

The Gospel of Good Intentions

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[0 : 00] It's good to be back with you all at St. Mark's. I hope you're all doing well. All right, well, as mentioned by Dylan a little bit earlier on, the subject for today, the title is simply the Gospel of Good Intentions.

And the focus is on leadership, parenting, and leaders in the church. By the way, just indicate with your hands, how many parents do we have here? All right, so we've got quite a few parents.

How many of us are involved in one way or the other in church leadership? Council, Sunday school, we've got a few great, great stuff. All right. Okay, let me start by just commenting on the importance of the relationship between the parent and the child in the Old Testament.

I'm going to give you a couple of references for you to ponder on. Number one, Exodus chapter 20, verse 12. Perhaps that really sets the scene for much of the rest of the Old Testament. Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

And then you've got quite a few references throughout the Pentateuch, particularly Deuteronomy and Exodus, that look like this. Exodus 13, from verse 14 to verse 15.

[1 : 15] When in time to come your son asks you, what does this mean? You shall say to him, by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt from the house of slavery.

For when Pharaohs suddenly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. That, by the way, is the gospel in the Old Testament setting, the story of the Exodus.

Then there is that rather distressing reference, I won't read it out now, where a son who persistently refuses to listen to his father is to be taken out in stone to death.

So what do these references tell us about the relationship and the importance of the relationship between the parent and the child?

Well, the relationship between parent and child is critical because the parent is the child's primary elder.

[2 : 23] And what I mean by that is that he is the principal source through which the child, in God's grace, gets saved.

He is the source of the gospel. When the child, through natural curiosity, asks him about God, the parent has to answer and share the gospel.

This is why that particular commandment regarding punishing the recalcitrant son is so important and why it is so harsh.

To cut yourself off from your parent in a Christian home in the Old Testament era and in the New Testament era is to cut oneself off from the gospel.

Certainly, potentially the case. And that is the background to our passage today. The importance of the relationship between the parent and the child.

[3 : 21] There are some younger folk in the church here today and you need to pay attention to what is being said here as well. Now, when you come to 1 Samuel, we are fairly far into the Old Testament.

In the book of Exodus, we discover that Israel is in slavery. She is rescued from slavery. She spends, in the book of Numbers, 40 years in the desert.

Then, finally, she comes to the promised land. Before she goes in, Moses preaches a long sermon to them in the book of Deuteronomy, reminding them of the law and the potential pitfalls that will lie before them as they enter into the land.

If they do not remember the Lord. Then, they go over the Jordan River in the book of Joshua into the promised land. Things seem to look good. But, unfortunately, by the time you come to the book of Judges, we realize that although they are in the land, they are not turning out to be the obedient people that we would have hoped they would have been.

Then, we come to 1 Samuel. And the question is, how is God going to deal with the two main crises that are facing Israel at this particular point?

[4 : 42] The first crisis is an external problem, the Philistines. How is God going to help Israel to evict the Philistines from the land? The second crisis is leadership, and that's what interests us this morning.

There's no real leadership in Israel at the end of the book of Judges. That's why there's an element of lawlessness in the land. In 1 Samuel, you've got two generations of leadership.

The first older generation is the corrupt generation. Saul as king, and Eli and his sons as priests and prophets. The older generation has to be replaced, and the replacement will ultimately be Samuel as prophet, David as king.

But what interests us this morning is not the new generation, but the older generation. Not so much Saul, but Eli and his sons. That is where we're going to put our focus today.

Eli is both a prophet and a priest. He's based at a place called Shiloh, where the mobile church, or the mobile building, the mobile tabernacle, is based.

[5 : 53] Of course, we know that church really means gathering, but for our purposes, the Israelites would come to the tabernacle in order to sacrifice and to worship. He's the father of two sons.

But he's like us in the sense that he is a complicated man. He's complicated because at heart, like many of us, he's a good guy. He's a good man.

And when we read about God's judgment upon his house, we are rather saddened to read about that. Eli, as we're going to discover, is a man who meant well, but ultimately was a failure.

Well, let's put it slightly differently. Eli was good, but he was weak. And so, as moms and dads and as Christian leaders, as we learn from the story, we come to see that successful parenting, well, meaning well, isn't going to be enough.

Eli is introduced with his two evil sons, as read out a little bit earlier on, in 1 Samuel 2 from verse 12. But we actually learn about Eli, first of all, in 1 Samuel 1 verse 3, where we discover that at Shiloh, he is engaging in his ministry with his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

[7 : 16] Now, Eli's weakness was his sons. I mean, really, that's the bottom line. He feared his sons more than God. He was good, but he was weak.

