

"A Stubborn and Rebellious Son"

When you stand firm in a good cause, we usually say that you are steadfast. When you stand firm in a bad cause, we usually say you are stubborn. Stubbornness is not generally an admirable trait, especially if you are stubborn over a great evil. Of course sometimes people who are stubborn about something don't see it as a great evil. They in one way or another have justified in their mind whatever it is that they won't budge over, and so they have probably commended themselves in their mind. Other times though, stubbornness can just be a selfish spirit of rebellion. The thing someone can be stubborn about in that situation is that they are just stubborn in their defiance. They might set their mind on doing the exact opposite of whatever the authority in their life is telling them to do.

Children can be stubborn. Mules can be stubborn. Adults can be stubborn. This passage addresses one more extreme incident of stubbornness, but it's something we can all relate to in different ways. Today we'll think about stubbornness as we look at this passage. We'll look first at the specifics of this law in the old covenant for dealing with a stubborn and rebellious son. After that we'll think about this in light of God's heart in seeking and saving the lost.

Let's begin then by looking at the specifics of this law here in Deuteronomy. Here you have the process for punishing a stubborn and rebellious son. Let's think about the description of this son first. The general description of this son is just that: stubborn and rebellious. These two labels are really a sort of summary of the son's entire condition. He is stubborn in that he is not willing to change. He is rebellious in that he neither heeds his parents' authority nor is willing to do what is right in general.

Just look at the rest of the description beginning in verse 18. This flushes out their condition. It says they won't obey his parents. That's part of the rebellious aspect of the son. Not only that, but it also says that the parents have tried disciplining him, but he still won't listen to them. That's the stubbornness. Then notice the further description given down in verse 20 by the parents. They repeat the claim that he is stubborn and rebellious, but they also add that he is a glutton and a drunkard.

Adding the fact that he is a glutton and a drunkard is probably intended here to be an example, not the only specific crimes where this would apply. But the point is that this stubbornness and rebellion is not just an internal family struggle where the parents are just being too strict and the son is starting to rebel against them. No, the son is actually engaging in a lifestyle that is destructive and sinful and against God's covenant. By the way, all of this tells us that this law is obviously not directed at young children. This would have been an older child to be described in this was as someone who is stubborn in their gluttony and drunkenness.

In other words, the sort of scenario envisioned here under the old covenant is not some parents who just want to get rid of their child the moment they did anything wrong. The scenario envisioned here under the old covenant is a long patient process of parents trying to raise a child up right, but the child persistently rebelling, persistently fighting against and ignoring the

parental discipline, persistently going down a path of wickedness. This is a child that is old enough now to be well aware of their actions and has a full understanding of the consequences of those actions. In our government, you might call this a child that is old enough to be tried as an adult. But again the picture here is of the extreme situation of an incorrigible child that will not repent. Not just rebellious. Not just stubborn. But stubborn and rebellious. Every other action by the parent to correct the son has failed. And so this law was meant then to be the last resort for the parents, not a preemptive strike.

And so in this extreme circumstance, this then outlines the process the parents were to follow in the old covenant in Israel. Essentially the parents take the kid to court. Verse 19 describes them taking the child to the elders at the city gate. That's the typical place legal disputes would be settled back then. Verse 20 describes the parents essentially giving testimony to the elders about the stubborn and rebellious son. Notice that both parents have to speak to the elders here. The testimony of just one parent wouldn't have been enough. Recall, the Torah required at least two witnesses to establish a legal fact; no one could be put to death in the old covenant on the testimony of only one witness. Thus, both parents have to come before the elders in agreement on their testimony about the child.

And so what's clearly implied then is that the parents aren't the ultimate decision makers in this situation. They give their testimony to the elders; the elders are going to decide whether this child's circumstances warrant the death penalty under Israel's laws. If the elders make that determination, then it says that the whole city was to put the son to death. The son would be stoned to death by the entire city; the typical way capital punishment was executed under Israel's laws.

