

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MOTHERHOOD

By Lavonne James McClish

During the years when her children are young, motherhood is the Christian woman's number one job, after her duties to her husband. If she fails, entire generations will be affected, and the sad results will be perpetuated. This is not to say the responsibility is altogether hers, nor is she totally responsible for her children's behavior after they are grown. They have minds of their own, and they have free wills and choices. They are responsible for their own misdeeds and failures. But the mother who did not rear her children properly will bear the anguish—if not the guilt, for this sin can be forgiven as can any other—for the rest of her life.

Think first of Noah's wife. The Holy Spirit has chosen to reveal to us very little about her. However, she must have been very important in God's plan, for her sons were righteous enough to be counted among the passengers on the ark, and the wives they chose or their parents chose for them were also righteous. We know that Noah was busy for all those 120 years building and preaching (Gen. 6:3), although we do not know what period these years covered in his sons' lives. It follows by implication that Mrs. Noah was at least partially responsible for bringing up her sons to fear the Lord and to respect their father and mother. (It is true that Ham forgot or ignored the teachings of his parents and he sinned [9:20–25], but he alone [his descendants did bear a part of the curse, leading me to believe that they were of the same mind] was cursed by God because he alone was guilty of sin.)

Then there was Hannah, who prayed for a son (1 Sam. 1:1–13), promising Jehovah that she would dedicate him to the service of Jehovah for his entire life. Hannah kept the child at home, not even going up to the feasts and the worship at Shiloh, until Samuel was weaned (v. 24). This weaning, as best we can learn from both Biblical and secular history, was often done when the child was three years old or even older. (Remember, there was no prepared baby food, no food processors, and no refrigeration, but mothers' milk was readily available, nourishing, and safe.) All of that time, Hannah must have been teaching and preparing Samuel, though he was so young, for his life of service in the tabernacle. After she took him to Eli in the tabernacle, she provided at least some of his physical needs (e.g., a little coat she made every year—1 Sam. 3:19). She had a short time in which to work, but she did her task very well.

In the New Testament, we read about Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother, respectively. They had taught Timothy the Holy Scriptures literally from his babyhood (2 Tim. 1:5–6; 3:15). Perhaps as an example and a source of encouragement to the many women who find themselves in the situation of having no help from a father, we are told that Timothy's

father was a Greek, a Gentile, a pagan. He apparently did not help Lois and Eunice at all with Timothy's upbringing and teaching. Yet, even though they had to do it alone, they taught and trained Timothy so well that he became a valuable assistant to Paul, who loved him as a son.

Jochebed, the mother of Moses, devised an ingenious plan to save her three-month-old son from the clutches of the wicked Pharaoh (Exo. 2:1–10; 6:20; Heb. 11:23). Essentially, she gave her baby up in order to save him from death. We all know the story of how she made a little basket—an “ark”—of bulrushes, put the baby into it, and set it afloat in the Nile River, sheltered among the bulrushes, where she knew Pharaoh's daughter would be coming to bathe. She was correct in her guess (or maybe she had Divine guidance?) that the princess would not be able to resist a baby's cries (even a condemned Hebrew baby!). Miriam, Moses' older sister, was stationed where she could watch.

When the princess picked up the baby, Miriam went to her and asked if she wanted one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby (nursing would include feeding—i.e., wet nursing—as well as general care). So, in the providence of God, Jochebed was able to care for and train her own son, at least for a time. Since Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God (Heb. 11:24–28), we know Jochebed must have made good use of the time she had her son in her care. Incidentally, we read nothing of the role of Amram, Moses' father (1 Chr. 6:1–3), in his upbringing. This omission does not constitute proof that he did not participate, but it is interesting that only Jochebed and Miriam are mentioned.

We must never be guilty of neglecting our children, physically, emotionally, and most of all, spiritually. They should be included in as many of our activities in service to God as we can manage. But we should not waste our time and energy by engaging in endless hand wringing and self-reproach (even though the pain is ever present) when the child departs from our teaching despite the best we can do. Each human being has free will—a choice.

Although Eli brought Samuel up from the time his parents left him at the tabernacle (1 Sam. 3:1–21), he apparently was “too busy doing the Lord's work” to train and reprove his own sons, Hophni and Phinehas (4:17). As the head of his house and as God's high priest, he was directly responsible. Eli should serve as a sad reminder to those who neglect their families in order to help other people. Eli's biggest problem seems to have been that he failed to rebuke and discipline his sons, even though he knew they were sinning grievously and corrupting the worship (as well as the women).

Many of us want so much for our children to like us that we will not go through the unpleasantness of discipline and correction. We hate to cross them or to “make waves.” A very important lesson: A parent, in order to please God, must be willing to displease his or her children at times, and even to inflict temporary pain (Pro. 13:24; 19:18) on them in order to teach them to obey. **(Eli was rebuked because he put his sons’ wants above God’s.)** Obedience must be learned in childhood, or else it will be very difficult to learn to submit to governmental authorities or even to God in adulthood. I am not certain, but I think J. Edgar Hoover gets credit for the saying, “Learn obedience and respect in the high chair or else learn it in the electric chair.”

