

The Sin of Ham  
Genesis 9:18-29

“Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants he shall be to his brothers.” Those are harsh words. What did Ham do to deserve such a terrible curse?

Verse 22 tells us that Ham saw the nakedness of his father. But this had to be something more serious than just walking in on Dad when he’s coming out of the shower. After all, an innocent mistake wouldn’t bring on such a curse. And so we might want to assume that there was some sort of perversion on Ham’s part. But the text doesn’t say that, and given the description of what went on in Sodom and Gomorrah, we know that the Bible is not hesitant to mention the sins of the flesh.

No, it seems that the root of Ham’s sin had to do with him telling his brothers about his Dad’s drunken stupor – in other words, he scorned his father. He mocked his father. He tried to embarrass his father in the eyes of his two brothers. Ham thus broke what would later become known as the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” It’s no wonder that Ham received such a terrible curse.

But wait! Surely Noah should share some of the blame, shouldn’t he? Wasn’t he the one that got drunk in the first place? And wasn’t his drunkenness the reason that he was in such an embarrassing state? And don’t the Scriptures consistently frown on people who drink to the point of drunkenness? Listen to these words from Proverbs chapter 23:29-35:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? <sup>30</sup> Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. <sup>31</sup> Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. <sup>32</sup> In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. <sup>33</sup> Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. <sup>34</sup> You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. <sup>35</sup> "They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink."

Drunkenness is obviously self-destructive. But even more seriously, it also indicates a damaged relationship with God. After all, when a man is getting drunk, he’s not doing that for God’s glory, but for his own pleasure. And when he has become drunk, at the very least he casts aside many of his cognitive faculties, thus dulling the image of God within him. When he is drunk, his inhibitions are lowered, and he is more easily tempted to do things that are not in accord with God’s will, things that he would never do if he were sober. In the most extreme cases, someone who is drunk places his faith in alcohol to take away his problems, or at least to dull their sting. Drinking can thus be a form of idolatry.

On the other hand, drunkenness also damages our relationships with other people. Someone who is drunk is simply less able to react in situations of emergency, less able to help others in need. It is especially unseemly for kings and other leaders to be drunk, for then they cannot fulfill their duties. Proverbs 31:4-5 says this: “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.”

So, yes, Noah was wrong to get drunk. And so we see that even after all the waters of the flood had washed over the earth, and even after God had rescued Noah from what would have been certain death in the flood, Noah remained a sinner. But God already knew that about Noah, and about all of Noah’s family. Back in chapter 8 verse 21, God said that even after the flood the imagination of man’s heart was still evil, even from his youth. And at the beginning of chapter 9, God prescribed the death penalty for anyone who would kill a man – in this way God was telling us that even after the flood, our world would continue to be marked by violence and murder.

No, Ham didn’t need to tell anyone that his father was a sinner. So what should he have done when he discovered his father’s sin? Shem and Japheth show us, don’t they? They refused to join Ham in mocking their father. But they also refused to join Noah in his sin by making excuses for him. They refused to leave Noah uncovered as if his drunkenness wasn’t a problem. No, they corrected his bad behavior by taking a garment and placing it over their father. But they did this by walking backward to make sure that they didn’t catch a glimpse of him by accident. They thus showed what it really means truly to honor our father, even when he’s not behaving in a particularly honorable way.

So what does that mean for all of us? I doubt that any of us, after all, has perfect parents, and none of us has perfect children. None of those who are married have perfect wives or husbands. All our families are made up of sinners like us, and the closer the relationship we have with others in our family, the more clearly we can see each their sins, right? Eventually, all of us will have a moment like Ham, when we are confronted with the sin of someone we love.

So, the question is, how will we deal with it? Will we respond with the sin of Ham, making fun of them or looking down on them? Will we sever the bonds of family through our disrespect? Or will we respond with the love and grace of Shem and Japheth? Will we show kindness and compassion to our loved ones in their weakness? And if we have to step in and correct some of the things they have done wrong, will we do that in the most respectful way that we can? Will we honor our parents, will we honor those in authority over us even when they don’t seem to be worthy of honor?

But there’s one more puzzle in this passage – the curse that Noah pronounces in verse 24. It was Ham, Noah’s son, that mocked and disrespected Noah. And yet the curse is placed not on Ham, but on Ham’s son Canaan. What’s that all about? How does that make sense?

