**THE LORD LOOKS AT THE HEART**

1 Samuel 16:1-23 Key Verse 16:7

*“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’”*

In last week’s passage, we saw how the Lord finally rejected Saul as Israel’s king after another act of disobedience. When he was commanded to totally wipe out the Amalekites and everything pertaining to them, Saul instead kept the choicest of the animals for himself and his army, supposedly to sacrifice them to the Lord. But Samuel taught him, and us, *“To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”* (15:22b). It was a difficult passage to study, because it makes us wonder: could I do something that makes the Lord finally reject me? I often feel like I disobey God in many ways. So we tried to understand what was the root of Saul’s spiritual problem. Our conclusion was that Saul was essentially the same as a godless person. Though he went through the outward motions of worshiping God, his actions showed that everything he did was before people. It’s like pleasing God was a concept that was somehow missing from Saul’s thought world. When talking to Samuel, Saul even referred to God as “your” God, showing that God was someone Saul himself did not know. When Saul had no relationship with God in his heart, there was no way for him to be genuinely obedient to God, as it says in Hebrews 11:6, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”*

Today we have a much more pleasant topic, because we see an example of someone whose heart was pleasing to God—David, whom Samuel anoints as Israel’s next king. We will just make a beginning today of studying the character of David, learning what was in him, and we want to apply that to ourselves, learning how we can also be found pleasing to God. One thing is for sure—the qualities that make us pleasing to God are not qualities that we can see on the outside, but that are on the inside, in the heart. The message has three parts.

1. Samuel’s new mission (1-7)

After the Lord’s final rejection of Saul, we saw at the end of Chapter 15 how Saul and the prophet Samuel parted ways, never to meet each other again. It says that Samuel mourned for Saul. Samuel genuinely cared for Saul—he was his disciple; Samuel tried his best to teach Saul the life of serving the Lord. Saul was like another son to Samuel. So when Saul failed, Samuel was heartbroken. Maybe Samuel felt that his whole life of serving the Lord was a failure.

However, the Lord was not done with Samuel. Look at Chapter 16 verse 1. *“The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”* Here we see the abundance of God’s grace to Samuel, his faithful servant. Samuel was not young anymore; he had previously said things that indicated he felt his race was about finished. But the Lord did not let Samuel go on thinking that God’s work through him had utterly failed. Though it was appropriate for Samuel to mourn for Saul for a time, Samuel also needed to rise above his grief and see that the work of God in Israel was going to continue. God had already chosen the next king of Israel, from among the sons of Jesse in Bethlehem; and he blessed Samuel to see him with his own eyes and anoint him.

I think the Lord always has his servants think about the future, has them eventually turn their thoughts to what is going to come after them. In the end, the work of God is not really about what works we finished and can point to and say, “This is my achievement and here it stands.” Our efforts in our life of mission are full of imperfections, and sometimes it seems like more failures than successes. But the Lord blesses all our efforts of faith and uses them as part of something bigger than we can even know. It’s not about us; we are just imperfect carriers of God’s light, which we will pass on to others coming after us. God is the living God, so his work is dynamic, it’s moving. Our blessing is just to participate in some small slice of it. God was so gracious to not let Samuel’s life of mission end with Saul’s failure. No matter what, no one who keeps the faith is a failure in God’s sight.

This mission to anoint the next king was actually not easy for Samuel. Look at verse 2a. *“But Samuel said, ‘How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.’”* Really? Would Saul actually kill Samuel? Yes, he would. At their last meeting, Samuel had told Saul that God had chosen someone better to succeed him. And Samuel knew that Saul had the root of jealousy in his heart, and that once God’s restraining grace was taken away from him, that jealousy would be capable of expressing itself in the deeds of a wicked tyrant, including murder, as we unfortunately will see in the coming chapters.

The Lord heard Samuel’s concern and gave him a “cover story”. He told him to take a heifer and say that he was going to Bethlehem to sacrifice to the Lord, to which ceremony Jesse and his sons would just happen to be invited. (2b) Technically, it’s true; Samuel will do the sacrifice as well in Bethlehem. Also, the Lord did not tell Samuel which one of Jesse’s sons he had chosen; Samuel would have to wait until he saw him with his own eyes and anoint the one the Lord indicated (3).

When Samuel arrived in Bethlehem with his cow, it also made the elders of the town nervous—it says they trembled and asked Samuel, “Do you come in peace?” Maybe they heard rumors about the conflict between Samuel and Saul and were worried that Samuel was bringing that trouble to their town. But Samuel reassured them and the elders were invited to the sacrifice with Jesse and his sons (5).

