

Is God's Law Cruel?

Deuteronomy 21:18–21

We are taking a week off from our series in the book of Numbers to consider the Bible's teaching about a stubborn and rebellious son. God's law specifies that, should a disobedient son be convicted of the crime of rebelling against his parents, the punishment is public execution by stoning! Now, to many Americans this might seem way too harsh: *It's not like he committed murder or anything—what's the big deal?* This law, as written, seems to “enlightened” Westerners like cruel and unusual punishment—something from the Dark Ages. We might reason: *Shouldn't the boy be allowed simply to offer a public apology for a first offense? Then maybe fined for a second offense, or a higher fine for a third offense? Why take him out and put him to death? After all, young people make mistakes.* Yet, here it is in black and white: the disobedient son's parents testify against him in open court. The elders of the city reach a verdict. At that point “all the men of his city . . . stone him to death with stones.” The body is buried, and that's that.

Look at this law with me. First, it involves a “son.” His age is not specified. Some people read this and think: *capital punishment for two-year-olds?* But then they hear the parents' testimony: “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.” Clearly, the son in view is not in the “terrible twos.” Any of us who are parents have seen it: the sweet toddler gets to age two, and what happens? Psychologists say something like: *The Terrible Twos is a normal developmental phase that typically occurs between 18 and 24 months, characterized by increased tantrums as children struggle to express their needs and emotions.* In other words, it's not deliberate disobedience. The boy simply hasn't matured to the point where he can express himself appropriately. It will pass. *But sometimes it doesn't!*—and a child's antisocial behavior only gets worse.

What the psychologist does not say is that the boy's behavior is *sin*. All children, no matter what their age, need to be taught: “Honor thy father and thy mother.” That's what God says. And it's required of all children, both boys and girls. Not to do this is sin.

Children, if you disobey your parents, you are failing to give them the honor that God requires. You may not understand why they say what they say, or require what they require, but until you become an adult—until you move out on your own and pay your own way and start your own family—you are required to obey them. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph. 6:1). You may think your parents' requirements are unreasonable, but as long as what they ask you to do is good and right, then you must do it. It is your Christian duty.

Norma and I know a committed Christian couple in another state. Since they couldn't conceive children on their own, they adopted three kids. Two of them

were sweet and compliant, but one—a girl—gave them trouble to the extreme. Her attitude was positively hateful and vengeful. She pushed her adoptive parents to the limit. They took her to church. They prayed for her. They sought help. They took her to psychologists and counselors, sent her to various agencies and reform-school-type treatment centers, all to no avail. She was incorrigible, right up through high school.

Make no mistake. The “son” in our Deuteronomy text this morning is not a toddler, not an elementary schooler or junior-higher, but one who is already making adult decisions. He is stubborn and rebellious; he will not follow family rules; he is a drunkard.

Notice that the decision to grab him by the arm and bring him to the elders at the city gate (where public trials were held) was the joint, united decision of both father and mother: “then his *father* and his *mother* shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city.” Matthew Poole’s observation is helpful: “The consent of both father and mother is required to prevent the abuse of this law to cruelty. And it cannot reasonably be supposed that both would agree without manifest necessity, and the son’s abominable and incorrigible wickedness.”¹ In other words, it is not the sole decision of just one parent having a bad day. *Both* parents had come to this decision after much struggle and prayer. It was not a decision that came lightly. And remember, this law was given to the covenant people—a people that highly valued children, as we saw in our adult Sunday school discussion this morning. The cry of Hebrew women in Bible times was: “Give me children, or else I die!” (Gen. 30:1). In the current case, God had given the parents a son. He was regarded as “a heritage from the LORD”—a reward from the hand of God.

Yet he was incorrigible! He wouldn’t obey. He was disrespectful—*all* the time. He was stealing his parents’ money and using it to purchase alcohol. He did this not once or twice. He was a drunkard. All of us know the effects of drunkenness, and the heavy toll it exacts on society. A drunken person in control of a vehicle can kill many innocent people.

Not only was this a joint decision of both the father and mother to testify against their incorrigible son (or daughter) in open court, but note that the elders of the city, in the words of Poole, “were first to examine the cause with all exactness, and then to pronounce the sentence.”