I have seen the following list in several places through the years, but I am sorry to say I do not know the author:

Rules for Raising Juvenile Delinquents

1. Begin when your child is an infant to give him everything he wants. This way he will grow up to believe the world owes him a living. After all, denying him may lead him to harmful frustration.
2. When he picks up bad words at school, laugh at him. This will make him think he is cute. It will also encourage him to pick up even cuter words and phrases later that will blow off the top of your head.
3. Never give him any spiritual training. You don’t want to be accused of forcing religion on him. Wait until he is eighteen years old, and then he will be able to decide for himself. (By that logic, don’t teach him English, either; when he grows up he may want to speak Bantu.)
4. Avoid use of the word *wrong*. After all, he may develop a guilt complex. This will condition him to believe later, when he gets into trouble, that society is against him and he is being persecuted.
5. Pick up everything he leaves lying around. Do everything for him. When he grows up, he will be experienced in evading all responsibility and shoving it off onto others.
6. Let him argue and talk disrespectfully to you and others. This way, he will think he has the right to rebel against authority and be rude and disrespectful toward those who disagree with him.
7. Take his part against neighbors, teachers, and law enforcement officers. This will teach him that he is always right and that no one can tell him what to do.
8. When he gets into real trouble, excuse yourself by saying, “I never could do anything with him.”
9. Prepare for a life of grief. You will undoubtedly have it.

Samuel, oddly enough, did not learn a thing from Eli’s heartbreaking experience. He also failed to discipline his sons (1 Sam. 8:1–3), and they brought much grief to him and to God. Indirectly, Samuel’s failures in this department brought about Israel’s demand for a king. At least Samuel’s corrupt and unruly sons provided them with an excuse. It is noteworthy that Samuel was a “circuit riding” prophet, who was likely away from his home and his family much of the time (this is not stated; it is possible that his family traveled with him). In any case, Samuel apparently neglected his sons and their training to some degree. Both Eli and Samuel were good, reverent men, who were great servants of God; but the fact that a father is a good man does not

necessarily mean that his children will absorb his good characteristics. He must spend time with them—show them the way— and actively train and discipline them.

Aaron was very weak-willed, as his lame excuse for the golden calf amply illustrates (Exo. 32:1–24). He did apparently take his work as high priest very seriously, however. It could be that he thought that, since he understood the gravity of his position with God, Nadab and Abihu would naturally absorb his attitude. Obviously they did not take their work and unquestioning obedience seriously, whether or not Aaron attempted to teach them (Lev. 10:1–7).

Aaron and Miriam had also rebelled against Moses (Num. 12:1–14) and attempted to seize some of his power. Is it possible that Nadab and Abihu saw this and were influenced by it? We have no way of knowing, but it is something to think about. In the accounts of the failures of Eli, Samuel, and Aaron, no mention is made of the mothers.

We have already alluded to the problems caused by absent fathers who do not shoulder their responsibilities. Elders can be guilty of this, if they have teenaged children. Perhaps this is a good argument in favor of having older men, whose children are grown, as elders. (Not that we would make a law here, since God's Word does not give a specific age.) An elder must shepherd and feed the entire flock, and that would definitely include his own children who are a part of that flock.

Preachers (and elders also, for that matter) could fill every night in the week, fifty-two weeks in the year—with good and important works. Their responsibilities are indeed heavy. But the point is, they will never **find** time for their wives and children; they must **set aside** the time, since their families are also a heavy responsibility. They will answer to God for their stewardship of their children as well as that of the rest of the church. Time spent with children is not wasted time! Surely an elder or a preacher or any other leader could set aside one night and one day for his family, refusing to let others encroach upon that time unless there is a dire emergency. Will God be pleased if they save other people's children but lose their own? Will they be setting a good example for other men of the church?

This essay is directed to wives, not to elders, preachers, deacons, and other male leaders. However, the above observations may help our perspective a bit. They also might provide us some logical thoughts with which to talk things over with our husbands. Young men, especially young preachers, are usually very conscientious and enthusiastic about their work and the way they spend their time, and I fear many of them have neglected their families woefully. (It is no accident that so many preachers' children go astray. "The cobbler's children have no

shoes.”) These husbands and fathers need to be made more aware of their responsibilities to their wives and children. If God meant them to be married, then he intended for them to be good husbands (Eph. 5:25, 28–29, 33; 1 Cor. 9:5), dwelling with the wife according to knowledge, honoring her as the “weaker vessel” (1 Pet. 3: 7).

It follows that, if they are married, they will likely father children, and that God intended them to be good fathers, just as he did other Christian men. Their duties to God, as well as to other people and their children, in no way exempt them from their responsibilities to their own wives and children. One of their duties to God is taking care of their own families. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that their homes should come first (Eph. 6:1–4). How can they possibly help others to fulfill their duties if they are ignoring their own duties? What kind of example are they providing for other men? Their children will have enough problems with the children of other members of the church (you know the saying about preachers’ kids) and with those outside, without having to deal with those problems caused by the neglect and/or absence of their fathers.

CONCLUSION

If the father is dead, absent, disinterested, or too busy, mothers must often take up the slack and try to be both parents to their children, as Lois and Eunice did with Timothy. It is not easy, but it can be done. If this is the case, a mother must try not to be critical of the father in front of the children, yet somehow, at the same time, she must acknowledge their needs as legitimate. She must avoid making them feel guilty for needing their father, along with his time and his love.

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