

False Prophets Do Not Know The Lord

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” (George Santayana)

Bill Gates modified it:

“It is fine to celebrate success, but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure.”

Many have said it, but it bears repeating: those who fail to learn from history repeat it. Scores of failures litter the pages of history because of their failures to learn from the past. We have not changed since the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden in Eden.

Despite familiarity of this truth, like Adam and Eve and all their progeny, we continue to follow the siren call of those who promise much but do not deliver on their promises. Countless people have failed to learn from the past and follow false prophets to their calamity.

The Bible offers numerous warnings against following false prophets. It gives vivid examples of them to confirm God's warnings against false teachers and illustrates their characteristics. The story of Eli and his two sons provides one of those pictures. (1 Samuel 2.12-3.1)

Hophni and Phinehas did not know the Lord.

Eli served as high priest over Israel following the era after the judges and before Israel's first king, Saul. He had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who served with him as priests in the Temple. Their stories indicate their true natures which led to their ultimate failures as spiritual leaders of Israel.

“Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD.” (1 Samuel 2.12)

This word “knew” has two different meanings.

- One expresses factual knowledge, e.g., book knowledge, understanding, or some kind of insight into a subject. You can recite information about different matters with some degree of mental acuity, and a level of intelligence. With this knowledge, acquired by observation and reflection, you can say, “I know it.”
- Another meaning depicts an intimate, personal relationship with a person, an intimacy of knowledge by experience, a fellowship. This denotation defines “knew” in this verse. Hophni and Phinehas lacked this category of knowledge of God. They had no intimate, experiential knowledge of Him.

The first kind of factual knowledge does not define the kind of knowledge meant by “knew” in this verse. In fact, the second definition describes it.

Therefore, Hophni and Phinehas did not know the Lord. They may have known some facts about Him, e.g.:

- God's appearing on the mount to speak to Moses, and give him the law;
- God's bringing the Children of Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land.

They could tell some things about God, but they did not experience a personal knowledge of Him. They did not truly worship or obey God. The text calls them sons of Belial, worthless, evil, unGodly. (*Strong's Concordance*)

Hophni and Phinehas abhorred the Lord's offerings.

In violation of God's decree, Hophni and Phinehas had utter disregard for the law of God as well as for the

people offering sacrifices. They dishonored, abhorred the Lord's sacrifices and failed in their responsibilities before God. (1 Samuel 2.17)

Hophni and Phinehas violated these requirements as given by God to Moses.

- They demanded their portions prior to sacrifices. (1 Samuel 2.13-15)
- They stole parts of the sacrifices for themselves after they completed them. (1 Samuel 2.16)

Eli's sons disobeyed God's word in the manner of the sacrifices that the people offered. God stipulated the acceptable offerings, the sequence of the offering, as well as the portion of the offering reserved for the priests after the completion of the sacrifice. No wonder God judged them for their sins.

Hophni and Phinehas adopted an entitlement attitude.

Eli's sons saw their offering of the sacrifices as an opportunity to satisfy their shameless desires with gratification of luxury. They took more of the sacrifices for themselves than God's law stipulated. They demanded the choicest portions of animals before completing the actual sacrifice of the animals.

It became a common practice of Eli's sons. They demanded their portions and even excess for their own pleasure.

Hophni and Phinehas esteemed themselves above the people whom they served. They satisfied their own lusts without regard for God's law. Eli's sons gratified their cravings as fitting for their positions, which led to their failure.

Hophni and Phinehas indulged in debauchery and sexual immorality.

Up to this point in the story of Eli's sons, their disregard for time to know God, their neglect of God, and their disobedience of God's law qualified them for destruction. Yet, their wickedness does not end with these crucial failures.

The Bible expands the depth of their sinfulness:

"Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation." (1 Samuel 2.22)

In that day, the women helped in the Temple, cleaning, sorting, organizing, and helping the priests. Some came to pray and worship. We read about Anna the prophetess who was in the Temple when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to complete the law of circumcision and to present Him to the Lord according to the Law. She is one who came to the temple to serve, honor, and worship God.

Eli's sons used their positions to take advantage of these women and abuse them sexually. Their sexual immorality became common knowledge among the people of Israel. Hophni and Phinehas lost the respect of those who brought their offerings to God at the Temple. Eli's sons failed long before their demise.

Hophni and Phinehas disdained discipline.

