

The Pitfalls of Passive Parents

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"It's just a phase. He will grow out of it." "That's just what teenagers do. She'll mature." "All kids are this way. There's not really anything we can do to change that." "They have to be able to make decisions for themselves."

We make these statements to give ourselves permission to disengage as parents. Today's culture and the typical family tells us it's normal for kids to:

- Lock themselves in their rooms
- Avoid close relationships with parents
- Have prolonged rebellion or bad attitudes
- Be sexually active before marriage

Since we believe these behaviors are "normal," we tend to disengage—to become passive parents. We essentially leave our kids to themselves to make their own mistakes and learn their own lessons.

Sometimes we're tired. Sometimes we don't really know how to deal with an issue. Sometimes career or other interests distract us. Whatever the reason, passive parenting is disastrous.

One of the best biblical illustrations of passive parenting is Eli, a priest of the Lord at Shiloh. His story is found in 1 Samuel 1–4, and the most revealing statement about his parenting is 1 Samuel 3:13 when God said He would judge Eli's house because he failed to "restrain" his sons.

The story is simple and powerful. Eli was an indulgent man, somewhat lazy, and rather content with the status quo. He had two sons whom the Bible calls "sons of Belial"—God's way of saying they were wicked, ungodly men. They abused the work of God and His people. They perverted themselves and others. They were living dishonestly and publicly shaming the name of God.

Eli's response was minimal. He spoke with them a time or two but took no other action. His inaction—his parental passivity—cost him and his family dearly. Let's examine Eli's passive parenting pitfalls and learn from his mistakes.

Passive Parents Defer Parenting and Spiritual Development to Institutions and Environments.

Though Eli brought up his sons in the service of the Lord and at the house of the Lord, they grew to despise God and His truth. Mere environmental changes—like church, school, or youth group—are no guarantees that

our children will live honorably. How often Christian parents place their children in healthy environments only to disengage and expect the institution to take over. This just doesn't work.

This is especially easy to do for families serving in the ministry. After all, Eli could have rationalized "what better place to rear children than in the service of the Lord?" But neglect and passivity have disastrous consequences no matter the vocation of the parents.

Wise parents take personal responsibility to introduce their children personally to God. They fully engage in displaying a personal walk and a spiritual life, expecting healthy environments to only complement what they are already teaching and modeling.

Passive Parents Excuse Their Own Sin and Their Children's.

Eli rationalized his own sin as well as his sons' sin. He didn't want to change. He was benefitting from his sons' dishonesty. The only reason he even talked to them about their sin was that the people complained to him, not because they dishonored God.

Sometimes we tolerate sin in our children's lives because we don't want to give up our own. They know it, and we know it. In so doing, we dishonor God and passively endorse our children doing the same.

Wise parents deal with their own sin first, and then they humbly and sincerely lead their children to do the same. They have zero tolerance for dishonoring God—both in themselves and in their children. They don't rationalize; they repent.

Passive Parents Avoid Confrontation and Responsibility.

They see everyone else at fault—the teacher, the pastor, the youth pastor, the other kids, the church, the school, etc.; but they don't see their own responsibility or the choices of their children at the root. Passive parents blame everyone and everything else but themselves or their own children. There's always another place to "point the spotlight."

Eli never really confronted his sons or took responsibility for his passivity or their sin. He never forced them to face the reality of their sin. The Bible word restrain means "to weaken or dim or diminish"—like putting out a light. Eli should have removed his sons from influence and diminished their ability to carry on their ways.

Wise parents own their children's failures. They first inspect their own hearts and ask God to expose parental failures like neglect, inconsistency, or anger. Then they help their children take personal responsibility for their actions. They don't defend or allow their children to blame others. And they always support those who will help them biblically address problems, no matter how embarrassing a situation might be. Embarrassment is a small price to pay for restoring a life or salvaging a future.

Passive Parents Have the Truth but Don't Apply It to the Heart.

They sit in church week after week, hearing the preaching of God's Word without really listening. Like pearls falling in the street, the truth is all around them, but it never penetrates their hearts or impacts their lifestyles. The Word never leaves church with them. It never changes things at home.

