

*Eli's Worthless Sons*  
*I Samuel 2: 12-21*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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One of the things I have loved most about coming to work at First Pres two years ago has been getting to lead the St. James independent and assisted living facility's Wednesday morning Bible study service. Being together with these saints is precious to me because of the bond we have in Jesus. They love him and it flows from every fiber of their being. They have a lifetime of stories of how the Lord has been near and faithful to them through the highs and lows of life. Now all in later years, there is clearly a resolve in each one of them to be faithful till the end, and by God's grace, He has kept their hearts tender and full of faith. Last week we said goodbye to our beloved faithful attendee Jessie Gray, who recently celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. During her funeral service and continuing on in following reflections, again and again I was told stories of Miss Jessie joyfully serving the Lord, even up into her 90's as she dressed in Biblical attire to serve during our VBS outreach to children. Most every week during our prayer time Miss Louise asks us to pray for her grandchildren that are close to the Lord that God blesses them and for those that are far from the Lord that He would lead them to repent and turn to him. Miss Louise and her husband Ken were very successful in business and had the privilege of traveling the world and living overseas for a period of time. So when she regularly asks us to pray for the leadership of our country, I sense deep in my gut that her perspective and prayers are coming from a vast reservoir of decades watching what godly leadership can do to bless a country and how the lack thereof can decimate a country. Another faithful attendee, Miss Ellen, lost her husband of 60-some years last summer. Three weeks ago she told with fondness the story of her meeting the love of her life Mr. Dick Fox at the USO here in town during the beginning of WWII. With his handsome good looks, she was whisked away in an adventure eventually of settling down in Baton Rouge and raising a family. When I asked how she was doing emotionally now that she is coming up on the 1yr anniversary of his death, she said, though sad at times, that she is doing quite well and considers herself to be incredibly blessed. Then she

looked me in the eyes and said, “I’m going to see him soon you know.” The way she said it, was in no way a trite Christian euphemism. Wrapped in a sweet grandmotherly delivery, was a time-tested, battle-hardened, forged-steel fortitude that communicated this one of the truest things that she knew. Another faithful attendee is Mr. Pat. Though his dear wife is battling cancer, Mr. Pat shines in how other’s focused he is in our group. When I’m in pain, I often want to have my whole focus be on myself, not Mr. Pat. His well thought out personal words of encouragement are often delivered at just the right moment and with the power and wisdom of a man who has lead at an exceptionally high level in the work-force and in his personal life for decades.

When I leave that study on Wednesday mornings, I always walk away with a deep sense of gratitude for the blessing of my dear brothers and sisters in the Lord that are further down the road of life than me. The group that comes to that Bible study are the embodiment of what I want to be when I’m at their point in life. Faithful, thankful, tenderly dependent on the Spirit, others focused and doggedly committed to beseeching the Lord to bring His kingdom to bear on Earth as it is in heaven.

There is an innate desire in the deepest core of our being to finish strong in life. As famed apologist Ravi Zacharias stated during a seminary commencement ceremony, “At the end of my life I want to know: 1. Have I kept the faith. 2. Do I still have my integrity? 3. Do I still have the wife of my youth? 4. Do my kids know me? As much as we hope our personal answer to those questions is a resounding affirmative, we are aware of the rebellion in our hearts and the damaging effects our rebellion has sometimes had on those around us. 18<sup>th</sup> century hymnodist Robert Robinson wrote the words well in his class hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. He writes, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.”

The sting of our text today is how vulnerable we feel to the main characters. “Faithful” is not how Eli and his sons are displayed. Eli is portrayed as a man who a mixture of good and bad, yet because of his unfaithfulness comes to the end of

his life as one who is powerless, ineffective, and facing the harsh repercussions of his heart's wandering from the Lord. Oh by God's grace, may we learn from his bad example.

God had done much to be faithful to Eli, therefore there was much expected in terms of reciprocal-personal faithfulness back to the Lord. We read in verse 27 of the text that a prophet was sent to remind Eli these words, "Thus says the Lord - 'I revealed myself to the house of your father,' 'I choose him out of the all the tribes of Israel,' and 'I gave to the house of your father all my offerings.'" God is saying to Eli, You are special to me Eli - "I have had an intimate relationship with your family and thus with you, *for generations.*"

How far to go back tracing God's faithfulness to Eli???? Eli is serving as the high priest in Shiloh in the hill country of Ephraim. How did he get there and his father before him? Since the fall of man, God has sought to restore man's experience of God from guilt and hiding, to intimacy and joyful allegiance. He has done this through divine covenants. After the week of creation, God made a covenant of works with Adam that held out the blessing of life if he and Eve would obey the covenants terms (Gen 2:15-17). They failed and ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, thus ushering in sin and death. God however did not give up, he remained faithful and promised **an agent** who would keep the covenant of works. (Gen 3:15) Out of an overflow of gratefulness to the promised covenant keeper, you would think that mankind would be faithful to God. Instead, in three short chapters later in Genesis 6 we read that man had become increasingly corrupt and filled the earth with violence. Every intention of man's heart had become only evil continually. God was ready to "blot out" man from the face of the Earth. A modern reader might think this is quite extreme, but God's judgment was in proportion to man's sin.

