

A Call to Holiness

Whether you loved her or not, whether you were a follower or not, one thing all would agree about Margaret Thatcher was that she provided strong leadership. She was the one that set the tone for the whole party. Her determination to hamstring the unions, to privatise nationalised industries, to reduce tax and what have you created a party that knew what it was about. Her leadership provided a strong lead for her government. Conservatism's failure to capture the imagination of the nation at the election poles has in part been due to the fact that it could not procure from its ranks a leader of note. Leadership is key.

The same is true in the church. Christ is our Chief Shepherd. The head of his church but as Ezekiel makes clear in chapters 33 and 34 he looks for faithful watchmen to act as under shepherds of his flock. Integral to this as we shall see today is a call to personal holiness. Holiness amongst the leadership of the people of God but also in the light of the fact that we are all 'priests' - set apart in the service of God the call is to us all.

Holiness is one of those topics that seems pretty dull. I mean, if we wanted to attract Christians from across the city we would offer some form of spectacular worship and many would come. Put up an advert for a meeting on holiness you can

be guaranteed, lest the spirit of God move in extraordinary power, few will turn up. I know I in all probability I wouldn't. Would you? No? Okay, if that is the case then we need to listen up because this topic is crucial. The command of God made to the people of God in the Old Testament is rearticulated to the people of God in the new (1 Peter 1:16) 'You must be holy because I am holy'. We saw this last week. Hannah calls God holy – right in all he does, just and true. We too are to be holy in our life and living not unholy. In other words we are to be like Jesus was. CS Lewis once said

'How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets real thing, it is irresistible.'

Okay, let's look at the passage. We will look at it under some anatomical headings

Feet and heart

Feet

Firstly, feet. Again we mentioned his is passing last week in asking in whose camp are your feet. We pick it up again this week this time in a slightly different way.

It is with their feet that the sons of Eli go and perpetrate their wrongs. It is with their feet that they go into the temple at Shiloh where they minister and

despite the fact that they are allowed part of the animal before it is sacrificed

Lev 7: 31-32

"The priest shall burn the fat on the altar, but the breast belongs to Aaron and his sons. You are to give the right thigh of the fellowship offering to the priest as a contribution"

and the pickings from the boiled meat as we see described in 1 Sam 2: 13

"Now is was the practice of the priests with the people that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice and the meat was being boiled, the servant of the priest would come with a three pronged fork in his hand. He would plunge it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot, and the priest would take for himself"

Yet that wasn't sufficient for them. They were partial to cooked meat not boiled. Prime barbequed rib if you like compared to boiled meat.

Not only that but the prescription was also that the fat was to be burned first

"all the fat that covers the inner parts...burn it on the altar on top of the burnt offerings...as an

offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord"
Lev 3: 3-5

But, oh no, 'Stuff that', says Hophni, 'That puts a nice crispy edge on the meat and helps with the flavouring. I'm not depriving myself of that.' Phineas adds his tuppanceworth, 'This job has few enough perks as it is. No land, no property, no inheritance',. So there is a tussle at the altar as these fat bully boys take from the hands of the worshipper that which had been brought for the Lord.

But that is not the end of the matter. If that were not bad enough. They were seducing the women who came to serve at he entrance to the tent of meeting turning the house of God into their own personal harem (vs 22ff). And these things were well known by the whole nation and they did not seem to mind.

Hophni and Phineas stand as some specific examples of the immorality of the people of God. On it Davis rightly comments - *it is indeed a sad day when the light of the people of God shines as darkly as the world around it.*

Hophni and Phineas may seem the exception. They may seem unusual but they are not. The tabloids over the past ten years have been filled with countless examples of immorality in the church. I know a man who was a leader in a local church in another city who stole over a period of years over £100 000 pounds and spent it on prostitutes amongst

other things. The leader of the Nine O'clock services in Sheffield which was at the cutting edge of outreach to youth in the city was using his position to sleep with several impressionable 19 year olds. I can think of three evangelical leaders in the Church of Scotland who in the last 5 years had to leave the ministry because of their extra marital activities. Of another prominent evangelical who left his wife, family and church to set up home with another man. An elder in the Western Isles misused his position in order to get near children to abuse them. I could go on. The thing that this re-inforces in my mind is that the scriptures are honest and represent human nature as it really is. It does indeed provide light but the question is - are we willing to let it shine in our hearts this morning?

