

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Eli's Wicked Sons and the Lord Calls Samuel

1 Samuel 2:12-3:21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson sets two priesthoods in sharp contrast and asks what God truly values in those who serve Him. The doctrinal stakes are the nature of genuinely knowing God versus mere religious activity, the seriousness of dishonoring God in worship and leadership, and the reality that God still speaks and calls. Help the class see that Hophni and Phinehas show how privilege without a humble heart becomes corruption, that Eli shows how knowing the right thing without the resolve to do it brings ruin, and that Samuel shows the beauty of a heart that listens and obeys. Anchor the warning of 1 Samuel 2:30, that those who honor God He will honor, and connect the failure of Eli's sons to Jesus' warning in Matthew 7 that not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' truly belongs to Him.

The lesson also aims directly at the student's spiritual formation. Press the class to examine whether their religion is fellowship with God or merely familiarity with holy things. Many in the room have grown up around the church and may mistake activity for relationship; this passage gently exposes that danger and calls them to a listening, obedient heart. Aim to leave each student with a renewed posture of honest listening, 'Speak; for thy servant heareth,' and a willingness to lead faithfully in whatever sphere God has entrusted to them.

Question 1

Student Question:

What does the contrast between Eli's sons and the boy Samuel reveal about what God values, and why does nearness to holy things never guarantee a holy heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The writer deliberately weaves two stories together. Just after we read of Eli's sons defiling the worship of God, we read, "But Samuel ministered before the Lord, being a child." The word "but" does the work of a spotlight, throwing the wickedness of the priests into stark relief against the faithfulness of the boy. The contrast is the message.

Hophni and Phinehas had everything the world counts as religious advantage: the priestly line, the holy garments, daily access to the altar. Samuel had none of it by birth; he was simply a child lent to the Lord. Yet God's favor rested on the boy and not on the priests. Position counted for nothing; the condition of the heart counted for everything.

This is one of the most important lessons a person raised in the church can learn. We can be surrounded by holy things, fluent in holy words, and busy in holy work, and still have a heart far from God. Nearness to the things of God is not the same as nearness to God.

Set the stage for the class by holding up these two frames side by side and asking which one their own life more resembles. The question is not where we stand in the building, but where our heart stands before the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God values the condition of the heart far above position, pedigree, or religious privilege.
- Nearness to holy things is no guarantee of a holy heart (1 Samuel 2:12).
- The deliberate contrast between the priests and Samuel teaches that faithfulness, not status, draws God's favor.
- Children and the lowly can walk closer to God than the celebrated and the credentialed.

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the two pictures, the priests or the boy, does your own walk more resemble?
- Why is it dangerous to mistake religious activity for closeness to God?
- How can a congregation help its members grow real hearts and not just religious habits?

Question 2

Student Question:

The priests used their sacred position to serve themselves rather than God and the people. Where are you tempted to use a role, gift, or position God gave you for your own advantage rather than His glory?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The sins of Hophni and Phinehas were not small. They seized the people's offerings by force, taking the best portions for themselves before the fat was even burned to God, so that "men abhorred the offering of the Lord." They turned an act of worship into an opportunity for greed.

Their position, which was meant to be a trust for serving God and shepherding the people, became a tool for self-indulgence. They stood between the people and God, and they used that sacred place to fatten themselves. This is the corruption of a calling: taking what was given for service and bending it toward self.

The danger is not confined to ancient priests. Anyone entrusted with a role, a gift, an influence, or a position can quietly begin to use it for personal advantage. A teacher can teach to be admired; a leader can lead to be served; a generous person can give to be seen.

Invite the class to examine the roles God has placed in their hands. The test is simple but searching: Am I using this for His glory and others' good, or have I begun to bend it toward myself?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God-given roles are trusts for serving others, not tools for self-advantage.
- Using sacred things for selfish gain corrupts worship and harms God's people.
- The sins of leaders can drive others away from the things of God (1 Samuel 2:17).
- Every gift and position must be regularly examined for whose glory it actually serves.