Of course, this would have actually provided a measure of protection to the accused child compared to some other cultures back then. For example, in ancient Roman law the head of the family, called the *pater familias* in Latin, had the power of life and death over the children. In other words, if you were a Roman head of the family, you could put one of your children to death, and no one was allowed to ask you any questions. You would be the accuser, judge, and executer. That's obviously not what's allowed for here for Israel. The parents would be the accuser and multiple witnesses; but the elders were the judges and the whole city was the executer.

And yet despite the Jewish law providing more protection compared to say the ancient Roman laws, we can't help but read this passage and notice the severity of the punishment. As a parent, I think most of us would find ourselves hard pressed to ever imagine a circumstance where you would want to execute this. Of course, even in Israel, we have no records that confirm if anyone in Israel ever followed this. In fact, later Rabbinic laws that we do have put so many additional restrictions around this law that it's almost impossible to conceive of the circumstances for which this capital punishment would have ever been executed.

And yet it's the severity we should notice here. This incorrigible child had become guilty of a crime worthy of death under the old covenant. Now many crimes in the old covenant had that same punishment attached to it. That stands out to us as we read about Israel's civil laws. Often when those laws are described you get the same commentary as you have at the end of verse 21. "So you shall purge the evil from your midst." This stubborn and rebellious son was being cut off from the holy people of God. We've already described

this in the past as we've studied Deuteronomy. This language describes a physical excommunication under the old covenant. This is something the New Testament applies to the church's practice of spiritual excommunication today.

And so let's provide a little assessment so far about this law. First, this law is an expired law. This was a civil law of Israel; that political nation as it stood then was destroyed. This law is not something God has required of other civil governments. We can learn from this law, but God hasn't commanded us to implement it. Rather we can wisely learn principles from laws like this and consider how they might influence our own legal system. For example, there might come a time today where parents have to turn a son or daughter over to the legal authority if they commit some heinous crime. And yet the severity of this law for Israel I think especially represents their holy status as a nation. They were the visible church at that time as a nation. They were a holy nation living in a holy land and God gave them many laws to show forth external, physical, holiness. The many capital punishments under the old covenant were measures to keep physical holiness among the people. And so the severity of this law is understandable under the old covenant, though not something that God has required of civil governments in general.

A further general assessment we can take from this law is that parents need to be disciplining their children. That's assumed to be happening in this law already. That's the ordinary and expected way to handle our children. That's an obligation that we see throughout Scripture. That obligation has not expired. And so parents, you continue to have an obligation for disciplining your children. Disciplining children involves teaching. It also involves corrective measures. This is described here as "chastening" in verse 18.

In fact the word used for chastening in verse 18 carries both these ideas; both instruction and correction. The word basically describes correction that results in education. In other words, the corrective measures that a parent employs with their children are intended strictly to train and educate them. In other words, you don't spank your children to vent your frustration. If you do, you are not chastening them at that point, you are using them as your punching bag. That's wrong. Biblical chastening is to employ corrective measures in order to teach the child. Spanking, for example, must always be to aid in teaching the child about obedience and godliness. Every act of chastening must be an act of love; it should be done out of genuine concern for the child's well being and growth.

Of course, in the other direction, this means that children have an ongoing call to obey their parents. Though this law here in Deuteronomy has expired, a child's obligation to heed their parents' discipline has not. Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Hopefully you have good parents that are raising you up in godly ways. Part of learning to obey your parents is that you are learning how to obey all the authorities you will find yourself under in life. Ultimately, learning to obey your parents, will help you in learning how to obey God. If you can't obey your earthly father, who you can see and hear very directly, it will be harder to obey your heavenly father. Learning to obey your parents is learning to obey God and all the authorities he places in your life.

So I'd like to change gears a bit now and begin to step back and think about all of this in light of God's heart toward the lost. You see, when we read

about the strictness of this law under the old covenant, we are reminded what our sin ultimately deserves. This stubborn and rebellious son is ultimately cut off when all efforts by the parents to turn him back have failed. This wayward son is then permanently cut off from God's people. But this is a picture of more than just a family conflict between parents and a wayward child. This is a picture of the sort of stubbornness and rebellion that each of us can have with God as our heavenly father. How often God chastens us in our life. And yet if we do not heed God's chastening; if we persist in rebelling stubbornly from God, ignoring all his efforts to turn us back to himself; then we face the threat of being cut off permanently from God and his people. Spiritual stubbornness and rebellion is pictured here in this Deuteronomy passage.

