. But in the end, the incarnation of what is in your heart shows up in your time, your commitments, your wallet, your actions. At the root of permissive parenting is an almost camouflaged idolatry – a love of child more than God, disguised as Christian family love.

Eli got where he was by refusing to recognise and repent of that in his heart, until it became a normal way of thinking and acting, and became the very habit of his life.

Eli did not restrain his children; Eli placed his children ahead of God.

We turn our attention now to the one of the only Old Testament examples of a godly, spiritual parent.

## **II. Job the Priestly Parent**

*Job 1:1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil. 2 And seven sons and three daughters were born to him.*

*3 Also, his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East.*

*4 And his sons would go and feast in their houses, each on his appointed day, and would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in*

*their hearts." Thus Job did regularly. (Job 1:4-5)*

Job, a man who lived probably sometime after Jacob and Esau, and was a descendant of Esau in the land of Edom. He was the wealthiest man in his culture, possibly some kind of duke or prince. He had ten children, and his large family, large livestock was the ultimate symbol of blessing.

But the striking thing about Job is his character: blameless, upright, fearing God and shunning evil. And as evidence for this godliness, the writer tells us what Job did in respect of his children. We are told that each of his sons, on his appointed day, which most likely refers to their birthdays, would hold a birthday celebration. Each son, on his birthday, would invite all his siblings, and they would have a celebration that lasted several days.

When the celebration was over, Job would then do something remarkable. He would send for each of them. In other words, he would ask for each son or daughter to appear before him individually, he would sanctify each one, and he would then rise early and offer sacrifices on their behalf. We could summarise all of this by saying that Job was a priestly parent.

In the Bible, a priest is a mediator. He stands between God and man. He presents atonement for man to God. He represents man to God, and God to man. That's what Job did for his children. He acted on their behalf spiritually, and sought to spiritually protect them, and spiritually provide for them. Let's consider his actions a little more closely.

First, Job was primarily concerned about his children's relationship with God. Verse 5: "For Job said, 'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.'" Here was the wealthiest man of his day, and his children's parties were no doubt lavish and extravagant. But when it was over, Job's primary question was not "Was it a good party?" or "Did you have fun?" or "did you feel special?" Job's primary question was "How did my children relate to God during this party? What if one of them in a moment of forgetfulness, or celebration that got too raucous, actually cursed God? What if one blasphemed, or thought himself so independent that he thought of God scornfully in his heart?"

Now you can attribute this to a kind of superstitiousness, but I think that would be taking it wrongly. Our evidence is that Job, who was himself blameless, who himself refused to curse God when his wife later told him to do so, was genuinely concerned about the state of his children's heart before God. He was most concerned not about his children's health or social life or exposure to fun experiences, but if his children were themselves God-fearers, loving God, living in reverent, dependence upon God.

A priestly parent is deeply concerned about evangelising his child. Before education or physical health or achievement or success, the deepest concern of a priestly parent is for the child's salvation. What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? So what will it profit if a child is healthy, wealthy, successful, happy, but lost and far from God? A parent is a long-term evangelist, always thinking of ways to prepare the heart, structure the life, influence and shape towards a reception of the gospel. Just as parents plan for their children in the areas of education, and health, and sports, a priestly parent has the goal of salvation, of trusting Christ. A priestly parent wants his child to become a Christian, and to love and fear God in life.

Second, Job gave each child individual, spiritual attention. So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them. We're told that he sent for them, and sanctified them. The implication is that he called for each child, and one by one, he brought them in, and sanctified them. What does that mean? It's the idea of purifying, setting apart. Job was not under the

covenant of Israel, so he did not have the Levitical laws, but in the culture of the Ancient Near East, there were a lot of similarities between practices. It probably involved the person taking some kind of bath, washing the clothes, symbolising purity and cleansing from defilement. Probably a sacrifice was made for purification. Some incense might have been burned as prayers were offered for cleansing and consecration to God.

Think about Job doing this for each of his ten children. Think of how much time that took, how much effort, how much cost. Think of the effect on his children, as they knew, after this celebration, father is going to call us, he is going to ask us how it went, he will ask us what was in our hearts, if we were thankful or proud, if we honoured God in the celebration. He is going to pray for our purity and holiness. Each child must have known, father is concerned that each of us is right with God and growing.

A priestly parent is concerned for each child's discipleship. Just like Jesus said that the 99 sheep who are safe will be left to go and track down the one that is lost, so a parent is concerned for the spiritual health and development of each child. For us, it is not purification ceremonies. For us, it is family devotions. It is making sure each child is reading the Bible and praying. It is making sure a child is not watching or reading or listening to things that will cause him to curse God, or stumble or be defiled. It is provoking in the child a love for holiness, a burden for God's church, a desire to see lost souls saved. It is guiding the child away from sin and towards the beauty of holiness. It's not the approach of so many – take them to Sunday School, so someone else can give them that spiritual input in their lives. No, it's father, and mother educating the children spiritually.

Third, Job interceded for his children. *and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all.*

Apart from his individual sanctifying of each child, on his own, Job would get up early, and offer sacrifices for each child, ten sacrifices, to cover possible sin in his children's lives. Job prayed for his children, and provided covering over their lives. He inconvenienced himself, deprived himself of some of his money, some of his food, some of his sleep so as to interceded and pray and stand in the gap for his children.

Because of the Gospel, we don't offer sacrifices for our children. Christ is the once-for-all sacrifice. But priestly parents will be bringing their children before the throne of grace in prayer.

Priestly parents care about the salvation of their children, give them individual spiritual attention, and intercede in prayer for their children. That's the opposite of Eli – refusing to restrain, and placing the children ahead of God.

We parents need much grace. I am glad for forgiveness in Christ, and for second chances. I am glad that God allows parents to begin doing right even when we have done much wrong. I am glad that He gives us His Word, so that we do not need Benjamin Spock to guide us. Let's pray for gracious enablement to be priestly parents.