

Deuteronomy 21:18-21

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-21/deuteronomy-2118-21/>

Moses instructs the Israelites on how to deal with a stubborn and rebellious son who continuously disobeys his parents.

Continuing the discussion of the sixth commandment, this section describes what is needed to be done *if any man has a stubborn and rebellious son* (v. 18). The two words *stubborn* (Heb. “sārar,” “stubborn,” “rebellious”) and *rebellious* (Heb. “mārâ,” “disobedient,” “rebellious”) form a hendiadys (a figure of speech using two unrelated words together to convey one idea). This intensifies how disobedient the son (and possibly the daughter) was to his/her parents. Today, this person might be called a juvenile delinquent. This would be a blatant and unceasing violation of the fifth commandment (“Honor your father and your mother”), and because the punishment here could be death, it falls under the sixth commandment.

This strong-willed son was one who habitually would *not obey his father or his mother*. Both parents are mentioned because the son must obey both of his parents and consider them valuable. Also, the fifth commandment mentions that both one’s father and mother must be honored ([Deuteronomy 5:16](#)). However, the rebellious son did just the opposite: when his parents *chastised him*, he would *not even listen to them*. The verb *chastise* (Heb. “yāsar”) implies confronting the son with the idea of teaching him correct behavior ([Leviticus 26:18](#); [Deuteronomy 22:18](#)). That means, the son would not obey his parents even after they disciplined him with corporal punishment ([Deuteronomy. 22:18](#); [Proverbs 13:24](#)).

In such a case where there was no hope of correction for that rebellious son, Moses prescribed this remedy: *Then his father and mother shall seize him* (v. 19). Moses emphasized that both the *father* and the *mother* of the rebellious son were to *seize him* (Heb. “tāpa”) or to take hold of him. Mentioning both parents shows that they were to be in agreement that their son was incorrigible and that they needed to *bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown*. The *gateway* was the place where the elders would judge on civil matters brought before them.

The *elders* were men who held high esteem within the Israelite community. They were well-known (well-respected) and often served as authorities in their

cities ([Deuteronomy 1:13](#)). They were the political leaders. So, it was to these elders that the parents brought their rebellious son. They were to say to them that *this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard* (v. 20). The Greeks called this Epicureanism, whose philosophy was “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Today, this would be called a hedonistic lifestyle. According to the book of Proverbs, the “heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty” ([Proverbs 23:21](#)).

This type of life is not what the LORD wants for His people and was not to be tolerated by the covenant community. So, Moses commanded that *all the men of his city shall stone him to death* (v. 21). In Old Testament times, stoning was the most common form of capital punishment ([Leviticus 24:14](#); [Numbers 15:35](#); [Deuteronomy 13:10](#)), because it allowed the whole community of Israel to actively participate in the process of killing the condemned. In this case, *all the men of the city* in which the rebellious son lived were to participate in killing him.

The purpose for a seemingly harsh judgment (i.e. killing the rebellious son as opposed to a less lethal penalty) was twofold. First, it would *remove the evil from the midst* of the Israelite community. The purity of the covenant community was extremely important to the LORD ([Leviticus 19:2](#); [Deuteronomy 23:14](#)). Tolerating a person obsessed with a hedonistic lifestyle would send a message to the community that it allowed such behavior and (even worse) the LORD was not opposed to it.

Second, when capital punishment was done here, the result would be that *all Israel will hear of it, and fear*. They were to *fear* the LORD Himself and *fear* that there would be terrible consequences if such behavior (a blatant violation of the fifth commandment) was allowed and tolerated.

It is interesting to note that there is no mention of this provision ever being carried out. The Talmud, which reflects oral tradition, states that it was never applied. It would seem reasonable that the mere possibility would be sufficient to create a change of behavior. It also seems reasonable that it would be difficult for rebellion to rise to the level of gaining approval of both parents, as was required in this statute. It also seems likely that the elders would be called on to intervene and aid the discipline of the child prior to pronouncing a death sentence. It seems reasonable to presume that this provision led to elders coming to the aid of parents in distress over how to deal with difficult children.

Biblical Text:

¹⁸ If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, ¹⁹ then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. ²⁰ They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.' ²¹ Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear *of it* and fear.