He was a man who meant well, but his sons, well, they were just plain bad. Read that in chapter 2 and verse 12.

Eli's sons were wicked or worthless men. They had no regard for the Lord. In the original, we are told that they are the sons of Baal, the sons of Belial.

They are the sons, essentially, of Satan. They are the sons of darkness. And no regard for the Lord could be regarded as not knowing God, not having the slightest idea of who Christ is, who God is, and what God's values look like.

They are utterly ignorant of who God is, and they're in this key position. Now, even today, good Christian parents, men and women of faith, can be led astray, let's face it, by their children, because they're unwilling to discipline them.

[8 : 34] And as we think about on those occasions when, as parents and leaders, we have to take a stand, we can't deny the fact that that is becoming increasingly difficult in our promiscuous age.

The world is changing under our feet, is it not, as we are here today. That increasingly, our society, our younger people, reject discipline and authority.

And in so many ways, this is seen in the lives of our children. But let's see how evil these two sons really were from verse 13 to verse 17 of chapter 2.

Firstly, let's appreciate the role of the priest. The priest is critical for the survival of Israel, her relationship with God and worship.

The priest is critical.

[9 : 52] Now, at that time, the priest used to work on a so-called potluck method when it came to the sacrificial system. Somebody would come with an unblemished animal, like a goat, for example, and that goat would be presented to the priest on behalf of the worshiper, would bring the animal, and that animal would then be sacrificed to the Lord for sin.

The animal would be slaughtered. And then the choicest parts of the animal. The fat would then be burned as a sacrifice, an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

What was left over would be cooked in a pot. And partly to help support the priest and his family. The servant of the priest, when the leftovers were being cooked, the servant would be entitled to come along with a fork, put his fork in the pot, and what he managed to spear and pull out, that would be for the priest and his family.

That's the way it operated in those days. Now, these men, these two men, Hophni and Phineas, they were despicable characters.

It was like so many false pastors today. They were using innocent people and their money, their wealth. They were using the church, the systems in the church, to enrich themselves at the expense of the souls of others.

[11 : 19] They were despicable characters. They violated everything that the law stood for. They violated the Lord's sacrificial system. They were in the job simply to exploit other people.

They had no sense of worship. They had no sense of respect. They had no sense of awe for the Lord. They were nothing more than gangsters and thugs. They were essentially saying, together with their cronies, if you don't give us what we want, we're going to take you out.

We're going to take you and your family out. If you don't give me what I want, I'm going to take it by force. They wanted the whole sacrifice. They wanted the choicest parts of the sacrifice.

And the worshipper, no doubt terrified, would say, well, let's first of all sacrifice to the Lord first, if you don't mind. They say, no, we want everything. We want it now. And if you don't give it to us now, we're going to take it by force there, from verse 16 to verse 17.

So once again, they had no regard for the Lord, and yet incredibly they're serving as pastors. It happens, guys. That's why we need to be very concerned about who our pastor is.

[12 : 32] Who do we employ? We're very concerned about who serves on our council. The godly men and women on our council. Put Jesus first. Who's teaching our kids? Can we trust them?

Can we give our children over to teachers who love the Lord and who are reliable, who are godly? These are the kind of questions as congregation members that we need to be concerned about.

But let's return for a moment to Eli, the father figure, because he is our tragic individual in the account. Let's try to grasp what kind of a man he really was.

He's the senior pastor. Might even say he's the bishop. He's the senior priest. He's the bishop over all of Israel. He's based at Shiloh. And clearly, he's a man of principles.

This is where the tragedy really comes in. He's a godly man. He's introduced to the story in chapter 1 and verse 12 with the story of Hannah. Hannah, who's going to become the mother of Samuel, who's going to be very famous.

[13 : 37] In fact, ironically, Samuel's going to grow up and become a priest and replace Eli and his sons. But at this point in the story, Hannah's mother is barren.

She can't have children. She's very, very saddened by that. She comes up to the tabernacle to pray about it, to ask God to give her a son. And she's praying. And she's no doubt, she's so caught up in her prayers that she's rocking back and forward in prayer.

And Eli, the senior priest, comes over and says, what are you doing here? And sees her moving from one side to the other and says, you're drunk. Get out of here. And she says, no, my Lord, I'm not drunk. I'm deep in prayer.

I'm petitioning the Lord. I want to have a son. And Eli realizes he's made a mistake. And he's committed an error in judgment. He says, I'm sorry, my sister. Let's sit down together and let's pray to the Lord together that the Lord would give you a son.