Discussion Prompts

- What role, gift, or position has God entrusted to you, and whom does it ultimately serve?
- How can good service quietly drift into self-service?
- What would it look like to hold your position as a trust rather than a privilege?

Question 3

Student Question:

Scripture says Hophni and Phinehas "knew not the Lord," though they served at His altar daily. What does it mean to truly know God, and how is that different from merely knowing about Him or being busy in His service?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The most chilling line in the chapter is the verdict on Eli's sons: they "knew not the Lord." These men performed the sacrifices, recited the law, and lived their whole lives inside the worship of God, yet the inspired writer says they did not know Him. Their religion was a shell with nothing living inside.

To know God in the biblical sense is far more than knowing facts about Him. It is relationship, reverence, love, and obedience. It is the difference between knowing a person and knowing a file about a person. The priests had information without intimacy, ritual without relationship.

Jesus presses the same point with sobering force in Matthew 7:21-23. People who prophesied and did mighty works in His name will hear, 'I never knew you.' It is possible to be busy in the Lord's work and still be a stranger to the Lord Himself.

This searches every one of us who has grown comfortable in church life. The question is not how much we know about God, or how active we are, but whether we actually know Him, walk with Him, listen to Him, and obey Him from the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Truly knowing God is relationship and obedience, not merely knowing facts about Him.
- It is possible to be religiously active and still not know the Lord (Matthew 7:21–23).
- Ritual and routine can hollow out into mere form when the heart is absent.
- The faithful know God’s voice and follow Him (John 10:27).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between knowing about God and truly knowing Him?
- How can someone tell whether their religion has become an empty shell?
- What practices help us move from information about God to fellowship with God?

Question 4

Student Question:

Samuel “grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men.” What habits and choices help a person grow steadily in favor with God rather than drifting, and which of those do you most need?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Threaded through this passage is a quiet, hopeful refrain about Samuel: he “grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men” (2:26). The same kind of words are later used of the boy Jesus in Luke 2:52. Real spiritual growth is steady, daily, and observable.

Samuel’s growth did not happen by accident. It grew out of faithful service in small things, sleeping near the ark, tending the lamp, ministering before the Lord, day after day, year after year. He was being formed in the ordinary faithfulness of obscure tasks.

We often imagine spiritual growth as dramatic moments, but Scripture more often pictures it as steady cultivation. Favor with God comes through humble obedience repeated over time, not through occasional bursts of zeal. The boy who swept the floor became the prophet the whole nation trusted.

Ask the class to consider their own trajectory. Are we drifting, plateaued, or steadily growing? Which small, faithful habits, prayer, Scripture, service, worship, are we keeping, and which have we let slip?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual growth is steady, daily, and observable, not merely occasional (Luke 2:52).
- Faithfulness in small, obscure tasks forms a heart that grows in favor with God.
- Favor with God comes through humble, repeated obedience over time.
- Drifting is the default; growth requires intentional, ongoing cultivation.

Discussion Prompts

- What small, faithful habits are most shaping your growth right now?
- Which habit have you let slip that you need to recover?
- How is steady growth different from occasional bursts of religious enthusiasm?

Question 5

Student Question:

Eli rebuked his sons but failed to restrain them, honoring them above God. What does this teach about the seriousness of how we lead in our homes and in the church, and about the difference between mild disapproval and real correction?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Eli is a more sympathetic figure than his sons, but his failure is real and instructive. He does rebuke them, “Why do ye such things?” but his words have no teeth. God’s indictment is sharp: Eli “honourest thy sons above me” and did not restrain them (2:29; 3:13). He knew, and he winced, but he would not act.

There is a vast difference between mild disapproval and genuine correction. Eli expressed his displeasure but never used the authority he had to stop the evil. A leader who only frowns at sin while permitting it shares in the failure. Love that will not confront is not the love God calls for.

This speaks directly to parents and to leaders in the church. To honor God in our homes and in His house is sometimes to do the hard thing, to confront, to discipline, to risk the relationship for the sake of righteousness. Eli loved his sons but failed them by refusing to restrain them.