Eli and his sons were in the ministry, surrounded by the truth on a daily basis, but the truth never penetrated deep into their hearts. There was a huge gap between God's truth and real life. What God said and how Eli lived were two very different things.

Wise parents always live with the ever-present reality of honoring God everywhere, all the time, in every way possible. It's not a church thing. It's not a Sunday thing. It's a whole life thing. It's a heart thing. Their Christian lives are 24/7.

Passive Parents Focus on Behavior Modification Rather Than Heart Transformation.

They are more concerned with minimizing embarrassment than with molding the heart. Eli wasn't alarmed by the wickedness of his sons' hearts. He was just embarrassed by their behavior and the complaints he received. In other words, if their sins weren't so public and embarrassing, he wouldn't have been bothered at all.

Wise parents do not merely try to modify or manipulate outward behavior. They are always targeting heart transformation. They are always asking the question, "Is my child just conforming outwardly, or is his heart embracing God's truth?"

Behavior modification and outward conformity is a losing proposition. It's temporary and shallow. It always breaks down at some point, and passive parents are usually shocked when that happens. Our kids need deep, heart-level convictions built on the foundation of truth and not merely the expectations of men.

Passive Parents Invest High Energy into Personal Interests and Career, but Little Energy into Parenting.

Eli somehow found time to serve God but found no time to restrain his sons, and God was not pleased. One of the saddest verses of the passage is 1 Samuel 2:25 when Eli is speaking with his sons and says, "...if a man sin against the Lord, who shall intreat for him?" I believe their father should have intreated! Eli wouldn't even intercede before the Lord for his sons.

Later, when God pronounces judgment upon Eli's house, his response is rather ho-hum, "...It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good." What amazing resignation and passivity!

Wise parents fight passionately for their children. They intercede, they intervene, and they fully engage with their best energy and effort. They are willing to lose the world but not their children. And God always honors those right priorities.

Passive Parents Ultimately Resign Themselves to "Whatever Will Be..."

Eli never really invested much energy into trying to bring about a change. Perhaps he saw himself as the victim of circumstances and powerless in his sons' lives. That belief caused him to slump into fatherly resignation and neglect. I want to shout to Eli, "Get up and fight! Reconcile your relationship with your sons! Do something! Beg God! Plead for your family!"

Wise parents never give up, and they never believe it's too late to affect a change. Many times I've seen faithful parents remain faithful through the struggles of a prodigal child. Through all the heartbreak, pain, embarrassment, and frustration, they never quit church, never left the Lord, and never stopped fighting. Rather than play a blame game, they just kept loving, praying, and living faithfully. Though their child was adrift, they remained the anchor!

And many times, I've seen those children come back to the Lord and to their spiritual anchor—their prayer-warrior parents. Parent, it's never too late to see God work in the heart of your child! Don't ever give up.

Passive Parents Will Answer to God for Their Own Neglect, not Their Children's Choices.

God created free will. It was His idea. At the end of the day, our children have the power to make choices that we cannot control. God holds them responsible for those choices. Eli was not responsible for his sons'

wickedness, but he was responsible for knowing about it and doing nothing (1 Samuel 3:13). The fact that we will be held accountable for our inaction should awaken us out of parental slumber.

Wise parents see parental action as obedience to God. They do not discipline and nurture their children to merely improve circumstances, control behavior, or minimize embarrassment. They do so because they themselves are obedient children of a Heavenly Father. They seek to honor God.

Last week I had a conversation with a young lady from our singles department who is experiencing marvelous growth in God's grace. Recently saved, she is basking in God's goodness and soaking up all the truth and wisdom that she can. It's wonderful to see. But over the course of our talk she expressed great disappointment in the fact that she's so late in learning many biblical truths that her parents should have taught her. How she wishes they weren't passive parents.

How about your kids? When they are in their late twenties will they share the same disappointment? Or will you fully engage and nurture them with God's grace and truth? Learn the pitfalls of passive parenting from the story of Eli. Engage with fervent energy and spiritual commitment. Target your child's heart with passionate tenacity. Engaging fully in the spiritual development of your children is nothing short of honoring God, and He responds quite favorably to that honor—"...for them that honour me I will honour..." (1 Samuel 2:30).