Only one man, Noah, found favor with the Lord. Notice the description that we usually ascribe to Noah found in Genesis 6:9 - "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation" are not causal of Gen 6:8. Noah did not find favor because he was righteous. There is a paragraph/chapter division here. The phrase,

“but Noah found favor in God’s eyes!” is the basis for his lifestyle. God is showing the richness of his love by choosing Noah to give favor.

God used this one man as conduit to rescue his family. Via a seagoing vessel of refuge, mankind was spared God’s ultimate wrath. After landing the Ark on dry ground, a blood sacrifice was demanded to ratify the covenant of protection that was granted to Noah that was signified by a rainbow. (Gen 8:20-21)

Unfortunately, three chapters later man is rebelling again by making a tower so that their name might be great instead of God’s. Thankfully, God steps in by choosing another man, Abram, to be special in his sight and create a whole nation of God worshippers responding in an overflow of grateful covenant keeping. God said to Abram, “I will make of you a great nation”, “I will bless you”, so that “you will be a blessing”. (Gen 12:2-3) This nation grew, but instead of being faithful, we read in Judges 17:6, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Because of Israel’s repeated unfaithfulness, God raised up prophets and priests to speak on God’s behalf and make sacrifices to atone for sin.

When we read in I Samuel 2 that God has **revealed** himself to Eli’s father’s house, **chosen** his lineage out of all the tribes of Israel to be His priest, and **gave** to the house of Eli’s father the offerings to make sacrifice, we can begin to feel the magnitude of how faithful God has been to Eli. God’s faithfulness began all the way back in Genesis. Therefore, we can also begin to understand the weight of God’s demand of faithfulness in response. Eli, you have been protected by God as one of the family of Noah. Eli, you are chosen by God to be His special people as a child of Abraham. Eli, you have been given great responsibility as the mouthpiece and intermediary of God as his chosen priest. This makes the shrill of God’s rebuke so painstakingly heart stopping, “Why then do you **SCORN** my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling?”

Eli is described as very old, yet his failure is not simply a poor job performance at work because he’s tired or made a mistake. When I was 13, I once got fired from a grass cutting job because I didn’t see a lady’s garden hose and shredded it with my push mower. That was an innocent mistake. Eli’s failure is one of unfaithfulness; we immediately read, “you honor your sons above me.” Eli allowed the blessing of his sons to become idols and usurp God as his heart’s

number one allegiance. Even though God was faithful, Eli did not reciprocate personal faithfulness. To quote the great theologians of Spiderman comics, “With great power, comes great responsibility.” Eli is told his strength is going to be cut off, the descendants of his house shall die by the sword of men, and if anyone is left in his house, though prosperity will be bestowed on Israel, his descendants will beg for a morsel of bread or a piece of silver. This might seem harsh and it might seem totally natural to wrestle with making the people we love our heart’s affection more than God, but God’s judgment was going to be in proportion to Eli’s sin. God had been infinitely faithful to Eli and therefore demanded personal faithfulness in response.

As I have been reading this text, my heart has wrestled. “Lord, I feel it. I know that I’m prone to wander.” I love my kids. Just this past month Barat and I have been confronted with how do we handle our culture’s demand for allegiance to kids sports. In March and April, our 9 year old son played in a baseball league that strikes a good balance with wanting to honor our desire for quality family time for all of our kids and value our family’s need to rest. In June, he was asked to join a league that had a much more demanding schedule. To be honest, we have wrestled with mutual desires to give him a great baseball experience, not force all 5 of our kids to privilege one kid over another, and honor God’s command to have a Sabbath rest. At times, they can become competing desires. Lord give me grace to keep you as my hearts number one allegiance and may that flow to practical and sometimes hard decisions in life.