The teaching of this passage applies I believe especially to those in leadership but it as I have said it applies to all seeing as leaders only lead in the way others should go.

How did the sons of Eli become so wicked? How did these church leaders I mentioned end up as they did. I doubt it was an overnight thing but bit by bit conceding to their desires. In CS Lewis Screwtape letters (correspondence between a senior demon and a junior demon) he wrote how the senior demon counsels the junior to tempt his subject in subtle ways - no neon signs, no big pointers just keep them on that gentle downward

slope and that their ability to rationalise will do the rest and before they realise what has happened they the harm is done and they are irreparably damaged. Like the frog in the pan of water. Does not really is being slowly boiled to death. In the same way the heat of our desires can build up and before we know it....

Personal holiness seems a dull topic. Being holy congers up images of being square and lacking lively and winsome conversation. But something has gone wrong. Jesus was holy and he didn't seem square. He is an attractive character. Yes he is uncomfortably attractive because his lifestyle and teaching challenge our own but that is because his holiness did not lead him to become introspective and focus on what he could not do but on what his holy character compelled him to do. To reach out to the lost, to change the plight of the blind man, the tax collector and the prostitutes, the down trodden. The life of Christ is in a sense an almighty YES to life. Yes to a life that is wholesome, selfless, servant natured and God loving. The direction of the holy life is not inward but outward. It shares in the essential nature of God himself who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing – taking the very nature of a servant. Think of someone you know who is godly or holy – aren't they the type of people that you want to spend time with? Often because their conversation is seasoned with grace and salt. Often because you are blessed by speaking with them because they do not focus on

themselves but on you or others – it's an outward focus.

But that was not the concern of Hophni and Phineas. Their gods had become their stomach and their libido. And to be honest there is a spirit that pervades at the moment amongst us as Christians that is not a million miles away from these two - which I think affects us all to one degree or another. It is the belief that it is slightly cool to be a bit naughty - I don't need to point these things out. There is another spirit amongst Christians that is more dangerous - it is the assumption that they know better than God. That is a spirit that is willing to openly flout the scriptures either because of ignorance of them or in spite of them. That is the one that leads to excessive drinking, drug taking, sexual promiscuity, blatant sinning - often in a misguided attempt to look cool to non-Christians in order to attract them to Christianity.

There is the another spirit that knows things are wrong but because of a lack of willingness to be open or ask for help allows sin to develop - internet pornography is one thing that is a great challenge to many but materialism is probably a greater challenge to us all. But notice the direction of all these activities. They are self oriented aren't they? They do not flow outward or God ward.

To get to the temple and perpetrate the things they did Hophni and Phineas had to walk. It was their feet that took them there. Where is it that your feet tread that you know is an area in your life that does not please God. It might be things that you do - an area of your thought life, reading material, something you watch on tv, slothfulness at work, how you steward the money he has given you, the words you use, the topics of conversations - gossip, criticism, flirting. It might be a sexual thing. It might be something that you are not doing loving, praying, serving. not keeping oaths you made to him. Why are these things such a big deal? Well in the first instance they are an offence to God but secondly they tarnish the likeness of Christ which he wants to shine through us.

'A holy life will make the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns, they just shine.'
D.L. Moody.

That shining can be dulled by sin

In addition it hampers our closeness and intimacy with God and it affects the growth of the community.

Heart

But what was the root of the problem for these two boys?

vs 12 They had no regard for the Lord.

Their hearts was not really in it. Their hearts were as hard as stone.

