

A REBELLIOUS SON (Deut 21.18-21)

CBC-19 June 2011

Text choice: my regular Bible reading and Father's Day.

We would expound, draw out some principles, and apply.

EXPOSITION (read text)

Basic sense clear and easy. It probably means what you think it means.

Historic context. God birthed Israel out of Egypt to be his holy people, gave them the laws for life in the holy land, their imminent inheritance. Their lives were to be holy, distinctive from Gentiles. One God → only one religion and one morality, as opposed to the pluralism and multicultural diversity of the seven nations God hated and was about to destroy.

Modern application. This text is both moral and judicial law. Moral law enforced is 5C (Exod 20.12; Deut 5.16), which "doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof, and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator; who gave it: neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation" (1689 LBCF XIX.5). This death penalty is example of OT judicial law, "which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any now by virtue of that institution; their general equity only, being of moral use" (1689 LBCF XIX.4). Deut 21 is full of judicial (civil) law for OT Israel → justice for the slain near Israelite cities, vv. 1-9; directions for pagan women taken captive in battle, vv. 10-14; rights of a bigamist's firstborn son, vv. 15-17; removing hanged men by sundown, vv. 22-23.

Let us now consider the basic sense as this text first came to Israel.

1. His Depravity (immorality, wickedness, corruption, v. 18).

- The real possibility. "If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son." Not a far-fetched scenario. All our offspring are depraved like us and act out that depravity to some degree. The total innocence of children is a false, romantic notion (Job 15.14; Psa 51.5; 58.3; Eph 2.3). Augustine observed sins of infants and young children, confessing them as his own: impatience for food, crying for harmful things, expecting others to satisfy their whims instantly, doing their best to strike and hurt, unwilling to share their mother's breast with a sibling, etc. (Confessions I.7). These infantile vices become more ugly and intolerable as children grow up.
- Marks of gross depravity (cf. v. 19). All are sinful children, but not all were to be executed. This is a severe case, very irreverent and dangerous. A "son" is more likely to act out *in this way*, but daughters might also prove exceptionally evil (e.g., sexually loose) and worthy of execution (cf. 22.20-21). Now hear God's own description of a desperately wicked son.

First, "stubborn," "determined not to change one's attitude," COED; "unreasonably or perversely unyielding: mulish," MWCD. Other

biblical terms in this semantic domain: stiff-necked, willful, hard-hearted, obstinate (ISBE). Heb. → stubborn, headstrong. Proves mountainous pride, enslavement to lust, no fear of God.

Second, "rebellious," "resistant to authority, control, or convention", COED; "unmanageable, belligerent" (MWCD); "contentious (argumentative), refractory" (BDB). "Stubborn and rebellious," are joint modifiers (Heb. pronounced *saw-rar* and *maw-raw*), w.r.t. self, autonomous, and others, anti-authority.

Sound familiar? Our corrupt society no longer alarmed by this in young people, accepts it as "normal." We have "defined deviancy downward" (Bork). Yet God censures extremely (1 Sam 15.23 → like witchcraft, wickedness, idolatry). We must repudiate pop-morality for biblical morality (Rom 12.2).

Third, disobedient to parents. "Which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother." Both have authority over the son (5C, "honor thy father and thy mother"). Verbal directives alone should be effective motivation, not counting or yelling or threatening, but simple, oral indication of their wishes (Psa 32.8-9). A Meadows family slogan to children: "obey right away." "Obey" is a term laden with connotations of authority/submission and fully scriptural. His offense is not incidental, but chronic, flagrant disobedience, a mark of extreme depravity, especially in older children (Prov 30.17; Rom 1.30; 2 Tim 3.2).

Fourth, incorrigible under "chastening," "to inflict pain for the purpose of reclaiming an offender; as, to chasten a son with a rod" (1828 Webster's). Heb. → discipline, correct (NIDOTTE #3579). Grammatical form (Heb. vb. of piel stem) can imply *intensive* action (e.g., not just "he broke" but "he broke to pieces, smashed") and *repeated* or *extended* action (not just "he jumped" but "he skipped, he hopped") (TVM #8840). Must chasten intensively, repeatedly.

All children need this. It is very basic to parenting in love, for God himself so chastens his beloved (Deut 8.5; 2 Sam 7.14-15; Prov 13.24; 19.18; 23.13-14; 29.15, 17; Heb 12.6-8). MacArthur says "a truly loving father is absolutely committed to helping his child conform to the highest standards," and he says, citing Jerome, "the greatest anger of all is when God is no longer angry with us." So in our families! Chronic parental failure to discipline amounts to disowning your children and consigning them to hell. Abdicating parents bear much blame for your child's immorality; faithful parents, little to none.

So here the older child still in the home is blamed for being finally defiant, "a glutton and a drunkard" (v. 20). "Though they discipline him, [he] will not listen to them" (ESV). While this is an exception to the general rule (Prov 22.6, 15), yet it is a fearful possibility. Lord, save our children from it!