After Eli heard some of the stories and reports that came back to him of his sons' behavior, he said to them:

"Why do you do such things, for I hear of your evil dealings by all the people? Nay, my sons, it is not a good report that I hear. You make the Lord's people to transgress. If one man sin against another the judge shall judge him, but if a man sin against the Lord who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father." (1 Samuel 2.23-25)

When Eli questioned his sons, they responded with disdain for discipline. They did not care for their father's warnings and rejected his attempts to correct them. In so doing, they disregarded God's Law and His rule over them.

Eli had let his sons function as a law unto themselves in their roles as priests. He had become ineffective as a High Priest and as a father. He lacked moral authority to enforce Biblical practice upon his sons. They rejected their father's warnings and correction, hastening toward failure.

They ignored the impact of their behavior upon others and rejected the messages of those who attempted to correct them

Hophni and Phinehas furthered the dearth of the word of the Lord.

1 Samuel 3 begins the story of Samuel's residence in the Temple with Eli, the High Priest. Samuel's dwelling with Eli resulted from his mother's prayer for a son and her promises to give that son to God.

"And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision." (1 Samuel 1.1-2.11)

The dearth of the word of the Lord describes these different conditions fostered by Eli's sons.

- dearth of the word Of God: scarcity

When it says that the "word of the Lord was precious in those days," it literally means scarce. Scarcity of something helps to determine its value. For example, people all over the world view gold as a precious commodity. They do so because of its scarcity and high quality.

In Eli's day, he and his sons deprived the Children of Israel of God's word. In fact, they disobeyed it with impunity. They failed to propagate God's word, and it became scarce and of little value to the priests and the people.

As a result of their sinful behavior, the Children of Israel experienced the deprivation of God's Word to them. The void of the life-giving sustenance of God's word brings certain failure.

- dearth of the word of God: a lack of vision

Because Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas deprived the people of God's word, the people did not have any open vision to guide them. The revelation of God and His purposes for His people came from the spiritual leaders to whom God gives a vision of His plans and purposes.

No one stood up and said, "Thus saith the Lord. Go this way." This dire circumstance followed the failed leadership of Eli and his two sons Hophni and Phinehas.

God's Purpose For Israel With This Story

God instituted the Priesthood for Israel as the means by which He would teach Israel His precepts. As priests, they had the sole right to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people of Israel for their sins. The priests held a sacred position with God as intermediaries between God and mankind.

Therefore, God could not give Eli and his sons a pass on their sinful behavior. God did judge them severely as described in 1 Samuel 2.27-36.

This story served as a warning to priests. It alerted them of their sacred duties and of God's demands upon them. God prescribed exactly how to offer each sacrifice to make it effective before God.

He made forethought for the priests from the sacrifices of His people. The priests would receive some of the sacrifices as part of their provision.

They held a holy position that required holy lives of the priests. God would hold them responsible for their obedient practice of the sacrifices on behalf of Israel's people. God would not view disobedient priests as guiltless and would judge them for their disobedience and sexual immorality.

The story also warned of the effects of unGodly leadership upon the people of Israel. The people suffered because of Eli's and his sons' disobedience. Israel suffered the consequences of the dearth of God's word. His word to them became scarce, and the people lacked Godly vision.

God used this story to identify the seriousness of spiritual leadership among His people. Those endowed

with this privilege must understand their responsibilities before God and to those whom God places under their care. Serious consequences result from either failure.

Correlation To You And Me

You and I share similarities in our day to the story of Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas. Like them, false teachers occupy leadership positions among God's people today. We can use the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas as criteria to help us identify false spiritual leaders in our day. Therefore, we can benefit from their failures and not repeat them.

False prophets do not know the Lord.

The example of Hophni and Phinehas warns Christ followers of those in authority in the Church of Jesus Christ who do not know God. These acclaimed leaders may know about God, can describe facts about Him, and recount stories from the Bible about Him.

But, they do not know Him in an intimate, personal manner. The priorities and practices of false prophets reveal it. Like Eli's sons, whose behavior disproved a sincere heart for God, they spend little if any time in intimate fellowship with God.

Further, the content of their preaching and teaching, their programs and policies for the people they lead, as well as the absence of the unction of the Holy Spirit upon them confirms their lack of knowledge of God. They do not know Him. One cannot teach what one has not experienced.

False prophets disobey God's word.

