

The Pain of Permissive Papas

There are a few 'reality' TV shows out there at the moment, in which a supposed child-expert visits a home where the children are almost totally out of control. The expert then usually tells the hapless parents some very common-sense things like – 'don't let your child hit you in the face, don't let your child throw food at you, don't let your child writhe on the ground kicking their feet and screaming.' It's amazing to watch because the parents really are almost defenceless. It is as if they are in a room with other adults who are throwing tantrums, and they feel a bit embarrassed, but they are completely powerless it seems, to do anything about it.

I try to imagine if such a reality show could have worked even fifty years ago. Fifty years ago, such things were unheard of. We are living in the age of permissive parents. Specifically, we are living in the age of permissive fathers.

What is a permissive father?

The word *permissive* suggests permission, permitting things. To be permissive has to do with your attitude and philosophy of parenting. You are one who keeps permitting all kinds of things, allowing certain types of behaviour, giving permission. Now it is not that giving permission is wrong or that parents aren't supposed to permit things. It is that permissive parents do not want to be negative or harsh. They are afraid of dampening the expression of their child, so they permit far more than they should. They give permission not only for things that are good, but for things that are harmful.

Permissive parents want to avoid one kind of pain, but they end up creating another kind of pain. They want to avoid the pain of restricting and correcting their children. They manage to do that, a lot of the time. But the pain of their child's heart turning to rebellion is one they cannot avoid.

Eli experienced the bitter consequences of being a permissive parent. Studying his actions helps us identify permissiveness in ourselves, and warns us to be the kind of parents God expected us to be.

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. But Eli had two sons, who were wicked and rebellious. They were greedy for food and defiled the sacrifices which earnest worshippers brought. They were fornicators, and profaned the tabernacle with their wickedness. The Bible makes it clear though, that much of the problem lay with Eli. Eli was a permissive papa.

I. Permissive parents choose their children over God.

The Lord indicts Eli with these words, in **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**, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel my people?"*

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. Eli is not the first person you would think of when you imagine a parent who places children ahead of God.

The answer is very simple – Eli refused to obey God's commands regarding his sons:

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 Phinehas took as much as they wanted. Also, the fat was supposed to be burnt up. But they would demand the raw meat for themselves, as it was.

Even if Eli were not the father of Hophni and Phinehas, 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.

But it was worse than that, because these men were his sons. To whom did God give the responsibility to teach His laws to the children? He gave that responsibility to their fathers.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. ⁷ "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.*

In the New Testament, it is specifically fathers who are given the command to train their children. We read in **Ephesians 6:4** *And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.*

Whose commands are the children supposed to obey? God's.
Which commands are they supposed to obey? All of them.
Who is responsible for making sure they do that? Fathers.

Now who do you think God expects to enforce the command to honour your parents? Do you think God expects children to figure it out by themselves?

So Eli was guilty on two fronts. First, he was the priest, and Hophni and Phinehas were profaning the sacrifice. Second, these men were his sons. He, more than anyone else in the world, had the task of reprimanding them. Eli did not want to insist upon his sons' obedience.

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. There was a time when Hophni and Phinehas were little cooing babies, who Eli, no doubt, held with the fondest pride. And they became little toddling, gurgling, blabbering little guys, and Eli loved them even more. And even then, they began to show they wanted their own way, and Eli felt it was no big deal, and he indulged them. And they became small children, who could have tantrums and demand their own way and cry and fuss for their own way. And Eli no doubt said, 'They're just children'. He loved them too much to interfere with them. After all, *most of the time they were so sweet*. And they became older children and then teenagers, and Eli found that their independence was now becoming assertive, even aggressive. There were times he wanted to stop them, but he told himself, 'You can't force children. They have to choose their own way in the end. I'll just pray for them.' So he still let them have their own way - until they became young men who took over the priestly duties, and that same undisciplined willfulness had never been checked.

Eli no doubt loved his sons. It was his love that made him reluctant to correct them. Love never wants to intentionally harm. But when your child is learning to rebel, learning to go his or her own way, and you do not intervene – your love is not too great, it is too weak. Your love is actually retreating, at the very moment it is supposed to act.

Proverbs 3:11-12 *My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; ¹² For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights.*

Proverbs 13:24 *He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly.*

You become a permissive parent by a repetition of concessions. Not one big choice, but many, many

small choices, where you choose the child's wishes over God's Word. You allow them to have their way instead of God's way – and over time the wailing 18 month old who doesn't want to sit in one place becomes a warring 18-year-old who doesn't want to stay the night.

That leads us to the second marker of the permissive parent.