Such children today, especially under faithful parents, are still examples of gross depravity. God saved some of us from this wickedness.

2. His Condemnation (pronouncement of guilt, vv. 19-20). “If” (v. 18) leads to “then” (v. 19). This law was given for practice, not mere theory as the Rabbis allege (Jewish SB, in loc.). Great crimes demand great punishment. Hillary Clinton famously said, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In OT Israel, the family was ordinarily enough; the village only got involved in a severe case.

- An act of both parents. “His father and his mother.” Parental solidarity is critical to family cohesion (note mention of both in v. 18, and the plural pronouns in v. 20: “*they* shall say . . . *our* son.”). When parents disagree, it is so important to work it out behind closed doors, and to present a united front before your children. Don’t let them see mom and dad arguing, especially over discipline issues.

What a wretched son if *even his own mother* could so testify against him!

Spurgeon said of his mother: “I remember on one occasion her praying thus: ‘Now, Lord, if my children go on in their sins, it will not be from ignorance that they perish, and my soul must bear a swift witness against them at the day of judgment if they lay not hold of Christ.’ That thought of a mother’s bearing swift witness against me, pierced my conscience and stirred my heart” (MTP #581).

However difficult tender parents now find it to reconcile themselves to the just punishment of their rebellious children, in the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God all natural affection will be so entirely swallowed up in divine love that they will acquiesce even in the condemnation of those children, because God will be therein for ever glorified (Matthew Henry, in loc.). Oh, imagine that!

- An act of some force. Two verbs: 1) “Lay hold on him,” lit., “they shall take hold,” or seize, catch him. Often used of capturing people (TWOT #2538), making an arrest. Not surprising for one who is more like a wild animal than a dutiful son. 2) “Bring him out,” lit., “they shall bring out,” “carry or bear an object from one place to another with linear movement, as in Gen 14.18” (DBLSD #3655). Once things got to this point, the wretch might begin to realize what is happening to him and put up resistance. This also suggests relatively young, strong parents and a son who was not completely full-grown at the peak of his strength. Incurability becomes evident in adolescence.
- An act of public humiliation. They march him to “the gate of his place,” i.e., the most public place in the town, where people passed constantly and legal matters were settled by the elders. The sorry spectacle was designed to help the whole community against sin.
- An act of mutual accountability. Parents, son, elders, community—all accountable to each other and to God. The son’s unbelief does not exempt him from accountability and consequences for his actions.

- An act of truthful, solemn testimony. Not psychobabble, but terms of moral derision. Stubborn, rebellious, will not obey—same sins God identified in v. 18. Also, “he is a glutton and a drunkard;” habitual overindulgence in food and drink—essentially the same sin (cf. Prov 23.20-21). He is a lazy bum, irresponsible, worthless. This solemn, truthful testimony is an harbinger of Judgment Day.

3. His Punishment (v. 21a). When chastening in love has utterly failed to form and reform the son, nothing is left but punishment in justice. The parents had divine authority to chasten their son but not to kill him.

In consequence of this accusation, all the men of the town were to stone him, so that he died. By this the right was [withheld] from the parents of putting an incorrigible son to death, whilst at the same time the parental authority was fully preserved. Nothing is said about any evidence of the charge brought by the parents, or about any judicial inquiry generally. “In such a case the charge was a proof in itself. For if the heart of a father and mother could be brought to such a point as to give up their child to the judge before the community of the nation, everything would have been done that a judge would need to know” (Keil and Delitzsch, citing Schnell, in loc.).

4. His Expulsion (v. 21b). “Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst: all Israel will hear and be afraid” (Tanakh). The society is better off without notorious sinners like this, because this tends to preserve God’s favor.

PRINCIPLES

1. Honoring Your Parents Is a Basic Moral Duty. One of *only ten* that summarize all devotion and righteousness in God’s sight.
2. God Will Enforce His Law. A law without a penalty is only good advice. Not Ten *Suggestions*. 5C here enforced with a curse (Deut 27.16, “dishonors,” ESV), as with all transgressions of God’s law (Gal 3.10).

EXHORTATION

1. Acknowledge the Rightness of This Law. Do not stand with the son who protests its injustice. A society tolerating youthful rebellion is doomed.
2. Exercise Your Parental Authority. Take charge of your family and insist on your children’s respect and obedience. Topple the patriarchy!
3. Confess Your Own Sins. By nature, we all are rebellious sons inside, and also outside except for God’s restraining grace. The father of the repenting prodigal son represents God (Luke 15.7, 10, 20).
4. Behold Jesus Christ. God only had one Son without sin, and he gave him over to the death penalty to save his rebellious sons from sins and guilt.
5. Embrace Christ! As your righteousness, and as your atonement. This is your only hope for salvation. Otherwise you will face him as your terrifying Judge and King. Amen.