To my young ambitious friends in your 20’s and 30’s. I see you trying to balance building a career, entertaining/or actually enrolling in grad school, and cherishing the fellowship of relationships such as a family and friends. I feel you. I have a full-time job, I have a wife, kids, friends, whom my heart adores....and at what time feels a bit late to the game, in my 40’s I’m going to graduate school. Month after month, I’ve been going to class and writing papers for 5 and 1/2 years attending seminary at RTS. Sometimes I prone to fear, Lord can I keep all of this in balance? I don’t want to lose you Lord as the love of my life in the process. I want to heed Eli’s example and realize that God has been incredibly faithful to me, I desperately want to give him my personal response of allegiance. Do you? Take inventory today.

If you're listening today and have had your heart shaken because you fear your heart is already cold to the Lord and that you are scorning the faithfulness that He has bestowed on you. Take encouragement, if your heart is pricked, it is a good indication that He has not sent you a prophet to declare his judgment upon your house. Take today to repent of putting of things or people in the place of your heart's number one allegiance.

Our text doesn't allow us to trace precisely how intimately the rebellion of Eli's sons is related to Eli's honoring them above the Lord, but it goes to great length to show how expansive the pattern of a father can be magnified in his children.

We first saw that because of God's faithfulness, a personal response of faithfulness and allegiance is demanded. Now we are going to see that because of God's faithfulness, faithful leadership is demanded.

In Old Testament times priests were considered consecrated (Lev. 21:6; 1 Sam. 7:1), making them set apart for the work they did in the tabernacle. In the temple, God's special presence was manifested and only the priests were to present a slain animal on the altar. Along with special responsibility, Old Testament priests were set apart from the rest of the community by special regulations, They were not to drink 'fermented drink' when on duty, attend funerals only of close relatives (Num. 21:1-6), and were to be materially supported not by the king, but directly or indirectly by the worshippers. Priests were entitled to the firstfruits of grain, wine, oil, and wool (Deut. 18:4). There were also at least entitled a part of each animal sacrifice (except for the whole burnt offering), once its fat had been offered to God by being burnt on the altar (Lev. 7:28-36; Deut. 18:1-5).

Like Eli, his sons Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the people of Israel. They had been raised being taught the stories of God's faithfulness. The rainbow over the ark, the ram caught in the thickets for Abraham, how God had delivered His people from bondage in Egypt giving them the promised land. All of these things they shunned and instead chose to take advantage of. The text has the crushing statements...They treated the offering of the Lord with contempt by forcefully stealing unsanctioned meat, corporately disgraced the nation by their

indecenty at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and insulted their father by flatly refusing to listen to his warning.

The weak, limp, powerless voice of their father was unheeded because verse 12 says, “They did not know the Lord.”

There is a danger in being so accustomed to the things of God that one fails to take into account God’s patient endurance with man’s sin and instead chooses to disregard His holiness. The blasphemous scandal of the priests of Ephraim’s actions was truly horrific.

For those in the audience who are simply visiting church today out of curiosity or kindness to a loved one, you might be thinking.....see, some things never change. The 21<sup>st</sup> century church continues to be plagued by scandal and hypocrisy of those in leadership. If God is real, how can He create a church that is in some respects no different than the CEO’s on wall street or Hollywood who abuse their power? My friend, your doubts and questions are a very poignant and important for our times. Because God is faithful, faithful leadership is to be expected. Eli’s sons were not faithful, but note the fact that the Scripture does not passively neglect dealing with their sin. Scripture denounces them as worthless. God also declares that their sin was not out of His sight. He does not allow their sin to go unpunished, but instead He sets the course for their very lives to be demanded. What one sows, they will reap. There will come a harvest time for those who sow rebellion. Seek to not place yourself as the judge over how and with what timeframe you think justice should be carried out. God will not be mocked and only He is the righteous judge.

My second application to this horrible topic is for those who call this church your home and family. Please seek to not be quick to pass judgement when we hear of pastors or priest in our town (or who have national influence) when we hear of failure. These men and women often need our compassion much more than they need us to be judge over them.

As one who is hired as a pastor, but is still seeking ordination in our denomination of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, can I just tell you for a moment the sense of intense weightiness, honor, and honestly solemn fear I feel in desiring to be your ordained pastor? One year ago I entered into what our

denomination formally calls “coming under care” of the presbytery. This is a journey where I and the leadership of our church and Presbytery earnestly seek the Lord trying to discern if He has actually called me to formal vocational ministry of serving in the local church. If God makes it clear to the leadership and myself, what this process is confirming is that God Almighty Himself, maker of heaven and Earth, the sovereign story writer of Israel and the church has sovereignly and specifically ordained and called me to be his mouthpiece and means of reconciliation to His people. Way more than the scariness of forgetting some points in my sermon or stuttering on the delivery of a key point in a message, I daily feel the magnitude of the awesomeness of being His ambassador. What is scary is when I am tempted to feel like the success or faithfulness of my ministry is solely on me. I am well aware that I can be tempted to replicate Eli or worthless sons tendencies.