When it was time, Jesse arrived and had his sons pass in front of Samuel. The firstborn went first; his name was Eliab. He made a good impression on Samuel! What did Samuel think when he saw Eliab? Look at verse 6: *“Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.”* It doesn’t describe in detail what Eliab looked like, but he must have been impressive in some way. But Samuel was mistaken, and he needed to be reminded of something by the Lord. Look at verse 7, our key verse. “But the Lord said to Samuel, *“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”*

From this we learn that, as disciples of Jesus, as we grow spiritually to become more like our Lord in his righteousness, our standard of judgment needs to be changed, so that we don’t judge by appearances but by the heart. We might think we’re more advanced than the people of Samuel’s time, and that we don’t judge people so much by their outward appearance but maybe by their resume or some talents that they demonstrate. But judging people on their appearance is so ingrained in human nature that it’s difficult to break the habit. Don’t you think?

There’s this reality TV singing competition show called *The Voice*. In that show, when the judges listen to the first audition of a new contestant, all their chairs are turned backwards so they cannot see the person who is singing; they have to judge based not on appearance but only on the sound of the voice. And if they really like the singing, they smack a big button and their chair spins around and then they can see who it is. That’s the gimmick, but anyway, even this game show shows us that, to judge justly, we have to try to overcome that strong natural tendency to judge from appearance.

Of course, we’re not judging people’s singing voices. Jesus told us we should not judge people at all for the purpose of condemning them or thinking we are better than them. But to be good shepherds like Jesus, we do need to understand people, like our 2025 ministry key verse says, “I know my sheep.” That requires overcoming the tendency to judge by appearance and looking for what’s in the heart, because that’s where the real truth about a person is—on the inside.

One of the reasons we judge too much by appearance is that we want to judge people immediately—we call it a “snap judgment.” I see that guy, boom! “I know what he’s like, yep.” But the heart is what you *can’t* see right away. So we have to deny our tendency to try to judge people instantly. We have to suspend judgment, put the judgment on pause, until we’ve had more time to learn more about a person and understand them more deeply. So then, one of the best things we can do to improve our judgment is to postpone it.

More importantly, we should pray that our own hearts may exhibit the characteristics that God finds pleasing. Then what are the good characteristics of heart that God looks for? Let’s go back to the passage.

1. David’s beginning (8-13)

After Eliab, Jesse had his second son, Abinadab, pass by Samuel, but he was not the one either, then his third, Shammah, but he was not chosen either. This was repeated with seven of Jesse’s sons. Jesse was very fruitful! But none of these seven was the one the Lord had chosen. So in verse 11, Samuel asked Jesse, *“Are these all the sons you have?”* This may be the only time in history when someone thought seven sons were not enough and asked someone if he had any more. Surprisingly, there was one more. Jesse said, *“There is still the youngest; he is tending the sheep.”* Of course, it was David.

What does this one short statement tell us about David? First, that he was the youngest of 8 sons. That might make it hard for David to feel that he was unique and special. Second, for some reason, David’s father did not see fit to invite him to this important ceremony, even though all seven of his other sons were invited! As a parent, I can’t imagine making one of my kids work while the other ones were invited to a party (though maybe they’ll remind of a time when I did do something like that and didn’t realize it.) Why did Jesse not bring David? Did not even consider the possibility that his youngest son was the worthy one? Did he think David was only good for the menial work of watching sheep? Maybe it’s not that bad. Maybe David was the only son who was still under 13, so his father just assumed he couldn’t be invited. But when Samuel heard that Jesse had another son, he had him brought immediately, and everybody got their first look at David. He was in fact quite handsome, and he had a very healthful, “ruddy” look about him (12). But we should not focus too much on appearance, right? Immediately, Samuel took the horn of oil he had brought and anointed David with it. It was God’s promise to raise David up as a shepherd for Israel.

We’re not sure why David wasn’t invited to the ceremony. But this funny way that he had to be tracked down has a spiritual meaning: it shows that David was not chosen by people but was chosen by God. Why did God choose David? Because God looks at the heart.