II. Permissive parents do not want to restrain their children.

You might read this incident and say, 'But Eli did rebuke his sons. He told them it was no good thing that they were doing.' Well, hear what the Lord thought of Eli's child-training.

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. ¹²In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For 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.** ¹⁴And 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."*

He did not restrain them. That's God's verdict on Eli. It did not make a difference if Eli had said some scolding words here and there. Like the mom who is forever threatening, but never acting – in the end, no restraining has been done.

Eli did not act when they were children, and he did not act now that they were adults. In fact, for Eli, it probably was too late. He was in his nineties. They were grown men. But he never intervened.

What is meant by restrain? Stop. Prevent. Correct. Change something. 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 means one party is preventing another from having its own way.

Permissive parents do not want to restrain or correct their children.

Someone asks, 'What am I supposed to restrain?' Short answer: Disobedience. So long as what you expect from your child is not sinful, then God expects your child to obey you - even if it is something simple liking eating their food, or staying in one place. If you expect it, and they disobey it, the issue just became much bigger than food or staying in one place. It became about them and God. They just rebelled against God's authority. They don't know it yet. But if you leave it there, you have just refused to restrain their disobedience.

Whether it is the 18 month old who refuses to sit on your lap, or the 18 year-old who refuses to stay at home on Friday night, it is the same thing. They know what you require, they refuse to submit. It is rebellion, it is sin, and the wages thereof are death.

You see, permissive parents actually have a belief. Their belief is secretly this: my child is good. If I let him/her have their own way, it is no big deal, because he/she will turn out well. Some even believe that if they restrain their children, it will harm them. They say to themselves 'My 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.*

In case you don't know what happens to fools, consider **Proverbs 9:6** *Forsake foolishness and live,*

And go in the way of understanding.

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.

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

Wise Christian parents realise that their children are not good by nature, nor wise by nature. Christian parents do not think that freedom of expression is the most important thing in a child's life. Wise Christian parents see themselves not as guides who let children shape themselves, but shepherds who direct, potters who mould, teachers who instruct, coaches who train. Wise Christian parents see their child like a trainer sees a new horse. For it to ever become useful, it cannot have its own way, or it will be useless, and eventually destructive. So to make a horse which is instinctively wild and proud, submissive and helpful, he goes to work training it – positively and negatively. Cracking the whip when it bucks, rewarding it when it submits. Any horse-trainer who says, 'The most important thing about a horse is its freedom and creative self-expression', you wouldn't hire, because he will not train any horses. If you believe your child is inherently good, you will not train him or her, because you think, left to him, or herself, they will turn out well. But if you believe a child is naturally a sinner, you believe that, left to himself, a child will destroy himself.

Someone says, 'It's insulting to compare raising children to training animals.' Well, then it is God who first came up with the insult, because it is in the Bible.

Proverbs 22:6 *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*

For good or for bad, we are to train, not simply moderate or facilitate our children.

Your parenting reflects your belief system. What you believe is always coming out in your parenting. What you believe about God, sin, hell, human nature and redemption.

Parents reveal their beliefs. They reveal how seriously they regard sin in their own lives. They reveal what they think of the holiness of God. They reveal whether or not they believe in future judgement.

Again, do you believe in hell? Do you believe that God punishes sin? How do you expect your children to learn it? You are the single-biggest authority figure in his or her life. What you do when they disobey your authority is the greatest lesson they have on what happens when they disobey God's authority. How you treat their sin is their greatest lesson on how God treats sin. If you excuse it, ignore it, indulge it, minimise it, they will, without even thinking about it, expect God to do the same. One day, you will try to tell them that God will punish sin and they must trust Christ to escape, and they will have no way of understanding what you are talking about. Why is God so mean? Why won't he give me more chances the way you do? Why is God so unkind? It can't be true. I don't believe that. God won't send people to hell. God is a loving God. God is like my mama was. He'll let us all off if we tried our best.

Here is the reason why so many people are permissive with their children: because they are permissive with their own sin. If you tend to give yourself excuses, you will do the same for your kids. If you are desirous to grow into the image of Christ and put to death the sins in your life, you will seek to drive it out of your children as well.

But if you don't mind sin in your own life, you won't mind it in theirs. If you don't fear disobeying God, you won't be disturbed by them disobeying God. If you don't notice sin in your own life, you won't notice it in theirs either.

III. Permissive parents are simply postponing the pain.

Eli made hundreds, if not thousands, of choices to not deal with sin in his children's lives. He thought that if he ignored it and showered them with attention, that somehow the good would drive out the bad. He didn't want to face the pain of dealing with their sin, making them cry, hurting them for God's sake. So he would put it off.