Nothing could, however, have been further from the truth as far as Hannah and Samuel were concerned. The young Samuel continued to minister before the Lord (vs 18). Hannah continues to come for the annual feasts to make sacrifice. There is nothing of the empty religion of Hophni and Phineas, nothing of the concern for the mere outward form of religion. Here in the action and lives of Hannah and Samuel we see the dynamic of lives lived in close and open fellowship with the Lord. Hannah as we have seen is prayerful woman, a woman prepared to make radical sacrifices in her life for the Lord's sake, prepared to give up the thing that which was most precious to her for a higher purpose. Her concern was not for herself alone but for the things of God. And her actions were bearing fruit. The Lord was gracious to her. Her obedience opened for her things that she could only have but dreamed.

I wonder if there is something that is holding you back from wholehearted sacrificial services to the Lord. Wondering if you will ever get married? Financial issues? Unnecessary worries? Ask he Lord to show you what is hindering you in his service. Ask him for the grace to overcome these worries.

Hophni and Phineas were bearing fruit in their lives but it was not spiritual fruit they were storing up for themselves the grapes of God's wrath. Their sin only increased with time. The Lord had in a sense given them over to their sin and it was leading them to destruction.

But whilst they were diminishing Samuel grew in stature and favour with the Lord. His concerns, in contrast to the sons of Eli, were for the Lord and he knew the Lord's favour. His relationship with the Lord was healthy.

It is common for some employers to give annual health checks. I wonder if this passage gives us opportunity to examine the state of our own hearts. The promise of God in Ezekiel 36:26 is (Look it up) p.

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and laws"

When we come to Christ it is as if we are given a heart transplant but like in real life we do not always take care of our hearts. We quench the Spirit's activity by developing forms and practices, sometimes unwittingly, that harden our hearts so they begin to resemble the heart of stone. Don't you feel that is true? Can you think of times in your Christian experience where you have let sin or

unhelpful forms of lifestyle run on and on and your spiritual life has suffered?

Now remember we live in the wonderful world of grace, where there is forgiveness for sin. But consider this - that though we may live in a gym it might not mean that our hearts were in good condition. (Hophni and Phineas spent their time in the temple but it didn't do them much good). We could spend all our time in the gym canteen. Though we are in an environment that could make us fit we might not indeed be. So to in the world of Grace, though there is unconditional love and there is forgiveness full and free it does not mean that we are spiritually in a good place.

I want us all to close our eyes and consider this. What is the state of our spiritual heart. Do we have hardened arteries because of a bad spiritual diet. What might you have to change and more importantly how will it change? Might we have an irregular rhythm – blowing a bit hot and cold? How will you bring a bit more consistency to your walk? Does your spiritual heart seem weakened? What might you do to strengthen it? Maybe you need to talk to someone, pray with someone (tonight). How about forming a prayer duo or triplet where you can receive help and encouragement in your spiritual life.

Samuel grew in stature and favour with God. Growth should be expected in the Christian life. It might be slow it might be in depth as well as breadth and height. Do you feel you are growing in your Christian faith? If not does it like need exercising? Does it need feeding? Does it need nurturing?

Seven Rules for Growth

A person who is “born again” starts a new life similar to that of a newborn infant. Seven rules that promote good health in babies can be adapted and applied to a Christian's spiritual growth.

1. Daily Food. Take in the “pure milk of the word” through study and meditation.
2. Fresh Air. Pray often or you will faint. Prayer is the oxygen of the soul.
3. Regular Exercise. Put into practice what you learn in God's Word.
4. Adequate Rest. Rely on God at all times in simple faith.
5. Clean Surroundings. Avoid evil company and whatever will weaken you spiritually.
6. Loving Care. Be part of a church where you will benefit from a pastor's teaching and Christian fellowship.
7. Periodic Checkups. Regularly examine your spiritual health.

Source unknown

May God enable us to walk as he walked. May
he pour his spirit into our hearts to help them
beat in accord with the beat of his own heart.
May he help us to be holy as he is holy.