In other words, a decision of this magnitude was not left entirely to the parents’ discretion, but was made by the town elders after due deliberation in a court of justice. The court heard the parents’ sworn testimony. They were duly cross-examined. The accused son was given opportunity to speak in his own defense. But

¹ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Deut. 21:19 (Logos Bible Software)

a verdict had been arrived at, and it was not the decision of a single judge. Rather, it was the decision of all the elders jointly. All bore equal responsibility for their decision. Ideally, one of the priests or Levites would have offered prayer for God's wisdom and guidance in the case. The decision would not have been made lightly. The judges would have explained to the young man the gravity of his sin and the necessity of the court to follow and apply the law of God in his case.

There is no record in Scripture that this process was ever done! Poole observes that the Jews say this law was never actually put in practice. But the law stands as a reminder that sin affects not just the sinner himself, but also his family, and society also. One drunken person's fateful decision to commit a crime is going to affect not just himself, but others as well. His reprehensible behavior is going to undermine the family.

The clear teaching of Scripture is that a stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, disrespectful, alcohol-abusing son is a threat to his parents and is to be removed from society. Calvin's comments are helpful: "it cannot be doubted but that by rebellious children all are designated who are abusive or insulting to their father and mother. For if it be a capital crime to be disobedient to parents, much more is it to strike, or beat them, and to assail them with reproachful words. In sum, Moses declares that those are deserving of death who are of such a stubborn and intractable disposition as to reject the authority of their father and mother, and to hold them in contempt."²

The son has abused his parents. He has treated them evilly and hatefully, not just once, but over the course of many years. The parents would have felt pressure to shield their son and deny that there was really a problem. There was an honor-shame culture. They would want to maintain the impression that theirs was a well-run home, and everything was fine with their son. Their first instinct would not have been to ban him from their home and property. Over time they would have continued to shield and harbor him, but their kindness would only encourage him to be more abusive. Over time he would have learned that he can get away with his hateful behavior, and there will be no consequences. But if his parents failed to deal appropriately with their son's abusive behavior, it would actually show that *they prefer their son over God himself*, a violation of the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Abusive children are a problem in society. "Honor thy father and thy mother" is a universal duty. All people the world over must honor their parents, and those who abuse them must be punished. Scripture does not allow us to say that a person has psychological problems and is therefore not responsible for his actions—but this is exactly what many people say.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, Deut. 21:18 (Logos Bible Software)

This kind of son is a narcissist—an extremely selfish person with an inflated sense of self-importance, who doesn't care about anybody but himself. He tramples on others and doesn't care if he hurts them. He will use up all his parents' money on himself and not feel bad about it. If he destroys his parents' home and property he would feel no remorse; his conscience would not bother him in the slightest. If he squanders his parents' whole estate on drugs and alcohol, and they are left out on the street, penniless, he would not feel the sting of conscience. He thinks only of himself. He is an elder-abuser, and he doesn't even feel bad about it.

Where in the world is this law practiced? Nowhere! In the West, the abused parents might finally kick their son out of their house and try to get a personal protection order (PPO)—a court order designed to stop threats or violence against an innocent person, providing protection from someone who is threatening, hurting or harassing. A PPO can prohibit the abuser from entering your home, following or stalking you, or possessing a firearm. A PPO may or may not work, but at least there is the legal recognition that abusive behavior is occurring.

In Islamic societies it is worse. Under Sharia law, if the father dies, the abusive son inherits his father's whole estate—all of it. That's the way the law always works. Never mind the abuse that has occurred. The estate ends up belonging to the son—lock, stock and barrel. The mother gets nothing. If the abusive son eats up all his father's estate in pursuit of pleasures and alcohol, the mother could be left out on the street with no legal recourse.

God's law is not cruel, but merciful! It provides real protection for suffering people—but no society anywhere on the globe follows it, and we must face that fact.

What can be done? How should our text be applied in the gospel age? At a minimum: (1) Parents of a stubborn, disobedient, rebellious, alcohol-abusing son are to bring charges against him before a civil court, if that is an option, and before a church court, if the state refuses to help. If both parents testify against him, that is the testimony of two witnesses called for in our text. God's Word says: "Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you" (Deut. 17:6–7). That is the Bible way.

(2) The parents must not let their love for and loyalty to their son eclipse their love for and loyalty to the LORD. God himself must always have absolute first place in the believer's life. Humanly speaking, their heart goes out to their son. They fondly remember praying for a child, rejoicing when their prayers were answered. They remember the joy of holding their newborn, feeding him, providing for him, and watching him play as he grew up. Their hearts are broken.

They would love to return to those earlier days, but they are gone forever. Their son has turned into a monster. He cares nothing for them. All he cares about is himself.