But in the end, who was it that finally disciplined them?

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. ¹¹ Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.*

In the end, it was God who disciplined them. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Eli could have prevented this, if he had embraced the pain of training his children.

Eli thought he was avoiding the pain, but he was just delaying it. The pain of sin cannot be avoided. To avoid disciplining your child, is to let them think they have got away with it and in the end, leave them to the judgement of God. 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?

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

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.

Do you know what you are doing to the precious little human when you correct them? You are preaching the Gospel to them. You are saying – sin hurts. And then as you take them in your arms, you kiss them - when they are older, you teach them to ask for forgiveness, you are teaching them about grace. They are learning about justice and mercy. God hates sin and will not let you off the hook. God loves you and forgives you if you repent. It is evangelism.

Now only a perverse heart enjoys inflicting pain. But it is God, not man, who instructs us that this is what is required to drive the foolishness out, to teach the child the consequences of rebellion, to shape their worldview to understand authority, submission, action – consequence. That's hard. Maybe it would be easier if the Lord allowed us to exchange children and spank other people's children. But He doesn't.

Someone says, 'This is cruel. This belongs to ancient people who didn't understand child psychology like we do.' Well, God doesn't write books that go out of date, since He is not limited by time. If He wrote it then and meant it, it stands today. Times have changed, but the human heart hasn't.

Some people say, 'Well, spanking just wouldn't work on my child. My child is too gentle. Or my child is hyperactive. Or my child is too stubborn.' God says, 'Use the rod.' With some you will need it more, with some less. God says, 'Use the rod.'

Someone says, 'Well, we tried it for a week, and it didn't work.' God says, 'Regardless of the apparent results, trust Me and use the rod.'

Someone says, 'Well, my child isn't old enough to spank, maybe in about three or four years.' If they are old enough to understand your will, and refuse to do it, they are old enough for the rod.

It is your job, father, to work hard at instructing, supervising, and then encouraging and praising what is good, and correcting what is bad. **Ephesians 6:4.**

I want to say this loud and clear – parenting is harder than providing. It may be difficult to earn money and provide shelter, food, clothing, transport, education and other needs. But compared to parenting, providing is pretty simple. That's why so many fathers choose to spend all their time on it, and ignore the parenting. Parenting means being humbled. It means admitting your mistakes. It means setting an example. It means instructing. It means reminding of the instruction. It means repeating the reminder. It means supervising obedience. It means interrupting what you are doing to make sure they are obeying. It means rewarding and praising good behaviour, and good efforts. It means rebuking and correcting what is disobedient.

That's hard work. It doesn't stop. It goes on and on.

A lazy man procrastinates, but his procrastination usually catches up with him. He doesn't study, until the night before, he must cram a whole term's work into his head. He is now working far harder than he would have had he studied earlier. He didn't avoid the pain of studying, it all came crashing down on his head in one night. You can keep delaying the pain of dealing with sin in your child's heart, but you cannot avoid it. The longer you delay, the greater will be the crash when it catches up with you and with him or her.

The irony is this. Permissive parents often don't want the controversy of dealing with rebellion. They hate the idea of confronting sin, rebuking it, correcting it, letting there be tears. All they want is to enjoy their child. All they want is peace and quiet. Whatever the child wants to satisfy them is what they will give just so they can have peace again.

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.*

It is persistent, obedient parents that end up with rest. They embrace the short-term pain of correction, they enjoy the long-term rest of a heart submitted to God. The most miserable people around, are those haggard, ragged parents whose children cannot sit in a restaurant, stand in a queue, or go anywhere without tantrums and scream. And yet, those same parents will defend their philosophy of parenting as enlightened and sacrificial. Sadly, they don't enjoy their children. They only enjoy them when they indulge them. God promises something far better.

It is really very simple.

Firstly, you must submit entirely to the Word of God. You must come under its authority. You must say 'God will control my life. His Word will govern me.'

Secondly, you must pass that on to your children by instruction and by example.

Thirdly, you must insist that they obey you, as you teach them and instruct them.

Fourthly, you must praise them when they do, and correct them when they don't.

I often wonder how people are supposed to understand 'the fear of the Lord' today, when fathers are either absent, or indifferent, or permissive. Would you fear a God who let you do everything you

wanted? Would you fear a God who couldn't bother to be involved in your life? Would you fear a God who was never really there?

If we want a God-fearing generation to grow up, we need fathers who are submitted to the Word of God themselves. We need fathers who hate sin and will not tolerate it in themselves, or in their children. We need fathers who love God and pass that love on to their children. May God give us such fathers in the local church.