Ironically, the Lord answers his own prayer. And Samuel is his replacement. But that's much later on in the story. But the point is that Eli is a good man. He's not a bad guy.

[14 : 39] 1 Samuel 1 verse 17. Then Eli answered and said, go in peace and may the Lord of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of him. So he is a man of principles. He's a man of compassion.

And in his defense, he tries to deal with the problem. He has a sense of right and wrong. He does try to tackle his sons. If we look at 1 Samuel 2 from verse 22 to verse 25, he is very old and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel.

Observe that. And how they lay with the woman who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. It's absolutely disgraceful.

And he said to them, why do you do such things? The evil things that I hear from all these people know 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. So to some extent, Eli tries to rectify the situation with his sons.

[15 : 47] He rebukes them for their behavior. The problem, of course, is that his sons by now have grown up. It seems to me that it is too much but too late.

He's old. They're adults. They are now running the show when it comes to the activities there at the tabernacle. Eli's opportunity to discipline his sons has come and gone.

Psychologists tell us that a child's personality is fully developed by the age of around about six. We have such little time, is it not so, to instill within our children under God's good providence a Christian outlook, a Christian mindset.

And I suspect what we have here with Eli is too much but too late. He's old. He no longer has control over them. They are now in the position of power. God then decides to bring judgment on both Eli and his sons from verse 27 and following.

We didn't read that out but it's good for us just to take a quick look at that. First of all, from verse 26 to verse 32, we won't read it out but a prophet comes to Eli and does two things.

[17 : 01] First of all, Eli is reminded as a parent and as a church leader of his responsibilities. It's a great privilege to be a leader under God as a Christian woman, a Christian parent, a Christian man.

To be a leader in the home, to be a parent, is a great honor. To be a leader in the church, to be on the church council, to be a Sunday school teacher, to help in the singing ministry.

Any kind of servant leadership role in the church, it's a great privilege to fulfill such a role. Eli is reminded of that. He's reminded of the great role and responsibility that he has.

With much privilege comes much responsibility. But then what he also does is he tells Eli that he is going to bring about his judgment on their house.

2 verse 29. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribe for my dwelling? It's God who prescribes how these things are to be done.

[18 : 11] We are servants in the ministry, aren't we? We don't set the rules. But observe the next line, if you do have your Bible in front of you. Verse 29. Why do you honor your sons more than me?

By fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel. It has quite a lesson for tithing built in that verse, does it not?

What is scary is that God still holds the elderly Eli responsible for his sons. Even though they are of age.

That might be so, but they are still working under his roof. They are still in his temple. He's still the boss. He's still responsible.

And although he's not necessarily sinning directly against the offering as his sons were, we'll observe that all of them are getting fat on the choice food that his sons doubtlessly brought to their table.

[19 : 15] Later, before he dies, we are told that he's a very heavy man. Because of his weight, when he finally fell off a stool, waiting for news from his sons from a battle, indirectly his weight caused his death, broke his neck.

He was a fat man. He's turning, to some extent, a blind eye. He's rebuking them on the one hand, but on the other hand, well, he enjoys those rum steaks that they bring home.

And Eli and his sons will be judged. There comes a time when God's patience runs out. We also observe that the whole nation is negatively affected by these sinful men.

That when the church is led astray by corrupt rules that disguise themselves as church leaders, the whole community, the whole society is led astray.

When the church is no longer preaching the truth of the gospel to the community, when the church is not concerned about its community, as Dylan rightly pointed out, the community loses its way.

[20 : 35] The church will be held accountable. All of us as leaders in the home, as parents, as church leaders, council members, all of us whom God has placed in positions of leadership will be judged for our role therein on the day of judgment.

Chapter 3 and verse 1. In those days, the word of the Lord was rare. There were not many visions. In other words, God is not speaking with power, with prophetic power, through his word to his people.

The whole nation is in a spiritual slump. Sometimes when I look out at my own community, that's how I feel. It was the hardest thing being in ministry in a middle class area where people enjoy their comforts to such an extent to feel they don't need God anymore.

This nation was in a spiritual slump, partly because there was a lack of prophetic preaching, because the leaders were corrupt and feeding themselves and not the people.

God is silent. And friends, that is the greatest tragedy of all. When the word is not applied to the heart and the heart is not changed because God is withdrawing his favor from the church, God is not working with power amongst his people.

[21 : 59] We pray for that when we get together for our prayer meeting. Secondly, the Philistines capture the Ark of the Covenant in chapter 4 from verse 10 to verse 11.