When God looked at David’s heart, what did he see? So far, all we’ve been told about David is that he was out tending sheep. But even this tells us something about David’s heart. For one thing, it shows he was faithful enough to be trusted with a job and left alone to do it. As you know, that’s not true about everybody. It also shows that he was humble enough to do lowly and even lonely work like watching over sheep. I don’t know much about sheep, but one thing I’m pretty sure of—they are not the most exciting conversation partners. Tending sheep was the most common of common jobs that even people with no special talents or abilities could do. As our leaders observed in our Friday night Bible study, one of the things God most wants to see in our hearts is humility. One expression of humility is that we’re not opposed to serving in a lowly way, as Jesus said, *“For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.”* (Lk 9:48)

So we learn something about David’s character from this early picture. But we learn even more about God’s work in David’s life. It was God who was already shaping David into what he wanted him to be, long before Samuel showed up, guiding David’s life situations by his sovereignty. By giving young David the job of a shepherd, the Lord taught him to have compassion on needy creatures, to understand their needs, and to serve them watchfully. It was not a very fun job most of the time, I’m sure, but through this “shepherd training”, God was developing qualities in David that would help him later serve as a leader of people. And maybe, when young David was out in the fields with nobody around except those sheep who were not exciting conversation partners, maybe he could begin to have a conversation with God. Maybe that’s how David became able to write all those beautiful Psalms to God, where he saw God with the eyes of his heart in spite of all that was happening around him. He could do it because of the one-to-one relationship he built with God when he was still young.

Verse 13b says, *“from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David.”* God had already been growing David, but after this turning point of being anointed he entered a new phase, when the Lord added the work of the Holy Spirit to shape David further into who he wanted him to be.

1. David in Saul’s service (14-23)

After his anointing, God begins to work in a new way in David’s life—in a very unexpected way. God sent David into the presence of Saul, to serve this tragic, deteriorating king who had fallen from grace. Humanly, it doesn’t sound like a very good idea. But the Lord knew what he was doing with David.

Verse 14 tells us that Saul began to be tormented by an evil spirit. We understand that this is a direct result of the Lord’s presence departing from Saul. If we somehow lose the Lord’s presence in our lives, all kinds of evil spirits are waiting to take over. It seems that this evil spirit would come and go, but when it was active, Saul’s condition could only be described as torment. Mentally, spiritually, emotionally, he was in unbearable agony, and as a result he lashed out at the people around him.

Saul’s attendants had an idea for how to treat the symptoms of Saul’s evil spirit. What was it? To get someone to play music for him. The soothing effect of music has been known since ancient times. We know that music can be a powerful spiritual force for good; that’s why it’s such an important part of our worship service. Songs of praise to God have power to turn not just our mind but our hearts back to the Lord. Sometimes when I first come to worship service, my heart is heavy because I’m bothered by many things. I’m not so joyful at the beginning, I’ll admit it. But when we sing all together to the Lord, somehow I feel that my heart is being restored to its right orientation before God.

So Saul told his servants to find someone who could play well and bring them. One of his servants had heard of someone. Who was it? Look at verse 18. *“One of the servants answered, “I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the lyre. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the Lord is with him.”* Of course, this is not a coincidence that it was David who was chosen; this is the hand of the Lord. Here we also learn that David he was good at music and could play the lyre, which is like a smaller hand-held harp. People probably learned to play the lyre like they learn to play the guitar today. This was probably a few years after David’s anointing, because we can see how David’s abilities had become a little more known. But notice that he was still working with the sheep at that time.

So Saul sent for David and he entered the king’s service, for music at first, but soon adding other jobs, such as being one of Saul’s armor-bearers. Saul was so pleased with David that he brought him on full-time. And David’s playing and singing was temporarily effective at driving away the evil spirit from Saul.

It might seem strange that David was led by God into the service of Saul, the king that God himself had rejected. But we see from this that the Lord really wanted to teach and grow David. The Lord did not hide from David the dark side of spiritual reality, but let him see right in front of his face what happens to a person who loses God’s presence in their life. As part of growing him to be a shepherd of people, God let David see the corruption that is possible in human nature. David could see that having a position of worldly power doesn’t guarantee happiness or blessedness. As we said, the Lord often grows us more through the unpleasant and difficult situations of our life. Amazingly, David served Saul faithfully even though Saul was becoming more and more difficult to deal with. In coming chapters, we will learn more about the spiritual principle David held on to that led him to serve Saul faithfully in spite of all Saul’s wickedness.

At the beginning of this message, we asked if we can have any assurance that the Lord will not reject us like he rejected Saul. We saw that Saul’s rejection was the fruit of his never having any personal faith relationship with the Lord. And today we saw that, in contrast, the Lord was leading David to have a one-to-one, personal trust relationship with God. Our way of having such a relationship with God is through Jesus Christ. We are sinners with many corrupted tendencies. We shouldn’t try to justify ourselves or tell ourselves that we have a good heart or that we did this or that thing right. But if we come to Jesus in sincere repentance, trusting the power of his blood, then God promised us through the prophet Ezekiel: *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”* (Eze 36:26) When we entrust ourselves to the Lord, asking him to lead us and grow us, he will be faithful to us to the end and never leave us nor forsake us. May God bless us to give our hearts to God, and he will remake our hearts to be pleasing to himself.