

THE AMERICAN
NATIONAL PREACHER.

No. 6. Vol. 8.] NEW-YORK, NOV. 1833. [Whole No. 90.

SERMON CLV.

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THE GUILT AND MISERY ATTENDANT ON PARENTAL INDULGENCE.

1 SAMUEL iii. 13—*For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.*

THIS fearful denunciation against Eli, the high-priest of Israel, was uttered by the Lord, in his first communication to the youthful prophet Samuel. The character of Eli, as it is briefly sketched in the sacred records, appears to have possessed uncommon excellence. His piety in the sacerdotal office, his ability and integrity as a ruler, and his benevolence and usefulness in every station he occupied, seem to have been worthy of all praise. In many respects also he was a highly favored man. Enjoying the confidence and affection of his whole nation, presiding with distinguished honor over its civil and ecclesiastical affairs, he was finishing a life of active virtue in the calm repose of an honored old age. In these points of view he might well be esteemed the happiest of men, and his life one of singular felicity. But after all, good old Eli did not form an exception to the ordinary destiny. His cup too was dashed with bitterness: his heart was agonized with affliction: amid all the affluence of his comforts and blessings, he too found life a vale of tears: and after his brilliant success—after having reached an age full of honor—his gray hairs were at last brought down with sorrow to the grave. The bane of his enjoyment was in his own family. His peace was poisoned at its fountain. His declining years were rendered wretched, by that most deplorable calamity—the undutiful and wicked conduct of his children. This was the

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direful cause that his joys were all blasted, and his heart desolate. What availed wealth, and reputation, and public honors, while the obstinate impiety and profligacy of his sons wrung his soul with anguish? He was doubtless a very tender, affectionate parent. It had been the labor of his life to secure the happiness and welfare of his offspring. With rapture he had watched their unfolding powers—with all a father's partiality he hailed the youthful promise of future excellence. He hoped to enjoy a renewed youth in *their* felicity. All the pictures his fancy drew of a happy old age, were brightened by visions of the joys of his children.

But who can describe the deep anguish he endured, when all these sunny skies, these cheering prospects, were shrouded in gloom by one dark cloud—when these idols of his fondest hope became the authors of severest grief—and when, by their criminal dereliction of every sacred duty, their sacrilegious impiety towards God, and their cruel ingratitude towards himself, his beloved sons pierced his aged bosom with many sorrows?

The course pursued by these young men, though marked by atrocious criminality, was by no means uncommon. Born and educated in the midst of affluence and temptations, dazzled by the prospect of high station and every worldly gratification, it is not wonderful that these youths imbibed false notions, and became thoroughly corrupted in their habits and principles. Human nature was essentially the same three thousand years ago as at the present time. And the fact, that the sons of the chief ruler of Israel became profane and profligate, is to be ascribed to the same moral causes which so commonly render the sons of rich and distinguished families the victims of pride and passion—the miserable votaries of “foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.”

It might indeed have been expected, that, as these sons of Eli enjoyed the privilege of the best religious instruction, were early habituated to the form and observance of divine worship, and were actually called to officiate in the sanctuary, they would be at least restrained from open wickedness, and preserve the appearance of piety and devotion. But such an expectation is not warranted by the essential principles of human depravity. On the contrary, it is well known, that the most extraordinary religious advantages are often so abused as to become the cause of the most dreadful obduracy. Hence it has been remarked, that some of the vilest men that ever cursed the world have been trained up in the strictest forms of pious instruction. This is far from proving that a religious education is not a most precious blessing. It only proves that the blessed tendency of pious instruction may be fatally resisted by an hostile influence, and that it *may* thus become a savor of death unto death. And it is important to remark here, that where the children of godly parents break through the restraints of early principles, and become, as they sometimes do, pre-eminent in wickedness—there is always discoverable a sufficient cause for such

lamentable apostacy. A close scrutiny will always detect "the dead flies which spoil the ointment." Therewill in every case be found some cardinal error, some grievous deficiency, or some pernicious influence, which is amply sufficient to account for the melancholy result. So that children are never ruined by extraordinary religious advantages—but sometimes they *are* ruined by other causes in spite of such advantages. Such was the history of Eli's sons. Their father's piety, and prayers, and exhortations did not *make* them wicked—but they became so by the force of their own depravity, and the violence of their unrestrained passions, *notwithstanding* all that was done for their preservation.