Well, in part our confusion stems from our Western hyper-individualism. We tend to see every human being as completely separate and independent, but in the Ancient Near East, people were more defined by their family and tribal relationships. In fact, all of chapter 10 is made up

of long lists of the tribes and families that descended from Noah's sons, and this information was of vital importance to the people of the day. Family mattered so much to them that they wouldn't have been shocked at all to learn that the consequences of their fathers' sins in some way fell upon them.

But there may be something more intimate and even more painful involved in this curse. Think about how Noah must have felt when his own son turned against him in such a callous way. It's one thing to have enemies make fun of you, but how much more terrible is it when your enemies are within your own family! And remember, Noah had done so much for Ham – Noah's obedience to God had even made sure Ham was safe in the ark from the waters of the flood. And this sort of mockery, this level of contempt was the thanks Noah received. What a crushing disappointment Ham must have been for him.

And so the essence of Noah's curse on Ham is that Ham would experience the same thing. Ham would also come to know what it was like to be disappointed in a son, as Canaan would become a servant to his brothers and his cousins. For Canaan would end up as an outcast, despised by the rest of his family. In years to come, the descendants of Shem, the Israelites, and the descendants of Japheth, the Philistines, would together make war on the Canaanites and subjugate them, just as Noah said. Ham's punishment was to know that all this was going to happen, that his own descendants would not enjoy the family blessings he himself had despised.

And the sad truth is that we see this sort of generational curse being played out in our own culture. The Baby Boom generation, after all, saw their parents' generation involved in the very real sin of racism. But along with rejecting race hatred, they rejected practically everything else their parents' generation stood for – community involvement, a sense of propriety, and of course traditional understandings of gender roles and the permanence of marriage. They rejected their parents' values, and they have seen their children and their grandchildren reject them even more completely, careening into unimaginable and self-destructive levels of debauchery, only to justify their behavior by denying the very concept of absolute truth. No, Ham wasn't the only one to feel the sting of Noah's curse.

And so it is obvious that we should shun Ham's example of disrespect and mockery of his father, even when his father was behaving in a dishonorable way. It is equally obvious that we should seek to emulate the graciousness of Shem and Japheth, honoring our parents especially when they are weak and vulnerable. But how can we do this? How can we become more patient with other people, especially when their sins and shortcomings are so obvious to us?

Well, think about it. Noah was a man who had personally been saved by God – God had told him to build an ark, and God had shut him into that ark to protect him from the flood. Noah was a man whose obedience to God had been exemplary – he had built that ark and had brought all the animals into it, just like God told him to. Moreover, Noah had stayed in that ark until God told him to leave it. Finally, Noah was a man of great devotion to God – the first thing he had done upon leaving the ark was to make a sacrifice to God. If anybody had a right to be proud of his spiritual maturity, if anybody had a right to look down on others, it was Noah.

And yet this same Noah who had been saved by God, who was so obedient to God, and who was so devoted to God, this same Noah fell into sin. No matter how righteous he may have been in the eyes of the world, at root Noah wasn't any better or any worse than anybody else. He was still a sinner in need of a savior.

Maybe that explains why Shem and Japheth were so gracious to Noah – maybe they knew that they were sinners, too. Maybe they realized that they weren't any better than he was.

But that's the same thing all of us need to understand. For that's why it is wrong for us to publish anyone else's sins or to gloat over them. That's why it is wrong for us to put anyone else down for their sins. For the fact is that, no matter how long any of us have been walking with the Lord, none of us is anything more than a sinner saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And to the extent that we recognize our own weaknesses, to the extent that we confess our own sinfulness, we will also be patient with others who are weak.

But in order for us to do that, we will need to have the Spirit of Christ living within us. For He is the only One Who never did anything wrong, and so He is the only One Who had every right to look down on a world full of sinners. He is the only One who would have been perfectly justified in mocking us in the way that Ham mocked Noah, despising our sinfulness and our weakness.

And yet Jesus is the One Who, even when He was unjustly accused, even when He was mocked and scorned, even when His closest friends abandoned Him, chose to love, chose to welcome, chose to forgive. He is the One Whose love for His people is steadfast and immovable and unconditional, even when we aren't acting in a very lovely way.

May Christ fill all of us with His Spirit. May Christ fill all of us with His love. And may we in turn love those who are the closest to us just as faithfully, no matter what they do.