

Sunday School Lesson

For Sunday, August 13

By Dr. Paul Caudill

THE PRIESTLY FUNCTION OF THE MINISTRY

Have you ever paused to consider the character of the task of the minister? Many of us, no doubt, have not.

In the lesson before us, therefore, we propose to consider "The Priestly Function of the Minister". Relatively few of those who study the lesson will enter the ministry. Nevertheless, those who do not become specially appointed ministers of God are nevertheless

servants of the Lord, and they are called upon constantly to assist God's specially chosen servants in their help undertakings. For this reason, the lesson should be of special interest.

A DIVINELY APPOINTED OFFICER

I Samuel 8:17-26

In our study of Eli, priest in Shiloh, and one of the principal characters in the lesson before us, we note that he was God-called. He did not come to his holy office merely by his own choosing. God had signified his desire that he occupy his important post: "And did choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest,

to offer upon mine altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me?" Out of all the tribes of Israel, God had chosen Eli to be his "priest". Likewise in the call of the boy Samuel, it was the only voice that came to him in the watches of the night, setting him apart for divine service.

Of course, in the matter of one's call to the ministry, there are many influences forever surrounding him and which, converging upon him, may be manifestly instrumental in leading him to make his decision. Nevertheless, if one is to be a minister of power, if he is to proclaim the unsearchable riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus, effectively, he must have the burning conviction that he is divinely called to his task. Otherwise, though he "ignites" with the tongues of men and of angels, his messages will amount to little more than "soot" and brass, or a "hissing symbol".

No young person should presume to enroll as a candidate for the ministry without the zealous conviction that he is, therefore, God-called. If he is in doubt, or troubled about the matter, there are ways and means whereby he

can come to a certain and indisputable conclusion. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally, and abridgeth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed." For let not that man think that he shall not receive anything of the Lord" (James 1:5-7). In coming to the right decision, one may have to wrestle all night in prayer, as did Jacob, or as did our Lord Christ—before his choice of the twelve. But a night of prayer is a small price to pay for a supreme conviction concerning one's life's work.

Since the office of the ministry is of divine appointment, it deserves the prayerful support and reverent respect of all. To this end, those who expect to enter the office should prepare themselves in every way possible for the important service they are to render. Jesus did not begin his formal public ministry until he was approximately thirty years of age. Those who would go out today as pastors and evangelists will do well to tarry until they are properly prepared and endowed with power from on high!

A SPIRITUAL SERVICE

I Samuel 2:29, 30, 35

The spiritual character of the service to be rendered by the minister is clearly set forth in verses 29, 30, and 35 of our lesson text. God is rebuking Eli for his failure to restrain his sons with reference to the sacrifices and offerings of the people. In yielding to his sons and in condoning their gluttony and idolatry, he had violated the commandments of God. It was utterly impossible for Eli to carry on, as one of God's chosen servants, and to render a distinctly spiritual service, when he was yielding to sins on the part of those of his household. Therefore, God's prophet reminded Eli that the priesthood would be taken from his family and that his family would suffer the consequences of their gross misdeeds.

There is only one standard for the children of God—the standard that is to be followed by minister and people alike—it does remain that the minister always occupied a unique position by virtue of his office. His influence therefore is bound to count for more than that of the average man. Both he, and of necessity, his family are constantly in the limelight. They are on that part of the stage where the most important section is progressing in the realm of God's kingdom here on earth. Try as they may, they can never deliver themselves completely from the conspicuous game of the spectators. That is one of the prices that has to be paid by those who are in any way associated with the ministerial office.

The minister needs to remember constantly that his office is a distinctly spiritual one. Whatever he does, wherever he goes, whatever he says, he is to have as his ultimate objective the advancement of God's kingdom on earth. If that is his mission, then, that is also, in a measure, the mission of his family—those intimates who are associated with him in the home. Whatever his family does, in a derogatory way, with reference to the kingdom of God, it will reflect upon him. It may be said that Eli was not responsible for the conduct of his sons. Perhaps he wasn't and perhaps he was. At any rate, God evidently felt that he had failed at some point in his relationship with his sons. Evidently, in some measure, he had come short of his best in disciplining them.

THE FRUITS OF FAILURE

I Samuel 4:12-18

Our lesson closes with the tragic picture of the fruits of failure in the ministerial office. Eli had manifestly failed to magnify the office of high priest, as God had expected of him. He had honored his sons above God. Therefore,

he had come to be "lightly esteemed" in the sight of God. As an unfaithful priest, he had met rebuke face to face.

One cannot read the story of the death of Eli, as recorded in the above passage, without a deep feeling of regret. It is filled with pathos.

It so happened that for a long time Israel had been delivered from the attacks of the Philistines, but at long last they were at war again. Because of their fear, the elders of Israel sent for the ark of the covenant, thinking that its presence in their midst would assure them of victory. The elderly Eli, evidently cognizant of the procedure, felt greatly distressed over the possible outcome of it all. We are told that "his heart trembled for the ark of God".

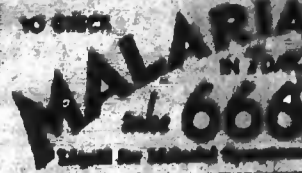
At long last the bad news came. A messenger, with his clothes rent, and with "earth upon his head" came and told Eli the full story. Israel had fled before the Philistines. There had been a great slaughter among the people. Rophni and Phinehas, his sons, were dead. Last, and worst of all, the ark of God was taken.

The sad story was too much for the old man. Ninety-eight years old, and almost blind, he fell from off his seat backward, by the side of the gate, and died with a broken

heart. It was a terrible end for Eli; but it was the fruit of his failure as a priest of the God of Israel.

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