Who can fail to sympathize with this good old man? His dearest hopes are crushed. His sons, whom he had trained up so carefully, whom he had brought forward in life with such high expectations—to whom he had fondly looked as the props of his age, and as the pillars of the church after his departure—his beloved sons, have become his grief, his reproach, and the guilty authors of impending judgments.

But Eli has a still stronger claim to your sympathy; as the source of his keenest anguish has not yet been mentioned. This was the heart-breaking consciousness, that of all this guilt and misery he himself was the criminal cause; that his failure in duty had been instrumental in the utter ruin of the dearest objects of his affection. This reflection filled the measure of his wo. When the terrible judgments were denounced against his household, when he was told that he should see both his sons cut off by a miserable death, his bosom was doubtless bursting with anguish. But when he was plainly told that his own sin had caused all this accumulated wretchedness, ah! then he felt the direst pang a pious parent's heart can ever know—the agonizing conviction, that a criminal unfaithfulness on his part had brought upon his beloved sons ruin temporal and eternal.

That Eli was deeply and inexcusably criminal in his parental conduct, and that the direct result of his management of his children was their ruin; we have the fullest assurance in the words of our text.—"I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not." Here we have a threatening of severe judgment upon Eli as a punishment for his indulgence in relation to his sons. This unquestionably proves great criminality; for in the divine government there can be no punishment where there is no sin; therefore, where a terrible infliction is menaced, the guilt must be of an aggravated character. But not only the question of criminality is settled in the text, but there is a direct specification of the particulars in Eli's conduct, which were so reprehensible and so disastrous. Listen to the accusation brought by the Lord himself against this unhappy erring father. He knew the misconduct of his sons, *and he did not restrain them*. Here was the head and front of his offending—this was the root of bitterness which produced such a harvest of guilt and wo. This father could not plead ignorance of his sons' delinquencies, nor of their evil propensities and wicked incli-

nations—of all this he had positive and painful knowledge from their earliest years.

No parent can honestly plead, as an excuse for unfaithfulness towards his children, that he did not know they were wickedly disposed, or that he was not aware of their depraved tendencies and proneness to evil; for every parent, unless he be stone blind, must see such proofs of his children's natural perversity as to afford perpetual demonstration.

Here, then, was the deadly sin of the Jewish high-priest—when his sons were viciously inclined—when he was fully aware of their propensities to evil—he *did not restrain them*: he did not guard them by a vigilant discipline: he did not exert his parental authority to control them, but madly gave them liberty of self-destruction. Appointed to watch over their spiritual safety, he permitted them to rush into the midst of temptation. Entrusted with the guardianship of the life of their souls, he suffered them to wander among beasts of prey. We have a shuddering horror at the thought of the man who exposes his little child in the forest among serpents and tigers, or of him who places a dagger within reach of a person inclined to suicide. But the conduct of the parent who does not restrain his children from evil, is more merciless and destructive.

This treatment of Eli towards his sons proceeded doubtless from excessive fondness and affection—but its effects were ruinous beyond those of the deadliest hatred. Here then we arrive at that fatal misconduct in Eli, which brought perdition upon his sons, and the most tremendous judgments upon his whole family—it was a weak and criminal *parental indulgence*. He knew the wickedness of his sons and he restrained them not. Probably the foundation of all this superstructure of guilt and woe was laid when his sons were children. Then they were the joy of his heart; and he could not be persuaded, that any very depraved propensities, any germs of malignant passions, lurked beneath an appearance so playful and lovely. Hence he weakly indulged all their wayward fancies, gratified their foolish inclinations, overlooked their faults and follies, and absurdly attempted to allure them from vice, and dissuade them from wickedness, by entreaties and flattery. At all their early transgressions he only smiled, and even the first exhibitions of pride, anger, ambition, self-will, stubbornness, and impiety, seemed nothing more in his eyes than the harmless freaks of childhood. He was one of those unwise parents, who think that coercion and correction are wholly unnecessary, and who therefore try the experiment of suffering human nature to take its course, unchecked and uncontrolled.

Thus the sons of Eli grew up in the hot-bed of indulgence, where all their perverse dispositions, all their sinful feelings, all their vicious habits, and all their headstrong passions, acquired an early maturity and an invincible strength. During their boyhood, the pious father kept hoping and hoping for a favorable change—still expecting that the good instructions they had received, and the religious advantages they had enjoyed, would at length exert

a salutary influence; and dreaming that all his ardent hopes would yet be realized. At length however he was roused to the dreadful discovery that these darling children had become hardened, licentious, unprincipled youth, entirely reckless and ungovernable in all their opinions and habits. This distressing disclosure doubtless filled him with unutterable grief and amazement. And yet there was nothing surprising about it; just what he might have expected—the natural result of the course he had adopted—the inevitable fruit of his parental treatment. No one would wonder if a field left to itself should produce thorns, or that a colt untamed and untutored should grow up a wild and worthless animal. Still more inevitable is the result, if a child that is “born as the wild ass’ colt,” and is permitted to follow his own inclinations, will become a stubborn, bold, bad man.

