

“The Lord Does Not See as Mortals See”

1 Samuel 15:34—16:13

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“The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” That verse is worthy of being posted in a prominent place, and being committed to memory. There is so much truth here, truth that needs to be proclaimed and heard – and *lived*.

The context is the delightful story about the anointing of young David to become king of Israel. It begins with sorrow about the man who was then the king, Saul son of Kish, who had begun his reign with the blessing of Samuel, who was, at that time, the *only* spiritual leader among the Israelites. Samuel had anointed Saul himself. Saul’s kingship seemed to have God’s favor, for Samuel had used divination to select Saul from among all tribes of Israel, and there had been a series of signs indicating that Saul had been divinely appointed. Saul led Israelite forces to a series of military victories over their enemies, securing a considerable degree of peace for the people of Israel. But Saul did not act with wisdom. He issued a rash order that nearly led to the death of his son Jonathan. He grew restless when Samuel advised him to be patient. He disobeyed clear instructions that Samuel had given him from God, and then tried to justify his disobedience. In short, he lost his way. He no longer cared about following the will of God – if, indeed, he ever had. He was, in the end, no better than any of the other kings in the nations that surrounded Israel. He was nothing special. He would not lead Israel to greater faithfulness to God. “Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.”

So God had to make a choice. God could continue to allow Saul to lead Israel in foolish ways. Or God could intervene. God chose to intervene. God decided that it was time for Saul’s kingship to end.

God speaks to Samuel. God tells him to take some oil and go to the village of Bethlehem, to the house of a man named Jesse. Jesse was a prominent resident in Bethlehem. He was a farmer, a sheep-owner, and the father of eight sons and at least two daughters. He was also the grandson of an immigrant; his grandmother was Ruth, the Moabite. From this immigrant’s stock will come the next king of Israel, chosen by God to rule over Israel. Indeed, Israelites will remember him as their *greatest* king.

Samuel is worried about what Saul might do, if Saul hears that he is setting off to find somebody to replace him. “If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” God tells Samuel to bring along a cow, to be offered as a sacrifice. God tells Samuel to invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and then await further instructions. Samuel dutifully obeys. He surprises the town elders when he shows up in Bethlehem; they are trembling when they greet him, evidently afraid for their own safety. Perhaps they thought Samuel’s arrival meant that Saul’s army was on the way. But no, Samuel comes in peace; he says he just wants to offer a sacrifice to the Lord, and he invites the town leaders, as well as Jesse and his sons, to participate.

Now Bethlehem, at this time, was a fairly unimportant little town. Its primary claim to fame was

that it was where Jacob had buried his beloved wife Rachel, back in the book of Genesis. In the time of Samuel, there were not yet any prophecies about anyone important who would come from Bethlehem.

So Samuel really has no idea what he is looking for. All he knows is that he is going to find Israel's next king here, among the people in attendance at the sacrifice that he is performing.

Seven of Jesse's sons are present. The oldest, Eliab, immediately impresses Samuel. "Surely," he thinks, this is "the Lord's anointed." He was tall and good-looking, displaying physical features similar to those that King Saul had. But God tells Samuel that this is not the one. "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." God is saying, quite clearly, that there are far more important factors to consider when choosing a leader than their outward appearance. What matters most are the qualities of their *heart*. Their *values*, their *principles*, their *wisdom*, their *character*, their *judgment*, their *integrity*, their *honor*, their *decency*, their *faithfulness*. Qualities like those matter *far* more than any aspect of their *physical* appearance.

So Eliab, Jesse's eldest son, is not God's choice, despite the fact that he *looks good*. Neither is Abinadab, the second-oldest, or Shammah, the third-oldest, or, indeed, *any* of the seven sons that Jesse has brought with him. God keeps telling Samuel, "No, this is not the one." Finally, Samuel asks Jesse: "Are *all* your sons here?" Ah, yes, there is one more. The youngest, who is out in the field, keeping the sheep. Samuel asks Jesse to send someone to fetch young David. Samuel looks at David, taking in his appearance. "He was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." "Ruddy" means that he had "reddish" skin coloring, like Esau, back in Genesis. I wonder what Samuel was expecting. God had told him that it wasn't the *outward* appearance that matters, yet of course that was the first thing that Samuel noticed about him. But what matters – in that case, and in *every* case – is what the person's *heart* is truly like. How do you assess someone's heart? If God had let Samuel choose, Samuel might well have chosen Eliab, and Samuel might never have even *met* this young David. But, now, here he is. His skin color is not quite "normal" for an Israelite. Perhaps it's because of that foreign blood that David inherited. But still, he's handsome, and those *eyes* ... he's *very* attractive to look at.