Today's ministers do not make offerings on behalf of God's people. That practice ceased with the advent of the New Covenant in Christ. However, by their disobedience to God's law in the manner in which they executed their obligations, Hophni and Phinehas showed contempt for the sacrificial offerings that God commanded.

Disobedience to God's word has become a common practice among false teachers today. I mention just three important examples.

- False prophets avoid the demand of a changed life as the effect of saving faith in Christ. They reject a popular emphasis upon the role of works in salvation. Granted, no one can achieve salvation by good works. True saving faith in Christ produces a changed life.

"Faith without works is dead." (James 2.26)

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5.17)

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2.10)

A changed life proves that someone has become a child of God. False prophets evade this demand of God's word.

- False teachers avoid the demand for repentance. Christ taught sinners to repent and believe the gospel. (Mark 1.15) Repentance means to turn from one direction to go in the opposite way. Repentance corresponds with the demand for a changed life. Christ demands repentance: turning from self-reliance and sin to trust Him for salvation from sin unto a new life.

False teachers fail to demand repentance as God's word commands.

- False prophets avoid the demand for personal holiness. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount the necessity of righteousness. (Matthew 5.20) This Sermon illustrated numerous areas where Christ commanded personal holiness.

In addition, the balance of the New Testament teaches the commands of personal holiness in believers in Christ:

- to become servants to righteousness unto holiness (Romans 6.19);
- to cleanse their lives from sinfulness unto holiness (2 Corinthians 7.1); and
- to follow not uncleanness but holiness (1 Thessalonians 4.7);

The demand for personal holiness, without which no man shall see God, embodies these three areas in which false prophets today disobey God's word. (Hebrews 12.14) They fail to emphasize them in their proclamations in disobedience to God's demands.

False prophets adopt an attitude of entitlement.

Similar to Hophni and Phinehas, an attitude of entitlement exists among false teachers today. Contrary to Christ's command of humble service, these false prophets believe they deserve special treatment because of their positions.

- They demand and enjoy lives of luxury.
- They command sizeable salaries and spend Church funds on expensive vehicles and palatial homes.
- Their opulent clothing and life styles draw attention to their pride.

Often, they claim a special authority and anointing from God for them to indulge their impious desires. These false prophets satisfy their cravings with purchases from funds offered by believers who trusted that they made an offering to the Lord.

Like the sons of Eli, the false prophets, teachers, and preachers of our day take these offerings for themselves, beyond actual need. As a result, people have come to abhor offerings and view them with disdain, just as they did in the time of Hophni and Phinehas.

False prophets indulge in debauchery and sexual immorality.

Remember that those who fail to learn from history repeat it? The immoral practices of Hophni and Phinehas did not end with them. No doubt, you, like I, have read of some in leadership positions in the professing Church today who have illicit sexual relationships with women in their congregations. Sexual abuse in the professing Church has attained significant extents.

Members of their families indulge their illicit sexual desires, too. Sexual trysts occur between staff members who travel together to meetings that promise to "glorify and honor God." When implicated, they lie about their immorality and justify it as a means for their victims to come closer to God.

Just like Hophni and Phinehas before them, they are false prophets, teachers, and pastors. They, too, will experience God's judgment upon them, unless they repent.

False prophets disdain discipline.

Time and time again, this pattern recurs in the lives of false prophets today. Churches split over pastors' refusal to accept discipline for their moral failures. Popular teachers ignore the warnings from those who love them and seek to correct their sinful lifestyles. Yet, they continue in their "ministries" without remorse or repentance.

Like Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas, today's false prophets plunge headlong into failure and take many along with them. The "I am different" attitude of Hophni and Phinehas describes the false prophets in our day who

have elevated themselves to a status beyond correction. They do not function in the Church the way God designed it:

- setting themselves above Biblical Church structure;
- rejecting correction;
- declining direction and guidance from Godly servants;
- deceiving others in financial matters; and
- violating the tax laws of our land, to mention only a few examples.

When admonished for their practices, these false prophets fail to repent of their sins of disobedience to God and their violation of the trust of others. Like Hophni and Phinehas, they claim special anointing of God and disregard the correction of others.

False prophets give rise to a dearth of the word of God.

1 Samuel 3 begins the story of Samuel's residence in the Temple with Eli, the High Priest. Samuel's dwelling with Eli resulted from his mother's prayer for a son and her promises to give that son to God as recorded in 1 Samuel 1.1-2.11.

"And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision." (1 Samuel 3.1)

The dearth of the word of the Lord describes three different conditions fostered by false prophets.