How keen must have been the agony of Eli’s heart, when, at last, too late, he discovered his fatal error—when the truth burst upon him, that the beautiful, playful animals he had been caressing, had become ferocious tigers—that his little sons, whom he had believed so innocent, so untainted and so attractive, were transformed into haughty, unfeeling, licentious, sacrilegious men—utterly beyond all human control—who scorned their father and defied their God! How did he mourn with unavailing grief, that the harvest was past, the summer ended—that his parental influence was lost, irretrievably lost; and that the precious season of controlling their perversity and moulding their characters, was gone by for ever! Alas! poor old man, what consolation can be thine—what can assuage such hopeless sorrows—what balm can heal such wounds! Ah! lay thee down and weep, for thou hast plucked all this ruin upon thine own head—these arrows that pierce thy very soul were sharpened by thyself, and this bitter cup of grief which thou must drink even to the dregs, has been mingled by thine own hand!

But we are not called to weep for Eli alone. How many parents’ hearts in this community are crushed by the same load of anguish—how many families are, like the prophet’s roll, filled with lamentation, mourning, and wo, from the same heart-rending cause!

While we thus deeply sympathize in Eli’s grief, and cherish the tenderest compassion for his cureless sorrows—let us not forget that he deserved all his sufferings: they were the natural necessary results of his guilty unfaithfulness—his inexcusable neglect of incumbent duty. His conduct was grossly criminal. Because, first, it was absolute disobedience to the positive command of God. The great charge given to parents is, to discipline and restrain their offspring in early life, while the heart may be moulded and while the evil propensities may be overcome. And he who neglects this duty rebels against God, and murders the immortal spirit committed to his care. Because, second, his neglect of duty towards his sons was a breach of the most sacred obligations. Eli possessed the books of Moses, and therefore knew that his children had a corrupt nature and many evil propensities, which must be overcome, or they would certainly be ruined. He knew that it was his office to chasten and subdue them—that their welfare and

happiness, temporal and eternal, depended upon their being early subjected to this salutary control—and that if he failed in this duty, there was none else to perform it, and that the consequence must be most disastrous and lamentable.

It appears further, that the negligence of Eli was criminal; because, thirdly, it was most unjust and cruel towards his sons themselves. His knowledge and experience must have convinced him that the unrestrained passions of youth tend directly to misery and ruin; he must have known that indulgence is the greatest curse that can be inflicted upon children; and yet, to save a momentary pang, to indulge a weak and senseless fondness, or to gratify the present foolish inclinations of his children, he wickedly withheld from them the restraint and discipline so necessary for their good, and left them in fatal liberty to ruin themselves for ever. Can there be more barbarous cruelty than this? Does not such a parent act the part of a relentless demon, rather than a guardian angel?

Finally, the atrocious wickedness of Eli's conduct appears from the consideration that it was rebellion against the divine government, and a fatal perversion of the provisions of divine mercy. Children come into the world feeble and helpless, and the duty devolves upon parents to support and nourish them. If this duty is neglected, they will certainly perish. In like manner, children come into the world under the influence of moral diseases, which must be healed, or they will kill the soul. Certain remedies are provided to check the first symptoms of these maladies as they begin to be developed in childhood. Among these are restraint and correction. And the parent is clothed with absolute authority in order to their administration. The use of the rod, the infliction of personal chastisement, where stubbornness and disobedience require it, are as much ordained of God, and as solemnly incumbent upon parents, as a regular supply of food. All this was known to Eli. Yet he restrained not his sons; he withheld from them the discipline which was indispensable to their safety and happiness, and thus became instrumental in their ruin. What can be more criminal than such a course? If a parent saw his little child going into the fire, or approaching a fatal precipice, or just about to step upon a deadly serpent, and did not instantly and forcibly snatch him from the danger, he would be called a monster. But his conduct is mercy in comparison to that of the father who sees his little son running into sinful courses, acquiring pernicious habits, and exhibiting depraved tempers, and fails to employ the appointed means to restrain and preserve him.