I wonder if Samuel had to remind himself, "It's not his *appearance* that matters." I wonder how many times *we* need to remind *ourselves*, "it's not that person's *appearance* that matters." Not their skin color, not whether their eyes are beautiful, not whether they are handsome or ugly, tall or short, skinny or fat, whole or maimed. What matters – what really, truly *matters* – is the quality of their *heart*.

God says to Samuel: "Rise and anoint him; for *this* is the one." Samuel takes his horn of oil and anoints David in the presence of his brothers. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon David. Israel would have a new king. A *better* king. Not a perfect king, for no one is perfect save Jesus Christ alone, but still, a *good* king, a king who – despite the terrible mistakes that he would indeed make – still did a whole lot of things *right*, and when he screwed up, he was man enough to admit his mistakes, confess them to God Almighty, and accept God's judgment. How many leaders try to cover up their mistakes, pretend they never happened, lie about them, or try to justify them through twisted arguments? Not David. He endeavored to be faithful to *God*. He wasn't perfect, but his *heart* was oriented in the right direction.

"The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Such a *critical* lesson for any of us who are serious about trying to follow God. It was a lesson I did not know when I was young. It was a lesson I had to be taught – again and again.

I was taught it first when visiting my cousin. He and his family lived down in Oklahoma, and we went to visit them about once a year. My cousin had been born with a birth defect. His right arm ended just past the elbow. There was a stump, and a couple fingers, and that was it. I'm sure my parents had to remind me, in those early years, every time we went for a visit, that he wouldn't look "normal." If I recall correctly, the word the family used to describe his arm was "special." And I do remember that, as a child, I had trouble getting past my discomfort. That says a lot more about *me* than it does about *him*.

Then there was the Jewish student in my first-grade class. She didn't look any different from the rest of us, but she had a traditional Hebrew name, and she was surely going to take some flack from her classmates for not participating in any Christmas festivities. So my teacher, in her wisdom, invited her dad to come in to speak to the class. He explained to us what Jews believe, and what they don't believe, and why they don't celebrate Christmas, and about the festival of Hanukkah. It was incredibly helpful, and I'm sure it made her experience with us better. It remains the *one* specific lesson I remember from my first grade year, and surely one of the most important lessons I ever heard in my early school years.

A year or two later, a blind girl joined our class. Our teacher explained to us ahead of time that a new student would be arriving, and that she walked with a cane, and that her eyes would be open, but that she wouldn't be able to see. The day she arrived in class, our teacher had to remind us not to stare at her, because that – of course – was what we all were wanting to do. We were still too stuck on how people looked on the *outside*. We weren't giving any thought yet to getting to know her on the *inside*.

Then, a couple years after that, a Black kid joined our class. The *only* Black kid in our class, maybe the only Black kid in our entire school. He had what we thought was a very funny name. It was also clear that his family didn't have as much money as us upper-middle-class white kids. So, from our vantage point, he had three strikes against him. And we let him know it. I am sure that things would have gone down differently if the school had made more of an intentional effort to integrate him into our class. None of us made any real effort to get to know him. In fact, we were terrible to him. *I* was terrible to him. I caused him to shed tears, tears that he tried not to let us see. But the damage was done. I knew I had hurt him, emotionally; I knew that I had done wrong. But I also didn't want to apologize, not with my friends around, because I cared more about trying to impress *them*, than about doing what was *right*. I still hadn't learned that a person's *heart* matters more than what they *look* like.

He left our school not long after that. I never saw him again. I never apologized to him. I've tried to find him. I've looked for him on Facebook. I've Googled his name. Nothing comes up. Like, literally *nothing*. It's possible I might not be spelling his name right. Someday, somehow, I'd like to tell him that I truly am sorry, that I sincerely regret the things that we said and the things that we did – the things that *I* said, the things that *I* did. I left scars on his soul, scars which surely impacted his whole life. Someday, somehow, I'd like to sit down with him, look at him in the eye, and apologize. I'd like to hear him tell me how he *felt* that day, even if it is painful for me to listen to. I'd like to hear his *story*.

We humans judge people by their appearance *far* too often. God's message is perfectly plain. "The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." There's nothing complicated about that. Except the fact that we are so incredibly bad at living it out. God gave us that message *three thousand years ago*. Thirty centuries later, it *still* hasn't sunk in.

May God grant us the insight to move beyond *appearances* ... and truly see people's *hearts*.

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