At this time, Israel goes into a battle with the Philistines. She thinks she's going to win. It's the worst defeat that Israel has probably had in her history up to this point. 30,000 Israelite soldiers are killed.

And the great tragedy of all is that the Ark of the Covenant is taken by the Philistines into captivity. Now, the Ark isn't worth anything, monetary-wise. The Ark is just a box.

It's a box with the Ten Commandments inside. But the tragedy lies in what the Ark represents. It is the Ark of the relationship. It is the Ark of the Gospel.

It is the Ark that symbolizes God's promises to Israel, God's relationship of marriage to his people. It is the Ark that represents vows and promises given to God by Israel, which she is now breaking.

[23 : 02] Tremendously powerful symbolism in the capture of the Ark. You'll observe that in the account of the battle, Eli's sons are killed, just as God predicted.

At the end of the day, God's enemies will perish, either in this life or in the life to come. All of those who set themselves up against Christ and his gospel, if they do not repent, they will perish at the end of the day.

Great challenge to those of us here who are perhaps not submitting the heart and bending the knee to Jesus. Great challenge to those of us who think that on the one hand we can be godly, but on the other hand do our own thing.

God looks into the heart and he takes our behavior seriously. Now how does Eli react to this tragedy of this battle with the Philistines?

From chapter 4 from around about verse 11 to around about verse 18. The battle has ended. Israel has been defeated. Eli, this overweight old man, is sitting on the side of the road.

[24 : 13] He's very stressed out. He wants to know what happened. He finds out that Israel has lost the war. He's very distressed when a messenger comes and tells him this, but he can endure it.

Then he finds out even worse that his sons have been killed. And even despite that terrible distressing news, he can endure it. But then he is told, finally, that the ark, the relationship, the ark of the covenant has been taken.

He realizes that at the end of the day, he is largely responsible for this tragedy. And in shock and in horror, possibly has a heart attack.

Who knows? He falls over and he dies. And it is over for him. His life has run its course. He's had his opportunity.

And now he's dead. And so dies this good but weak man. A man who believed and who lived for a gospel of good intentions, but ultimately never, never followed through.

[25 : 20] At that point, he must have realized that what he had done and that it was too late to fix it. That point of no return.

How many of us might well indeed stand before Christ on the day of judgment when we might say to the Lord, Lord, please can I have another chance? Can't you give me another life?

That I can do it again. That I can do the things I didn't do. Dylan has been reading from the book of Hebrews earlier on when he led the service.

There's that powerful verse, is there not? I think in Hebrews chapter 9 it says what? It is given once to a man to die. Once.

And then the judgment. Well, I want to make three concluding applications as we wrap things up. Firstly, I want to ask us all today, do we want to go down in history as Christians who were good but weak?

[26 : 23] Men and women with great gospel intentions, but ultimately intentions that were never followed through. You know, folks, we can accept that there are many non-Christians with no moral principles.

That's part of the world in which we live. But we learn from Eli that it is possible to be a man or a woman of faith and yet still be a failure in the church in God's eyes as well.

It's also possible to be a Christian and to be weak and to be a failure as well. He was good. He had a good heart, but ultimately ineffective in God's kingdom.

In the end, God couldn't use him or his sons anymore. They needed to be replaced. Father meant well, but God couldn't use him anymore.

So how do we define a Christian who means well but doesn't follow through? Good but weak. A person with good intentions but no follow through.

[27 : 29] Such a man or a woman is a Christian who, on one level, loves the things of God but not enough. It's always that other little thing.

Whether it is my appetites or my wealth or whatever it might be, there's always that other little thing that that individual loves more than God. In Eli's case, it was not only his appetite but it was his sons.

His sons were his idols. He was more afraid of his sons than God himself. He wanted to please his sons more than God.

And as we know, the people who are closest to us in our lives, the people we listen to the most, the people we take into account the most, the people we love the most in our lives, are often those people who influence us the most.

They have the potential to change us. There was a man powerless to serve God because it would seem that at some point his kids turned him away from the Lord.

[28 : 32] Maybe not completely but enough to destroy the effectiveness of his ministry in his life. Maybe it was because he just loved his sons too much.

Certainly a possibility. Or maybe it was because he was afraid of his sons. I get that. The opportunity that he had to influence their behavior, the time he should have spent with them, the time that he should have spent praying with them before they were put to bed at night, the time that he should have spent teaching them instead of going out there and teaching the people, that opportunity, no doubt, had come and gone.

We don't know. Maybe he was afraid that they might injure him if he complained too loudly. Reminded of what Jesus tells us in Matthew 10, verse 37, Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

So being a man or a woman, a gospel man or a woman with all the good intentions, but no follow-through means that we will not be able to stand for God at all costs when the time comes.