We hasten to conclude our remarks upon this painful history, by glancing at the consequences of this deplorable instance of parental unfaithfulness. Probably there is no class of transgressions so inevitably followed by severe retribution in the present life, so uniformly productive of a direful harvest of keenest woe, as those committed by parents towards their children. Negligence and folly here are

like the frosts of spring withering and blasting all the treasures of the year.

As all the temporal enjoyments parents can expect in declining years must depend upon the conduct and dispositions of their children; wherever an erroneous or defective course of early discipline has resulted in the formation of characters perverse, violent, unprincipled and immoral, how surely is the whole fabric of domestic bliss shaken to ruins—all the lights of life's evening quenched in darkness, and the heart of parental love, like some deserted mansion, cheerless and desolate, while the mournful forms of departed joys wander about mantled in grief. Oh! is there one bright hope to assuage such anguish, to cheer such a parent's path-way to the tomb? There is one and only one—the hope of heaven—the hope of calm repose at last, where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary are at rest.

Nor does this terrible severity of retribution fall upon guilty parents alone; it descends also upon their wicked, ruined children in tenfold vengeance. Such parents may be truly pious, and if so, they have a support which lightens the burden of their wo. But indulged children almost never become subjects of grace, and therefore they stand naked and unsheltered, to bear the pelting of the pitiless storm—to receive the stings and arrows of remorse and calamity to which they are exposed by their own criminality. For, let it be distinctly borne in mind, that while parental indulgence is a crying sin, and usually instrumental in the ruin of children, such children are by no means excusable, but are justly chargeable with the guilt of self-destruction. The parental delinquency does not diminish a jot the atrocity of juvenile wickedness. While the parent destroys his son by not controlling and restraining him, the son destroys himself by a wilful and determined course of wickedness and folly. The parent's guilt is that of the accessory before the fact, who might have prevented the commission of murder, but failed to do so: the guilt of the spoiled boy is that of the principal, who perpetrated the murderous deed with his own hand.

In exact accordance with these principles were the calamities which befell the family of the high-priest of Israel. Look at the disconsolate father, standing in mute despair amid the ruins of all his domestic hopes and enjoyments. Led astray by a false tenderness, he has permitted his sons to plunge into ruin, and to become the authors of severest sufferings—he is compelled to be an agonized witness of their guilty career, while they are bringing upon themselves swift destruction. His heart is torn with self-reproach, his family is ruined, he feels upon him the hand of divine displeasure, and the cup of his wo is filled by the annunciation, that exterminating judgments were impending, and that his sons would both fall under the stroke of avenging justice. What heart can conceive, what language describe the mental torture of that good old man? A torture which admitted of no relief, until the dreadful message came that his sons were slain, and the ark of God

taken—when his aged heart was broken at last—he sunk in death, and the days of his mourning were ended.

Turn your thoughts now to those guilty, ruined young men. Recollect what they might have been—what prospects once opened before them—what advantages they enjoyed, and what an affluence of temporal and spiritual blessings courted their acceptance; and now reflect what they are? miserable victims of pride and unbridled passions—the object of public abhorrence, the grief and reproach of their father, the wicked destroyers of their whole family, abandoned of God, and hopelessly consigned to utter destruction. How unutterably dreadful was their condition even in this world. But a heavier vengeance awaited them; they were smitten down in their youth by a violent death, and hurried unforgiven, unprepared, to the tremendous bar of an offended God!

In reviewing this mournful history, who of us can be unaffected by the impressive lessons it affords, and the appalling picture it presents, of the guilt and misery attendant upon parental indulgence and mismanagement? Is it possible to conceive a scene of more aggravated wretchedness, than the one we have been contemplating? And at the same time, who can fail to perceive that all this accumulated woe is the just and necessary consequence of the voluntary misconduct of those more immediately concerned?

REMARKS.

1. Applying the statements and conclusions of this discourse to the present time, and to the actual circumstances of the community; we cannot but be struck with the direful effects of parental indulgence within our own personal observation.

2. This subject presents most important and salutary counsel and warnings to those parents whose offspring are yet in the tender years of childhood.

3. This subject should be regarded with deep and solemn interest by the young—especially by the children of pious parents.

4. The history and example of Eli's sons furnish awful admonitions to all the self-confident and profligate, who have cast off the restraints of a pious education, and who now seem either walking in the counsel of the ungodly, or standing in the way of sinners, or sitting in the seat of the scornful—really appearing neither to fear God nor regard man. I know there are such, who listen to admonitions from the pulpit with the same sneering contempt with which they regard parental entreaties. But let them take heed—God will take them in hand.