Praise God that I am not on this journey of seeking spiritual leadership on my own. God has given His Spirit to empower me to live the life He intends. My role is simply to yield and abide to His power at work in me. The other good news is that neither are you on your own. God’s call on your life might not be to be employed on the pastoral staff of our church, but He has ordained that you are to be spiritual leaders to those He has entrusted in your care. Are you a grandparent? He has entrusted you to be faithful to Him in spiritually being a priest for your family. Are you a teenager in our church? Do you know that elementary school aged children look up to you as spiritual role models? Every time you volunteer in VBS or simply make conversation in the basement on a Sunday, He is calling you to be His spiritual voice of love and shepherding. If any of you were here three weeks ago or plan on attending church on June 30<sup>th</sup>, we took vows as church members to take spiritual responsibility in nurturing the children we baptize. When the vow was asked, I said that “I will”. Did you? What an awesome responsibility!!!!

This passage is remarkably weighty, therefore may the sweet breath of God breath life into you on our final point. God is faithful and therefore demands faithful allegiance and leadership, but He also faithfully provides the means to do so. In the dark shadowy description of Eli’s worthless sons, there emerges a



piercing beam of light. Just as the sin of Eli's son's rebellion was in His sight before Him, God also tells of another in verse 18 who was ministering before Him. Samuel, a boy clothed in a linen ephod, was ministering before the Lord. Drop down to verse 21 where we read, "And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord" and in verse 26 where it is repeated just in case we missed it, "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow in both stature and in favor with the Lord and also with men." Out of the hamstrung leadership of Eli, out of the deplorable example of Eli's sons, God is causing to grow to maturity one who will be a faithful priest to the Lord Almighty. From a womb that never had produced, God miraculously conceived a baby that would be dedicated to the Lord's service from his begetting. Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 2:52. "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." We will look at the miraculous life of Samuel next week, but take solace in what the text in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel chapter 2 does not want us to miss. God sent One "who grew in both stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man."

Jesus, the incarnate God in flesh grew as any normal boy would do. In the obscurity of a remote backwater Israelite town on the border of the region, grew a boy who would grow as any boy would do, but was also set apart from anyone in history. The boy Jesus was one in very nature with God. One in nature, yet was two in personhood. Jesus was 100% fully man, but was also 100% fully God. He is the one that Hebrews 2:17 says, "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and **faithful high priest** in service to God."

Jesus is the one who knows you're tired and sees you wondering if you can be faithful to him for the totality of your lifetime. Jesus is the one who saw your grotesque sin that you committed last night, again. Jesus is the one that heard you when you took a vow to him to faithfully serve His church and spiritually nurture his baptized children. God has dedicated His Son to be the atonement for our sin and our faithful high priest.

Whether you are a skeptic in the audience today, one seeking pastoral ordination for ministry, or trying to be faithful to those around you, do not look to

yourself for the power to live this life. God is faithful and has wonderfully provided the means to do so. Don't seek to be faithful on your own. Yoke yourself to Christ by faith in his finished work on the cross.

As we close, Steve is going to sing a song for our time of reflection before God. Two weeks ago he asked if this song would go well with what I intended to preach today. I took the time to watch the song on YouTube, but then I couldn't help but to read the comments that were written below. Though I am sometimes skeptical of people writing cliché Christian euphemisms in web posts like that one, the Lord told me I need to read some of them to you.

Quotes from YouTube entries while listening to *Redeemed*:

I WAS a drug addict for 35 years and spent 11 in prison until I started reading my bible and Praying !!! Jesus Lives Folks!!!

This song is my anthem, released from prison after serving 17 years in prison serving 2 life sentence in California.. JESUS my REDEEMER!

Drugs ruined my family. Now god is taking my family one by one to church. God answers before you call. Amen

104, days sober 😊 god delivered me of drugs and alcohol.. and will always follow Christ I am so blessed!!!

I need prayer for my Daughter, she's on drugs. She's getting help, but She still does not talk to me.

I got saved September 17th 2017, gave my life to the lord and November 1st will be a year clean off all drugs

I love all the testimonies. Please pray for me. I want to be redeemed. I'm tired of being an alcoholic.

I am a 9 year old and I went to this youth challenge that Chris Hewett was preaching at and he said a lot that helped me and the next day when I went to church in childrens church I let god open the door to my heart and it was Father's

day and my dad said he couldn't have any better gift that could ever top me being saved and I just poured into tears.