(3) They must testify against their son publicly in open court. This is a testimony of their love for God over love of kin, and a testimony of their faith to a watching world.

(4) There should be a public execution, if such is legal. If not, then their testimony in open court stands as a witness against the injustice of the civil law.

Remember the description of the son in our text: “a *stubborn* and *rebellious* son who will not obey” (v. 18); “this son of ours is *stubborn* and *rebellious*” (v. 20).

In 1 Samuel, King Saul was ordered by God to utterly destroy the Amalekites, but he spared King Agag, and the Amelekites’ best sheep, oxen, fatlings, lambs, and goods. Samuel confronted Saul and rendered God’s verdict: “*Rebellion* is as the sin of witchcraft, and *stubbornness* is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king” (1 Sam. 15:23). The dynasty of Saul was replaced by the house of David. Note well: God has no toleration for *rebellion* and *stubbornness*.

Stubbornness is resolute adherence to your own ideas or desires. *Rebelliousness* is a contemptuous attitude born of disrespect.

God wants us to obey him out of sincere love for him. He wants loving obedience. And it is for our own good! He is a kind and merciful Father. He wants what is best for his children. He knows perfectly what is best for us. The Bible tells us that if we obey him, we are blessed. He is a perfect Father. His purpose is to bless us. “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:13).

The loving relationship that the LORD has with those who fear him is the example for the relationship between parents and children in human society in every age. If there is love and mutual respect between the generations, then things will be harmonious and productive. Parents and children will live together in a happy home. But if there is hatred and disrespect and *stubbornness* and *rebellion*, then family life will be a living hell.

Children were highly valued by the covenant people. A son who could carry on the family name! Think of the women who longed for a son but were barren or infertile—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Manoah’s wife, Hannah, the Shunammite woman of Elisha’s time, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

Our present text is an acknowledgment that family life is not always idillic, it is not always “happily ever after.” Sin rears its ugly head. Sin separates us from God. It also separates us from people we love. This is heart-rending. Our text this morning is a reminder that sin corrupts not only our relationship with God, but also our relationship with our fellow man.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, in its exposition of the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” teaches, among other things, that sins of children against their parents include “contempt of, and *rebellion* against their persons . . . in their lawful counsels, commands, and corrections” (Q&A 128). Our text this morning is the Scripture proof.

Children, when your parents command you to do something—even something so simple as, “Come here” or “Look at me”—then your responsibility is to comply. “Just a minute” is not the right response. Delayed obedience is *disobedience*! The principle is simple: *just obey*. When you obey your parents, you are obeying God. You are honoring them, and this pleases your Father in heaven!

The fact is that none of us obeys our parents perfectly. None of us obeys God perfectly. The only son who obeyed his father perfectly is the Lord Jesus Christ. Our imperfect obedience can never please God. That is why we need a Savior—a Savior who went to the cross and died for us, a Savior whose perfect obedience all his life long is credited to all those who look to him for salvation. The only way you can be saved is through Christ. The good news of the Gospel is that “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord *shall* be saved.” Not “*may*” be saved, if he fulfills some other requirement. “*Shall* be saved”! Oh, dear sinner, ask Jesus to save you.

The Bible teaches what true masculinity is. Being irresponsible is not a masculine trait. Wearing long hair isn’t either. Having multiple sex partners is not a masculine trait. Male conquest might be considered such according to the world’s standards, but the Christian’s duty is to cast out everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. The Christian must bring his every thought into obedience to Christ, including thought and understanding about what constitutes masculinity.

The Christian man honors his parents. The Christian man honors women—both in general and in particular. That includes watching out for their wellbeing, desiring the best for them, assisting them, praying for them. To mistreat a woman—especially your own mother—is not a petty sin. It is a serious violation of God’s holy law. To honor your mother is what is required of a godly son. There is no expiration date on this command. No matter *your* age—no matter your *mother’s* age—your duty is to honor her.

Wickedness is bound up in the heart of man, and sons (and daughters) do not always obey their parents. Parents, too, are guilty, for they do not insist on obedience. They are indulgent toward their children, not nipping the seeds of rebellion in the bud. If you have a garden, you know that weeds must be pulled before they take over. Little weeds grow into big, intractable weeds that cannot be pulled out. Sometimes, they cannot even be *dug* out. There are remnants of roots, below ground, that will grow back and try to take over again.

Dear people of God, know that God's perfect law is not cruel. It is intended by a loving God to train us in the way of righteousness. It points us to the only Savior. Look to him in faith! Amen.