The principle reaches every sphere of God-given responsibility. We are not merely to disapprove of wrong; where God has given us charge, we are to act. Silence and softness in the face of sin can be a betrayal of the very ones we love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honoring God sometimes requires the hard work of correction, not merely disapproval.
- Mild rebuke without real restraint is a failure of leadership (1 Samuel 3:13).
- Honoring people above God, even our own children, leads to ruin.
- Faithful leadership in the home and church requires resolve to do the hard thing (1 Timothy 3:4–5).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between expressing disapproval and actually correcting?
- Where might love require us to do a hard thing we would rather avoid?
- How can parents and leaders honor God even when it costs them relationally?

Question 6

Student Question:

Eli knew what was right yet lacked the resolve to act on it. Where in your own life do you already know what God requires but are hesitating to do the hard, costly thing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Behind Eli's failure lies a paralysis that many of us recognize. He knew the right thing. He could name his sons' sin and grieve over it. What he lacked was the resolve to act on what he knew. Knowledge without obedience left his house in ruins.

This is one of the most common and dangerous gaps in the Christian life: the distance between knowing and doing. James warns that the one who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin (James 4:17). Eli is a living illustration of that verse.

Press the class gently here, because all of us have our hesitations. There is usually some hard thing we already know God requires, a conversation we avoid, a sin we tolerate, an obedience we keep postponing. The problem is rarely ignorance; it is resolve.

Invite honest reflection. What is the one thing you already know God is asking of you that you have not yet done? Eli's story is a sober reminder that delayed obedience can harden into disaster, and that knowing is never enough without doing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Knowing the right thing without the resolve to do it leads to ruin.
- The gap between knowing and doing is one of the most dangerous in the Christian life (James 4:17).
- Delayed obedience can harden into disobedience over time.
- God calls His people not merely to agree with the truth but to act on it.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one thing you already know God is asking of you that you have not yet done?
- Why is it so easy to substitute agreeing with truth for obeying it?
- What helps you move from knowing to actually doing the hard thing?

Question 7**Student Question:**

God's word was "precious" and rare in those days, yet He chose to speak and call Samuel by name. What does this teach us about God's initiative in seeking and calling His people even in dark times?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter three opens with a haunting description of the times: “the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision.” Revelation was rare, the spiritual climate was dim, and even the lamp of God in the temple had nearly gone out. It was a dark season for the people of God.

And yet, into that darkness, God speaks. He takes the initiative. He calls a sleeping boy by name, not once but repeatedly, patiently, until the call is recognized. The God who seems silent has not stopped seeking His people; He simply speaks on His own terms and in His own time.

This is enormously encouraging. God’s apparent silence is never His abandonment. Even when His word is rare and the times are dark, He is still moving, still calling, still raising up those who will hear. The story of redemption is full of God speaking into seasons that looked hopeless.

Help the class see God’s initiative here. Samuel did not climb up to God; God came down to Samuel. Our walk with Him begins not with our reaching for Him but with His gracious reaching for us, and He still calls people by name today through His revealed word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God takes the initiative to seek and call His people, even in dark and silent times.
- God’s apparent silence is not abandonment; He speaks on His own terms.
- God calls people by name, personally and patiently (1 Samuel 3:4–10).
- Even in dim seasons, God is at work raising up faithful servants.

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever experienced a season when God seemed silent? How did He prove faithful?
- What does it mean that God takes the initiative in calling us?
- How does God speak to and call His people today?

Question 8

Student Question:

Samuel did not at first recognize the Lord’s voice and needed Eli’s guidance to respond. Who has God placed in your life to help you discern and respond to Him, and how can you both receive and offer such help?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When God first called, Samuel did not recognize the voice. Three times he ran to Eli, assuming the old priest had called him. It took Eli, flawed as he was, to perceive that the Lord was calling the boy and to teach him how to respond: “Say, Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth.”

There is real instruction here about how God uses others in our spiritual lives. Samuel needed a guide to help him discern and respond to God. Even in Eli's decline, God used him to point the next generation toward the Lord. None of us learns to hear God entirely alone.

This is a picture of the value of the body of God's people. Older believers, teachers, and mentors help younger ones recognize God's voice and respond rightly. And we are meant both to receive such help humbly and to offer it faithfully to others.