That is actually a description of Israel's history, isn't it? The Old Testament often describes Israel as stiff-necked in regards to their relationship with God. That's just another way of talking about stubborn rebellion. When you read the prophets, you see God warning Israel time and time again about their stubborn rebellion. You see God trying to chaste them through some of the covenant curses, to try to wake them up to their sins. The picture the prophets present with Israel is God having tried everything with wayward Israel, and yet they stubbornly persisted in rebellion. And so God cut them off. He sent Assyria and Babylon to destroy them. This law in Deuteronomy shows the strict legal justice that God holds toward his stubborn rebellious people.

So in one sense when we think about this law here in Deuteronomy, we should take it beyond just the earthly parent-child relationship. We should turn and think about our own stubborn ways we rebel against God. In what ways are you like stiff-necked Israel in your spiritual walk? In what ways are you like a stubborn and rebellious child toward God as your heavenly father? In our past, how many of us have deserved to be permanently cut off from God for the ways we've rejected him. I'll be honest. I'm willing to admit that I've deserved this. In one sense or another, we've all experienced sins that we've not wanted to give up. I'm sure even now, if we are honest with ourselves, we can examine our life and find some sin that we just really struggle to want to let go.

It's when this is taken to its extreme, that church discipline comes in today. When someone is seen as stubborn and rebellious as a Christian in the church, unwilling to heed the elder's discipline, we have a technical word for it. It's call contumacious. Contumacious. In the church discipline context, it basically means that you are stubborn and rebellious and won't heed the elder's discipline. That's often when the elders have to resort to excommunication, much like this passage here. It's when the so-called Christian repeatedly refuses to look to obey God's commands, and repeatedly rejects the elder's discipline, that we have to excommunicate them; cut them off spiritually from the church to preserve the holiness of the church, and hopefully wake them up.

And so we can think about God's heart in all this. In terms of his heart for strict justice, he says the spiritually stubborn and rebellious are to be cut off from himself. And yet even when he cut off Israel by destroying them, even then he preserved a remnant. You see, in the midst of God's strict justice, we also see a kind and compassionate and merciful father. With God, there is hope for the spiritually stubborn and contumacious because we know how gracious our God is. Just think of yourself. You can read a passage like this and know that no matter what your son or daughter did how it would

probably be impossible for you to actually keep the strict letter of the law and turn them over for this extreme punishment. Our gracious love for even our wayward children would hold us back. If we know how difficult it would be for us to have our child put to death, we can begin to understand God's heart toward his chosen ones, even when they wander stubbornly.

Just think of the parables of Luke 15. Don't these show God's heart for mercy? The parable of the one lost sheep out of ninety-nine, shows the heart of God. He seeks and saves the lost. The parable of the woman's lost coin, one out of ten, shows us the same thing. God seeks and saves the lost. In the prodigal son parable, we have a very similar circumstance even to what is addressed here in this passage in Deuteronomy. There the stubborn and rebellious son goes off and lives in drunkenness and gluttony. The father doesn't look to execute strict justice on him at that time. He mercifully waits for his son to realize what he really had all along. The father rejoices and celebrates when his stubborn rebellious son returns to him! This is a picture of God's heart toward the lost. He pursues the stubborn and rebellious. He wants them to repent and return. He is so very, very, patient. God seeks and saves the lost son. He rejoices when they return to him.

