

Short Coattails – FMC – 1 Samuel 8:1-22 – 1-17-10

Some U.S. presidents have long coattails. Some have short coattails.
That has nothing to do with the cut of their suits.

When a president has long coattails in an election, the members of the president's party who are running for Congress, governor, and other offices tend also to be successful in getting elected.

When a president has short coattails, he'll win, but he'll have little or no effect on other races.

In the area of business, sometimes a father owns a business and has a son—a son who inherits the business.

If the father has been trustworthy, hard-working, friendly and wise, he will have some long coattails for his son to grab on to.

But of course, if the son turns out to NOT be trustworthy, hard-working, friendly and wise, the father's long coattails will soon unravel and provide nothing to hang on to.

When a son or daughter tries to get a free ride from father or mother, when they think they can make in on their parents' reputation, when they depend on somebody else's coattails instead of on their own creativity and initiative and integrity, they won't get very far.

The 8th chapter of Samuel is about coattails—short ones—Samuel's.

Samuel was a great judge of Israel.

A judge back then was a prophet, a religious leader, and a political leader.

Samuel was in the judge business, and as he got older he had a desire to keep the business in the family.

He had 2 sons, Joel and Abijah.

He appointed them as assistant judges over Israel.

But as v. 3 says, Joel and Abijah “did not walk in his ways.”

They used the position handed them by their father
as an opportunity to line their own pockets.

They figured out pretty quickly that accepting bribes made them rich,
and so making money became far more important to them
than doing justice.

Samuel’s coattails were long enough to get them the position,
but his coattails were incredibly short in terms of character.

The story of Samuel and his 2 sons Joel and Abijah is not the first
biblical story of sons taking over a father’s position by grabbing
onto his coattails.

It can be tried even if the father is dead,
as it happened in the case of Gideon.

Gideon had put the Midianites to flight with a small crew of 300 men
armed with pitchers, lamps, and trumpets.

But when he died much later of old age, one of his sons—Abimelech—
decided he could use his father’s reputation to gain power
for himself.

By the way, Abimelech’s name states his case:
it means “My father is king.”

So this guy named “My father is king” went around giving speeches
at political fund-raisers.

In his speeches he constantly dropped his dead father’s name;
after all, dad was a hero.

And then he passed the plate for contributions.

He then used the money to raise an army of outlaws.

At Abimelech’s direction his group of hired thugs killed all the other sons
of Gideon that he had had by various wives.

They killed 70 people in all.

They killed ALL of Abimelech’s brothers and half-brothers,
anyone who might be a threat to Abimelech’s becoming
the most powerful person in Israel.

Abimelech, , son of Gideon, ruled Israel for 3 years,
but to make a long story short, his reign ended when—
as he approached a tower containing some of his enemies
in order to set it on fire—
a woman, who was up in the tower as he passed below,
dropped a millstone on his head. Her aim was good.

Abimelech had grabbed some of his father's power,
but he grabbed none of his goodness,
none of his sensitivity to God's leading,
none of his good judgment. You can't depend on coattails.

And then, early on in the days of Samuel, there was the story of Eli.

Eli had 2 sons, Hophni and Phinehas.
Father Eli was a priest, so that meant his sons were also priests;
the coattail thing again.

Hophni and Phinehas went through the motions of doing what priests do,
they dressed and acted the part,
but they knew nothing—and cared nothing—for the God who was
to be worshipped in the temple in which they worked.

Eli yelled at them once in a while. He told them they weren't doing a good
job. But he did nothing about it; there were no consequences to
their lack of integrity.

In fact, when the two sons wrongfully plucked meat out of the offering pot
and ate it themselves, Eli joined them in the improper snack.

Eli's sons got the job because they were born into the right family,
but the family coattails did them—and the temple—no good.

Because of their unbelief and the general unbelief in the land of Israel,
the Philistines defeated Israel,
and in the battle, Hophni and Phinehas, sons of Eli, were killed.

And upon hearing the news about his 2 sons,
plus the news that the Philistines had captured the ark of God,
Eli fell over backwards, broke his neck, and died. Short coattails.

The storyteller's lack of criticism for the fathers in these cases is significant.

Eli is the only parent in these 3 stories who is at all criticized, though he is the only one who is recorded to have at least verbally tried to correct their behavior.

Gideon was dead when Abimilech did his violent and evil acts, but his previous parenting is not criticized.

Samuel's parenting of his 2 sons is also not criticized.

