

# The Lord Looks at the Heart

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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As I said last Sunday, we're going to be spending the last two weeks before summer begins focusing on the Old Testament lectionary readings from the book of 1 Samuel.

This is partly to correct a deficit of Old Testament content in my sermons so far this year. But it's also because I think these are just two really interesting stories that open up some important truths about who God is and about who we are.

This week, we're looking at the story of the anointing of David. Next Sunday, it's the well-known story of David and Goliath (which I have *never* preached on in sixteen years of preaching!).

It's always a bit of a challenge to join a story mid-stream, especially when many people have only a passing familiarity with the narrative arc of the Old Testament.

So, let's get our bearings.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel describe Israel's transition from a loose federation of tribes to centralized power, first under Saul and then under David.

A story that began with God calling Abraham way back in Genesis and wove through the stories of Isaac and Jacob and his twelve sons...

And Joseph being sold into slavery and rising to become powerful in Egypt... and the people of Israel heading down to Egypt to avoid a famine in Canaan...

And with Pharaoh eventually enslaving the Israelites, and the Israelites growing in number and crying out to God for deliverance from oppression...

And the Exodus from Egypt, and the wandering in the wilderness, and Joshua leading the conquest of the promised land, and the descent into lawless chaos in the period of the Judges...

This long, meandering story of a sojourning people has brought us to the books of Samuel.

Samuel is an interesting figure, a bit hard to classify. He serves as kind of a combination of a prophet, priest, and judge in this important transitional time in Israel's history. Whatever the title, he is the boss.

The people come to Samuel with a demand: "We want a king like the other nations." Samuel wants no part of this, but the God says, essentially, "Just go ahead and do it. It's not you that the people are rejecting, but me, their true king."

So, Samuel grudgingly grants their request but warns them of the harsh consequences to follow. The government will conscript their children for wars, make them domestic slaves, confiscate their land, and implement exorbitant taxes.

Saul did all this and more.

If we were to fast forward in the story, we would see that Saul's life and reign ends in tragedy. He tries to murder his successor David (who spares his life twice).

He dies by suicide, after which the victorious Philistines recover his body, along with those of his three sons who also died in the battle, decapitated them, and then fasten his body to the wall in the public square of Beth-Shan.

It's pretty grim reading. It's no wonder that our passage says, " And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel."

(Naomi asked me yesterday if I was going to be talking about how God could "regret" something that he knew was going to happen. I mumbled something about not having time. ☺ If you are interested in the question of how God's foreknowledge interacts with human agency, feel free to bring it up for next year's Faith Questions series!)

At any rate, this is where we are in the story. The people of Israel are taking their first steps as a monarchy. It is not going particularly well.

Saul has been rejected as king although he is not particularly eager to accept this. Samuel is on the lookout for the next king of Israel.

He goes to Bethlehem (with no small amount of trepidation about what Saul might do if he were to find out) and begins to look for a suitable candidate among the sons of a certain Jesse.

Jesse's sons are paraded in front of Samuel. Maybe it was something like the NHL draft or some kind of beauty pageant. He sees the first son, Eliab, who was evidently a physically impressive specimen.

And this where we encounter the key verse of the passage (at least for the purposes of my sermon):

<sup>7</sup> 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."

The Lord, it seems, has a different set of criteria than we do. And so, it is the youngest son, the one off tending the sheep, the least likely candidate who is chosen.

God looks differently. God sees differently. God has a different set of standards than we do.

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Well, it may be hard to place ourselves in large parts of this ancient story. We do not live in an ancient theocracy transitioning to a monarchy. We do not regularly find ourselves involving heifers or sacrifices in our decision-making.

The cultural gap between Samuel's time and ours is wide.

But one thing that resonates deeply across time is this human propensity to judge based on outward appearances.

We are experts at judging based on superficial categories.

We have so many outward appearances to judge by. We judge people based on their shape and size, on the colour of their skin, on who they're dating and for how long, on how their kids are turning out, on how smart they are, on their politics, on their religion, on what they post on social media, on what they drive, on where they go on holidays, on who they associate with, on things they said in the past, on things they don't say (but should say), on how much money they have or don't have, on whether or not they can get it together and keep it together.

That's just a (very) partial list.

It's difficult to imagine a cultural context that is hungrier to judge and more eager to do so based on the thinnest and most superficial of categories than ours.

I should hasten to add that ours is not the only culture that judges on externals. Earlier this week, I was having coffee with Ernie and Abe and Phil, and Jim who were doing some work at the church (thanks guys!).

Jim told a story about a colleague from Pakistan who once lamented that he didn't get a good wife because he was short and, in his culture, short men were looked down on. Ernie talked about how the Masai in Kenya have a contest to see who can jump the highest to see who gets first choice of wives (he even sent me a few videos—these guys had impressive verticals!).

At any rate, this is a human temptation, not a uniquely Western or North American one.

And there is both a comfort and a challenge to us in this ancient story about how God chooses a king.

The challenge is obvious enough. We must seek always to judge as God does. Not by outward appearances because these only ever tell a part—sometimes a very small part—of the story.

“Don't judge a book by the cover,” we sometimes say.

We are all so much more than our outward appearances. So much more than our bank accounts or our resumes or our physical appearance or the image we project to the world. There are hidden depths, things that God alone can see truly and fully.