- scarcity

False prophets and teachers fail to concentrate upon God's word as the basis for their proclamations. Books by popular authors replace God's word as the foundation for messages. Exciting Church programs supplant God's word for direction on Church practices.

In Eli's day, he and his sons deprived the Children of Israel of God's word. As a result of their sinful behavior, the Children of Israel experienced the deprivation of God's Word to them.

The void of the life-giving sustenance of God's word brings certain failure.

- lack of vision

The statement, "Thus saith the Lord, go this way" has become the mantra of false prophets who seek to move people in their direction. It has little Biblical foundation anymore. False teachers' get their plans and purposes from the latest cultural phenomena and seek to conform their followers to the cultural mandates.

These false leaders have no Biblical revelation of God's plans and purposes for His people. The latest and greatest suits them.

- emphasis upon lesser issues

In our day, the lack of vision exhibits a different aspect that results from a dearth of the word of God. Good has replaced best. Pastors and teachers today concentrate upon lesser life issues rather than Biblical doctrine and gospel exposition:

- psychology;
- emotional disturbances: and
- "How To..." messages on money and health.

This emphasis, having only slight Biblical basis, has replaced the greatest good: sermons on foundational Biblical doctrines and personal holiness. These false prophets abandon preaching the word of God for “talks,” making no clear statement of God’s truths.

Thus, under the leadership of false prophets, even prominent, popular ones, the Church careens as a rudderless ship, without direction or standards. No wonder the professing Church experiences spiritual decay.

And it does.

Summary

The failure of Hophni and Phinehas brought spiritual decay to Israel. Their spiritual failures reappear in the false prophets of today, who influence the spiritual decline of the Church.

Dr. Ainsley Barnwell, a former mentor of mine before his death, counselled me,

“Tom, water never flows above its source. A spiritual leader can never take people above his level of spirituality. They will reflect their leader. If you maintain a low spiritual quality, so will the people that you lead. They will never rise above you. If you are not a man of God, your people will not be people of God.”

In the third chapter of his epistle, James warns believers of the responsibilities of leadership. Those who lead in the Church have great liability for their actions. Leaders face greater condemnation for their failures, because the spiritual condition of those who follow them will reflect the leaders’ condition.

The examples of Eli and his sons provide a vivid picture of the causes of the failure of false prophets. Therefore, we must examine those who lead us to escape the same destiny of those who followed Eli and his sons.

May God, by His Holy Spirit, open our eyes to distinguish between truth and error, to identify the false prophets among us, and to escape their failures that threaten to destroy us.

Questions For Study

1. Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, did not know God. How does this happen:
 - A. to preacher’s kids?
 - B. to deacon’s kids?
 - C. to Sunday School teacher’s kids?
 - D. to your own kids?
2. Is it right to call people who strive to follow God’s law, “legalists?”
3. How can you obey God’s voice in your life without assuming that your good works earn you points with God?
4. How do modern day false prophets evidence their attitude of entitlement?
5. How does the church determine whether the demands of their pastors are necessary to live in this society or are born of a desire for luxury?
6. Does your church have a plan in place to deal with the possibility of sexual immorality on the staff of the church?
 - A. How does your church follow-up incidents that give rise to doubt regarding church staff?
 - B. Is it ever right to disregard such immorality?
7. Do you cause your spiritual leader to stumble by treating him as though he were above and superior to

others in the church?

8. Do you show him respect and appreciation without treating him as a “star?”
9. Most churches state in their constitutions that the Word of God is the sole provider of wisdom and truth from the hand of God. Believers in these churches often read more of the latest popular books about Christianity or books with ethereal prose about communion with God than they read the Bible. Does your pastor discourage such choices and promote the reading of God’s word both in the church and in the home?
10. What is your personal plan for learning to know God and know His word?

Thank you, heavenly Father, that You have provided for us ways in which we can observe and heed Your warning to us to beware of false prophets. Thank you for ways in which we can examine them and come to some kind of evaluation and understanding of whether these men and women truly are men and women of God.

Help us to reject the false and to pursue the truth. I pray that You will open our eyes by Your Holy Spirit to see the truth, to understand it, and to grasp it.

Grant us by the power of the Holy Spirit to conform our lives to the truth, to come to know You intimately, and to fellowship with You intimately.

We will give You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, honor, glory, and praise for what You accomplish with the truth in our lives. Amen.