

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

April 17, 2016

“Sons of Trouble”

Bad Dudes of the Bible, part 3

1st Samuel 2:11-17

May I share some good news with you this morning? There is lots to go around. Start with this fact: we are all here worshipping together. That's good news. We have chosen to come to this place and combine our voices to praise God. We are not alone. There is more good news. We have great leadership in this church, so that when I take a group of youth and adults away on a retreat, I know that Sunday's services will honor God and encourage the people. I want to thank everyone who helped Sarah Hescheles feel at home while she filled in for me. And lastly, there is good news, if you want to send someone to camp. We have money! Seriously, I know many parents that are saying, "We can't afford \$400 for a week of summer camp." Actually, if you have three children, it's \$1200. I can't afford that, either. But we have scholarships. The camp has scholarships. The district has scholarships. Write this down on your bulletin: Call Pastor Eric and get the kids signed up for camp. Trust me, you'll be glad you did.

I invite you to pray with me this morning as we look into God's Word together.

Thank you, God, for your love that sustains us. We come before you as your chosen people this morning, the Body of Christ, ready to be your hands and feet, ready to hear your voice, ready to apply the words of scripture to our lives. Send us your Holy Spirit, and shape us for service and ministry to all the world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I grew up with two brothers. I don't think we were sons of trouble to our parents, but we definitely had our moments. I recall my older brother hot-rodding the sand dunes with the truck one night, trying to impress his friends. He ran a tire right off the rim. That did not please my parents.

I wasn't perfect, either. One time I took my dad's car for a scenic drive through the national forest, on a two-track. I dented and scratched the car on the tree branches, putting a nice gouge in the rear-view mirror. About a month later, I crashed the car driving on black ice.

We weren't trying to disobey our parents. But stuff happened, and when it did, we received their discipline. We had to listen to their instruction, because, frankly, we enjoyed living rent free and eating our meals at home.

Who disciplined you when you were younger? Maybe it wasn't a parent, but another adult, such as a grandparent, a teacher, a counselor. Did they teach you stuff? For example, who taught you the Ten Commandments? Remember these? Worship God. Don't make idols. Don't use God's name in vain. Honor the Sabbath. Honor your parents. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't covet. If those aren't familiar, try the cowboy version.

(SLIDE)

You've probably heard most of these, and whether or not you are a Christian, I submit to you that they are good commandments. The thing is, not everyone follows them. Part of the reason I am giving this current message series, "Bad Dudes of the Bible," is to point out the stories of people who disobeyed God, and what happened to them. I'm trying to follow the classic proverb: "A fool learns from his own mistakes, a wise man from the mistakes of

others.” So let’s take a look at Eli’s boys, these “sons of trouble,” and learn something from their mistakes.

If you open to 1st Samuel chapter 2, you find the story of Samuel the prophet, who worked for the priest Eli. Now, before Samuel was old enough, Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were in charge of the temple sacrifices. As you can tell, they violated a whole bunch of commandments, starting with “Do not steal.” Verses 13-14 explain how the priests were supposed to get their portion. They were to take a big fork, stick it in the pot of boiling meat, and whatever they got was “potluck.” Understand, priests worked for the temple; they did not have land, own businesses, have their own fields and flocks. They were promised a portion of the sacrifices in Deuteronomy 18:1. The idea, scripture indicates, is that the random act of stabbing into the pot would give them what was appropriate.

Let me give you a present-analogy. Have you ever been the last one in line at the potluck table? You know the feeling. All the good cookies are gone. The really good bratwurst, too. And all you have left is some plain hotdogs and cold mac and cheese.

That’s sort of how Phinehas and Hophni felt. They thought they could make this system work better for themselves. They wanted to “cut in line,” get the good portions before they were burned up to God. They started to bully the worshipers, who were supposed to give their offerings of their own freewill. It was like saying to your honest worshippers, “That looks good, I’ll take that.”

God didn’t like it. Read verse 17. “This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD’s sight, for they were treating the LORD’s offering with contempt.” They were breaking at least three commandments. Not worshiping God, coveting and

stealing. The scripture says they literally did not know God (1 Sam 2:12), so they didn't care. To them, it was just a job. So they got greedy.

Let me ask you: who was supposed to be showing them the proper way to do worship? Eli, their father and the high priest. Not only was it his job to discipline his boys, it was also his job to make sure everything in the temple was done according to God's will.

What do you think their dad did? Let me read it to you. 1 Sam 2:22-25.

²²Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ²³So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. ²⁴No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the LORD's people is not good. ²⁵If one person sins against another, God^[d] may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?" His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death.

So now the boys were adding adultery and dishonoring their father to the list. One sin connected to another.