Encourage the class to think in both directions. Who has helped you learn to hear and answer God? And whom might God be calling you to guide, the way Eli, for all his weakness, guided Samuel toward that life-changing answer?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God often uses others to help us discern and respond to His voice.
- We are not meant to learn to hear God entirely on our own.
- Even flawed people can be used by God to guide the next generation (1 Samuel 3:8-9).
- We are called both to receive spiritual guidance humbly and to offer it faithfully.

Discussion Prompts

- Who has helped you learn to recognize and respond to God?
- Whom might God be calling you to guide toward Him?
- Why is it humbling, yet important, to admit we need others in our walk with God?

Question 9

Student Question:

God gave Samuel a heavy word of judgment against Eli's house, and Samuel had to deliver it faithfully though it was painful. What does this passage reveal about God's holiness, His justice toward persistent sin, and the cost of speaking His truth faithfully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The word God gives Samuel is not gentle; it is a confirmation of judgment against the house of Eli, judgment that will not be purged with sacrifice or offering forever. The young boy, in his first prophetic act, is handed a heavy and painful message, and the next morning he is afraid to tell Eli what he has heard.

This reveals God's holiness and His justice. The sins of Eli's sons, and Eli's failure to restrain them, are not overlooked. God is patient, but persistent, unrepented sin meets His righteous judgment. The same God who tenderly calls a boy by name is the God whose holiness will not wink at corruption in His house.

It also reveals the cost of faithfulness. Samuel must speak the truth even when it is hard, even to the man who raised him. When Eli presses him, Samuel “told him every whit, and hid nothing from him.” Faithful servants of God do not edit His word to make it comfortable.

This is the heaviest point of the lesson. Hold together both truths: God is gracious and seeking, and God is holy and just. His call to Samuel and His judgment on Eli’s house are not in tension; they are two faces of the same righteous God. And those who carry His word must carry all of it, faithfully and without flinching, while remembering that the same God offers mercy to all who will turn to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is holy and just; persistent, unrepented sin meets His righteous judgment (1 Samuel 3:11–14).
- God’s patience is real but not endless; corruption in His house is not overlooked.
- Faithful servants must speak God’s truth even when it is hard and unwelcome.
- God’s grace in calling and His justice in judging are two faces of the same righteous character.

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage hold together God’s tenderness and His holiness?
- Why is it important that Samuel told Eli ‘every whit’ and hid nothing?
- What makes it hard to speak God’s truth faithfully, and how can we do it with both courage and love?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across this lesson, name one specific way the Lord is forming you to be more like Jesus, whether in genuinely knowing God, leading faithfully, or saying with Samuel, “Speak; for thy servant heareth.”

Commentary and Teaching Notes

As we close, draw the threads together. We have seen privilege without a heart for God, leadership without resolve, and a dark season pierced by the voice of God calling a boy who learned to listen. Each picture presses us toward the character of Christ.

Jesus is the One who truly knew the Father, who always did the hard and faithful thing, who said in the garden, ‘Not my will, but thine, be done.’ To grow more like Him is to move from familiarity with holy things to fellowship with God, from knowing the right thing to doing it, from telling God our plans to saying, ‘Speak; for thy servant heareth.’

Invite each student to be specific. It is easy to nod at Samuel and remain unchanged. Far better to name one concrete way the Lord is forming us through this passage: a place we will finally obey, a posture of listening we will adopt, a role we will steward faithfully.

End by lifting the class's eyes upward. The God who called Samuel by name still calls us through His word, still seeks our hearts, and still shapes those who answer Him into the image of His Son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual growth means moving from familiarity with holy things to real fellowship with God.
- Christ models perfect knowing of the Father, perfect obedience, and a perfectly listening heart.
- God still calls His people through His word and forms those who answer (Romans 8:29).
- Naming one concrete response helps the truth take root in daily life.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific way this passage is forming you to be more like Jesus?
- Is your greatest need right now to know God more truly, to obey more fully, or to listen more carefully?
- How will you practice 'Speak; for thy servant heareth' this week?