This story ought to remind us to pump the brakes on the judgment machine. To remember that who a person is on the inside matters far more than the metrics we use to evaluate people.

It can also be a comfort. For all those who feel looked down on by the world, all those who feel unimpressive, neglected, overlooked, unseen... God sees.

God does not value in the same way we do. God's love is deeper and truer than the superficial judgments that we often have for one another.

God operates with an entirely different system of metrics. God is the one who turns things upside down, who rearranges business as usual.

We see this in Hannah's song earlier in 1 Samuel. Hannah, remember, is Samuel's mother who was thought to be barren. She sings these words after miraculously conceiving her son:

the Lord is a God who knows,  
and by him deeds are weighed.

<sup>4</sup> "The bows of the warriors are broken,  
but those who stumbled are armed with strength...

<sup>8</sup> He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;  
he seats them with princes  
and has them inherit a throne of honor (1 Sam. 2:3-4, 8).

These are themes that obviously echo throughout Scripture, in the prophets, and most obviously in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. The small and the lowly are raised up; the proud and the "strong" brought down.

But for me, the lines that stand out in Hannah's prayer are the first ones: "The Lord is a God who knows."

God knows. God sees. God evaluates differently.

The shepherd boy will be king, not the more outwardly impressive first-born. His heart is more aligned with God's.

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Well, speaking of that shepherd boy, David will indeed go on to be king. And years later, the Son of David will arrive on the scene. And this theme of God operating with a different set of priorities and criteria will continue.

Jesus, as we know, was born in humble, scandalous circumstances. He had an ordinary childhood in an ordinary village.

He was likely unimpressive by outward appearances, despite all our portrayals of him ever since (we can't seem to resist portraying him according to our ideals). We don't know for sure, but he likely didn't have movie-star good looks, almost certainly not blue eyes and wavy blond hair!

And the questions that surround him in his ministry give us clues about how he was seen by those around him.

*Is this not the carpenter's son? Don't we know his family? Can anything good come from Nazareth?* Jesus clearly came from stock far too humble and ordinary for some to take him seriously as a Messiah.

And then, there are the words from way back in Isaiah 53 that we interpret as speaking about Jesus:

Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

<sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

It's perhaps unsettling for us to think about Jesus, the object of our devotion and desire, the love of our souls, the Saviour of the world being as being held "in low esteem." As being unimpressive in appearance. As having no beauty or majesty to attract us.

And clearly this only tells part of the story. Clearly, many people did and do desire Jesus, many were attracted to him.

But it is also undeniable that when God chose to arrive on the scene in person, he did so in less obvious or impressive manner than we might have hoped or wanted.

Both in his life, and in his death, Jesus revealed the true heart of God. It was a heart for those on the bottom. A heart for justice and for mercy. A heart for the sick, the outcast, the kicked-to-the-side. A heart for the rejected and the neglected. For those "held in low esteem."

A heart for sinners.

God sees differently. God evaluates differently. God has a different set of metrics in mind when it comes to what matters.

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On the deepest level, this story should challenge us to look inward, at our own hearts. Are they aligned with God's? Do they want to be?

It's important to remember that the word "heart" is not some kind of vague word for our emotional temperature or our feelings.

The Hebrew word translated "heart" has a more robust range of meanings. It refers to the will, the seat of decision making, to moral character, inner resolution.

Are these things oriented in God's direction? Are our hearts leaning towards the same people and priorities that Jesus's was? Do we, too, long for justice and for mercy?

The Lord looks at the heart. As I said earlier, this can be enormously comforting. The idea that God sees the truth of who we are in a world that is eager to dish out superficial judgments is good news.

But it can also be terrifying. For our hearts are not pure innocence and light. There are ugly things in our hearts, too.

This was true for David (we know some of his more sordid deeds).

I cannot help but mention this on Father's Day. David was not, by any reasonable measurement, a good father. He set a terrible example with some of his behaviour, specifically his treatment of women (think of Bathsheba). His sons, in particular (nineteen by at least seven women) led complicated and often bloody lives filled with mistakes. So, if you're a dad who isn't feeling particularly pleased with your performance today, take heart. You are not alone!

So, the view isn't always pretty when God looks at our hearts. Jesus knew this then and knows this still. In Mat. 15:18-19, for example, Jesus says,

But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Even if our hearts aren't preoccupied with some of these more obvious sins, in our more honest moments, we all know that our hearts are conflicted.

Our desires are misdirected. We are prone to superficial judgment of others. We too easily gravitate towards our selves rather than God and neighbour.

It can be a scary thing to think that the Lord looks at our hearts and sees the *whole* truth.

The good news of the gospel is that the Lord loves us because of but also *in spite of* what is in our hearts.

That God, in Christ, died for us and our conflicted hearts.

Roman 5:8 is a verse that I have been returning to often over the last few months:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.



While we were still sinners. While our hearts were conflicted and divided and misdirected. While our hearts were busily off judging other people. While we were lost and confused and worse.

*While we were still sinners...* Not after we smartened up, not after we repented and turned around, not after we heard a sermon on 1 Samuel about how our hearts needed a bit of fine-tuning.

Before we even took a step in the right direction, Jesus, the unimpressive Son of David the shepherd boy, died for us.

The Lord looks at the heart. And he loves what he sees, even when our hearts are at their most unlovely.

This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