But I find Eli's response strange. Eli knew what was going on, not because he himself saw it, but because someone else told him what was happening. And to me, his rebuke lacks punch. It's a lecture, nothing more.

Can I talk to you dads for just a moment? I have two sons, so this passage has a great deal of meaning to me. Dads, are you involved enough in your children's lives to see what they are doing? Do you know what makes them happy, what drives them nuts? How would you know if they were stealing, or worse?

Eli was in charge of two things: the worship in the temple and the raising of his own two sons, and he bungled both of them. How tragic. That's a huge lesson for us today.

But before guilt overtakes us, let me remind you of the other thing scripture points out: the true fault lay with Hophni and Phinehas. They would not listen to their dad, and therefore God would allow them to be killed for their sins. Do we have a job as parents to point our kids in the right direction and apply wise discipline in their lives? Absolutely. Is it their choice whether or not to obey us? Yes, because freewill is a gift from God.

The tragedy of Eli's family really is sad, but there is a silver lining. All the time this is going on, young Samuel is serving in the temple. And even though he doesn't live at home, his parents are still involved in his life. But think about what he is seeing. What is he learning? I believe he learned from the bad examples of Hophni and Phinehas. 1 Samuel 2:26 says that Samuel "grew in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men," even as Eli's boys did the exact opposite.

Isn't that our choice, too? We can learn from other's mistakes. We can recognize the sin in our own lives and do something about it, before it's too late. The bible tells us deliberately, don't mess around with sin. The Apostle Paul says in Colossians 3:5 to "put to death...whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

But how often do we justify our actions? When we take from others, we steal from God. When we withhold our love, when we judge, when we compromise, it starts us down a slippery slope. And it very well can lead to death.

What do you think about God allowing these men to die for their actions? Do you think that's right? What about grace? Aren't we the ones who preach

forgiveness in Christ? A second, third, fourth, and tenth chance? Isn't that the gospel.

It is, but what this story tells us is that, eventually, if we don't listen to God, if we don't change our hearts, we run out of chances.

God is patient. God is kind. God is loving. God is also righteous, and holy. I was talking with a seminary student last week, and he made the interesting point: God's grace doesn't compete with his justice; both aspects cooperate together. Discipline is a form of grace. We can accept it, accept the consequence, and work to redeem the situation. We are all given that chance. Hophni and Phinehas were given that chance. They rejected it.

A similar, tragic story occurs in the church in Acts 5. Peter asks Annias and Sapphira, who are trying to cheat the church, Acts 5:4b – "What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

What happens when we start to ignore God? When we fool ourselves into thinking, God doesn't care about my actions? We think the consequences of our actions won't catch up with us.

Go back to that Colossians verse again. What is idolatry? Literally, it's carving images out of wood, stone, and metal, which you use to replace God. None of us here probably do that. But figuratively, when we place our desires before God's will, aren't we committing idolatry, too? Do you see how it all works together? We covet, then we steal, then we lie or kill to cover it up.

We are not fooling anyone, least of all God. God knows. God sees. And the point is, God gives us a way out. It's not just about saying a prayer, "Jesus, please forgive me." It's about opening up our lives, our whole lives, to let God come in and do a complete demolition and rebuild. It might be painful, it might

be awkward, and it might mean confronting some issues that we are ashamed of, even angry about. We might uncover things like gossip. Selfishness. “My way or the highway” attitude. These things have to go if we are to make room in our hearts for Christ.

Hophni and Phinehas could have listened to their dad, but they didn’t. We can listen to our heavenly Father. Will we?

We don’t have to be first in line at the potluck. It’s not about us. It’s about God. Maybe there are some changes we need to make. Maybe we need to read that list in Colossians and Exodus again, and instead of saying, “Yup. All good. Checked “No” in all the right boxes,” we need to say, “God, please show me the depth of my sin, so that I can repent and you can redeem.”

It might mean identifying ways in which your life doesn’t honor God, and seek to change them. Maybe we need to recognize oppressive leadership and speak out against it. Maybe we need to listen to the advice of godly people, even (shock, gasp) our parents. Maybe we need to give godly advice to our children. Maybe we need to get more involved in their lives. We need to give our children good discipline, full of correction, affirmation and love.

Samuel was watching Eli and his sons. Who are the Samuels that are watching you and your family? Are you showing them how you love God?

Memory Verse:

Proverbs 3:11-12 (NRSV) “My child, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”

Questions for Reflection:

1. How did your parents discipline you? How did you normally respond?
2. Have you ever observed someone stealing? What did (or didn't) you do?
3. What valuable lessons have you learned from the mistakes of others?
4. God lets us feel the pain of our mistakes, but God always give us grace when we need it. When have you borne the burden of a mistake? When has God given you grace?
5. What does it mean to grow in favor with the Lord and people? Is this something you do?