This being a patriarchal narrative about a patriarchal society, we know nothing of the mothers in these stories.

The short coattails of Gideon, Eli and Samuel make for sort of a discouraging story; their children did not turn out well.

But for those of us who are parents, there's also something freeing about these stories. The lack of criticism in these narratives about how these fathers parented may help relieve you and me of any burden we may be feeling because of the imperfections of our own children.

Gideon, Eli and Samuel were like most parents in this room—doing the best they can to raise up their children to love God, trying to respond faithfully to God in their own lives, and, being human, not doing a perfect job.

Gideon, Eli and Samuel were probably closer to God than were the vast majority of their contemporaries.

They received vision and direction from God, they had faith, they tried to pass that faith to their children.

But all had children who made unwise choices.

You know, it's awfully easy to quote the proverb:

“Train up a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

It's especially easy use that quote as indictment on somebody else when their children make poor choices.

It's awfully easy to hit other parents—or yourself—over the head with the idea that if only you had been perfect, your children would be perfect, too.

That verse from Proverbs describes a general truth, not a guarantee. It describes a tendency. And it is certainly true that training a child in the way they should go is a very helpful thing.

But even those who do their best to train up their children in the way they should go will sometimes find that their children decide to walk a different path.

Parents should not be condemned for the choices their grown children make; and neither should they condemn themselves.

The Bible is quite clear that we are not condemned for the sins of others. Read Ezekiel 18 sometime if you need to review that fact.

Obviously, you can find imperfections in the character and in the parenting skills of Gideon, of Eli, of Samuel, and in yourself. Obviously, we parents make mistakes, sometimes hurtful mistakes, which make it harder for our children to find their way.

But if Scripture does not condemn the fathers for the sins of the children, neither should you. Each person on this earth, including your own children, is responsible for their own choices.

You can offer them your coattails in the family business, you can help them get started in life, you can teach them and be a good example for them, but when they are grown, no coattails you can offer them—whether long or short—will do them any good. Their life is theirs, not yours. Their decisions are theirs, not yours. Coattails, whether long or short, become irrelevant.

And now, switching perspectives, a word to children, teenagers, and perhaps young adults.

If you have parents who love God and take you to church,
say a prayer of thanks to God,
because you have a great advantage over children who don't
have Christian parents.

But on the other hand, that really doesn't do you much good at all.
You're not a Christian just because your parents are.
I say that to every catechism class dozens of times.

Just being around parents who pray and read their Bibles doesn't do you
much good unless YOU pray and read your Bible.

You can't borrow your parents' commitment to Christ.,
You can't borrow your parents' faith.
You can't borrow the visions from God your parents have had.
You can't borrow the divine guidance that your parents have received
at different points in their life.

You need to make your own decision to follow Christ.
You need to open up your own heart, upon up your own ears,
open up your own eyes to God for yourself.

It's nice if your parents have coattails, but in the end, they're irrelevant.

No matter how good your parents are,
no matter what their honesty, integrity, faith and reputation,
their life is their life, and your life is your life.

You can't borrow their experience, and they will not be judged for yours.

This works on the flip side, too.
If your parents made awful mistakes, if they hurt you, if they lacked
integrity, if they are NOT models you want to follow,
it is not your fate to repeat their mistakes.
Your choices are yours. You can chart a new, better path.

However you were parented,
there comes a time when you have to stop coming to church and
Sunday School just because you're supposed to
and start coming because you want to.

There comes a time when you let go of your parents' coattails,
whether they be long or short,
and start building your life based in YOUR visions from God,
YOUR faith, YOUR commitment to follow Jesus.

The stories of Gideon, Eli and Samuel actually confront the children
more than they do the parents.

In all three cases, children tried to use their parents coattails
to fulfill their own selfish desires.

They used their parents' names and reputations,
but they never built up their own name or their own reputation—
except to do evil.

Children, your parents aren't perfect,
but they do love you, and more than anything else,
they want you to choose to love and follow God.

But what they want and what they feel does not control you,
whether those wants and feelings are positive or negative.

You choose for yourself, and you cannot depend on their coattails.

What you CAN depend on is God's unconditional love for you,
God's always-open arms of forgiveness when you mess up,
God's ability to create new things out of the debris of the old,
and God's constant willingness to work with imperfect people.

The message today is grace, a forgiving grace for imperfect parents,
an empowering grace for children as they choose for themselves
the paths upon which they will walk.