It's not easy to do that, is it, in the home and in the workplace. Eli could not convince his sons. Yes, he was ashamed of their behavior, but not enough to take the drastic action that was needed.

[29 : 55] I wonder whether or not he was one of those guys who wanted to keep the peace at all costs. Some of us are like that. Sometimes it depends on temperament.

Some of us, by temperament, are more comfortable where necessary in confrontation. But others of us would rather not confront. All in the name, we say, of keeping the peace, which is sometimes a good thing.

But sometimes it's not in the name of keeping the peace. It's in the name of just serving the self. I don't want to have to go through the personal discomfort of confronting my child.

I'd rather just read the newspaper. I choose the option of peace as a way of serving myself, my own comfort above everything else.

Perhaps that sums Levi up. But you know, sometimes the conflict that I choose to avoid with my fellow man or even my child over the truth of the gospel then becomes a conflict that I bring about between myself and my Savior.

[31 : 11] Eli needed to understand that. And therefore, just my second closing observation, similar to the first, but I think it's important for us as Christian parents and leaders to reflect on this.

I'm not saying that we need to be confrontational, rude, arrogant people always looking for a fight. I'm not saying we're looking for trouble. We shouldn't be unnecessarily contentious, but on occasion we need to be willing to take a stand for the truth in a permissive age where confrontation is no longer acceptable.

Christians, when necessary, need to take a stand for what is right. Sometimes that's tough. Maybe you've got to do that in your business, in the business world. I know of a man who started a business in Gauteng some years ago.

He had a senior position in our denomination. He was a trustee for many, many years. And the business grew, and he appointed two other directors. And after three or four years, these other directors took the company on a new path, an ethically unsavory path.

An ethical path that contradicted the gospel. And he stood up to them, and they wouldn't back down, and so he left his own company. He was reduced to almost poverty.

[32 : 25] But he made a stand for what was right, and for him that was the right thing to do in protest. Essentially, for five or so years, struggled to get back on his feet financially, to support his family.

Now, the passage reminds us that we are responsible for our children as parents. We need to exhibit a godly character in the work environment.

And the way we run our homes and our priorities have a direct effect on our children and their faithfulness. My last observation as I close. We need to remember that God does replace morally weak church leaders.

That's exactly what happened in the story. That at the end of the day, there comes a time where God will not work with weak-minded men and women who will not stand for the truth.

God is never defeated by weak-minded Christians. That's the warning to all of us in leadership. God leaves them behind, and his kingdom moves on.

[33 : 36] But in wrapping up, let me also say this to you. Isn't it wonderful that Jesus is our leader? Not somebody like Eli. Think about that for a moment.

Not somebody like Hophni or Phineas. That is such a great blessing for us. I think of those of us who have, in this congregation, struggled with leaders.

Those of us who have been hurt, maybe not by an Eli, but I wonder how many of us in this congregation have been hurt by a Hophni or a Phineas. I'm sure there are folk here who have had perhaps a Hophni or a Phineas as a father.

Perhaps you've been abused by a Hophni or a Phineas father. And for years after that, you've struggled trusting any leader. Is that true of you? Perhaps you've had a Hophni or a Phineas of an uncle.

Or perhaps there was a Hophni or a Phineas in your school who hurt you and other children in one way or the other, physically or emotionally. Or maybe you are still struggling with the breakup of a marriage to a Hophni.

[34 : 44] I wonder how many of us have been married to some kind of a Hophni or a Phineas. And you have been hurt because of that. And as you sit here today, you struggle with leadership.

I can promise you this morning that Jesus is not a Hophni or a Phineas. Praise the Lord. He's not an Eli. Jesus says to all of us this morning that I will never, ever let you down.

If you put your faith and your trust in me this morning, I will never betray you. I will never, ever hurt you. I will never, ever act or work in a way that will undermine you or destroy your life.

But I will forgive you. I will heal you as your leader and your savior. I will give you hope. And I will put you back together.

Isn't that wonderful? Let's pray. Father, help us as your children not to be like Eli or his sons. Help us to take our responsibilities seriously.

[35 : 55] I pray especially for those of us as parents and as leaders in the church. Lord, help us to listen to your word this morning. And Lord, finally, thank you for Jesus. Thank you that he is not like Hophni or Phineas.

We praise you for that. And Lord, I pray for those of us who are hurt, who are broken and struggling because they have been damaged by false leaders. Lord, help them, as indeed all of us, to turn to Jesus, the perfect, loving leader who will never, ever let us down.

Amen.