And yet these parables don't tell the whole story, do they? They don't tell how God is able to forgive the wayward and wandering. In the old covenant, even if a son or daughter did heed their parents chastening when they sinned, they still needed atonement. That's what all the sacrifices in the old covenant were for. And whenever a stubborn and rebellious individual returns to God, they are forgiven. But that's because there is a sacrifice to provide that forgiveness. That sacrifice is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Think of the irony here of how God is able to keep strict justice while at the same time be merciful by forgiving the wayward. Think of the irony here. God puts to death his one righteous son to pay the penalty for our stubborn rebellion. God puts to death his one righteous son Jesus, so that our stubborn rebellion can be forgiven. As this passage reminds us at the end, to die on the cross is a sign of divine curse. Paul in the New Testament applies that rightly to Christ. Christ became a curse for us. We deserved death. We deserved to be cut off. Christ died in our place. Christ was cut off for us. He did this so that we could be forgiven.

God now tells us that this forgiveness can be received as a gift. You can turn today from your stubborn rebellion against God. You can repent of your sins and believe in Jesus. Confess with your mouth that he is your Lord and Savior. Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead for you; that your sins would be paid for on the cross.

If you are sitting there today and are not a Christian, then I would challenge you to recognize that you are essentially in stubborn rebellion against God. Will you respond in faith and repentance today when confronted with this stubborn rebellion? Will you take hold of the forgiveness made available to you in Jesus? Believe on him, and you will be saved. You will be lifted up and set as a child of God, beloved by your heavenly father.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, is there a sin in your life that you are stubbornly hanging on to? Think about it in your mind right now. What is it that you don't want to let go of. This is a sin Christ died for. Give it up today. It does you no good.

Instead, heed the discipline of the Lord. You see, this is how we can recognize true believers from false believers. You show yourself to be a true disciple of Christ when you heed the discipline of the Lord. It doesn't mean that you won't have times where you stubbornly hold onto a sin for a time. But it will mean that when God brings chastisement into your life, that ultimately you will respond. It means you will endeavor to heed the voice of your heavenly father in your life.

That voice can come in different forms. It can come through the Bible. It can come through your elders who bring you the words of Scripture. It can come from your close loved ones who know you the best, looking to gently restore you in godliness according to the law of God. It can come in prayer as you suddenly find conviction on your heart by the Holy Spirit.

But when you hear God's voice speaking into your life about a particular area of sin, don't ignore it. You see, it's the false believer who claims to be a Christian but repeatedly ignores God's discipline in his life. Romans 2:4 tells us that God's kindness toward us is meant to lead us to repentance. Our salvation has an end trajectory - a life of repentance; a life learning to heed God's voice more and more. It's the false believers that won't ever heed God's voice and just stubbornly rebel. It's the true believers that acknowledge their sins, they confess them, and then they look to Christ for forgiveness and grace and growth. The true believer, the Bible tells us, will then experience fruit. The fruit may be small at first, but there will be real fruit when you are connected with Jesus. The false believer continually makes excuses for why there is no fruit in their life. The true believer continually tends to the garden when the fruit is small; planting, and watering, and pruning with the means of God's grace.

If you are someone genuinely *struggling* over your sins, then that probably isn't you being stubborn. That is exactly what the Christian life will look like until Christ returns. There will be a struggle to fight against the sin that still remains in our life. It will be a constant battle of putting off the old and putting on the new. We're not talking so much today about those struggles. Those are normal for the Christian. What we are addressing today is our spiritual stubbornness. Those times when we are unwilling to repent and turn from certain sins. It's when we have that attitude toward sin that we put ourselves in a dangerous spot. This passage today has told us how serious this is. Stubborn rebellion against God is not how God's people are to live. True believers will ultimately seek repentance and change when they recognize sin in their life. True believers don't remain stubborn in their rebellion. True believers will ultimately respond to God's chastening voice when it comes into their life.

Do not resist God's Spirit or spurn his grace when he confronts you on a certain sin. Look instead to actually struggle against that sin. Turn from your stubbornness today by acknowledging those sins in your life. Endeavor anew again today to grow in obedience to the Lord. Begin the struggle and fight against that chronic sin. Take heart, brothers and sisters. Our Lord knows our stubbornness. He knows our hard hearts. He is able to overcome even these as we look to his grace by faith. He will not reject a cry to him for grace and help over any area of sin in your life. Instead he will remind you, that even over your toughest sins to conquer, that his grace is indeed sufficient for you. Let's cling to that grace again today. Amen.

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