

The LORD Looks at the Heart

1 Samuel 16:1-13 (NIV)

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.” ² But Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.” The LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’” ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate.” ⁴ Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, “Do you come in peace?” ⁵ Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. ⁶ When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD.” 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.” ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, “The LORD has not chosen this one either.” ⁹ Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, “Nor has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰ Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “The LORD has not chosen these.” ¹¹ So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?” “There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.” ¹² So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.” ¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah.

The first king of Israel, a man named Saul, certainly looked the part. He was described this way: “Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else.” (1 Samuel 9:2) He looked like leadership material, and he even started out good, obeying God’s Word. But then he disobeyed God again and again. The LORD saw that Saul’s heart had rejected him, and so he rejected Saul as king over Israel. The prophet Samuel was the one who delivered this news of rejection to Saul.

Not too long after this, the LORD commissioned Samuel as we heard in our verses today. “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.” (verse 1) Samuel goes to Bethlehem with a sacrifice in hand along with his horn of oil for anointing. He summons Jesse and his sons for the sacrifice.

When Jesse’s sons arrived, Samuel sees something in Eliab, Jesse’s oldest son. Maybe Eliab reminds him of Saul – a handsome young man, taller than the rest. “Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD,” he said. (verse 6) The LORD corrected Samuel’s observation, told him that he was judging by different criteria. “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.” (verse 7) What was in Eliab’s heart was not what God was looking for in the next king of Israel.

Unlike God, we can’t look at hearts. We can judge mostly only by outward appearance. We judge by how people present themselves – not just the clothes they wear or how neatly groomed their hair is, but body language, eye contact, a handshake, how they talk about others, how they treat others. We judge by outward appearances because we are not able to look inside a person. We can only go on what they reveal to us.

Knowing that we can really only judge by outward appearances, we make a point of putting on appearances for people. We work to show them only what we want to show them. Maybe we only want to show them the good side. Maybe we try to show only a person who is nice and compassionate, who is well put together, smart, and witty. Maybe it’s not even an act of good works, but an act of hiding all the pain because no one wants to hear us complain yet again and we are sick of complaining without any solutions.

No matter the show, the LORD sees through it all – the clothes, the make-up, the pretense, the words, the deeds. He sees right through and knows why you do what you do. He sees the attitude of your heart. He knows your motives. He knows your thoughts. He knows your struggles. He knows the complaints that you never voice. He knows your ulterior motives in helping your neighbor, in doing good works. He knows your moments of disobedience. He sees every imperfection, every blemish, every sin. You can’t hide anything from him.

What does God see when he looks at my heart? Is it as clean as it needs to be? I think I'm pretty good, but there still lies the dark thoughts and attitudes in my heart. I know my thoughts. I know how wrong they can be at times, and God doesn't accept that. He ought to reject me for the heart I have because I do not have a pure, clean heart. I know my heart is not pure enough. I know my selfish thoughts. I know my short-comings and imperfections. I know the wrong I do. I can't hide it from you. Make me clean! Make me new! "Create in me a clean heart, O God!" as even David cries out in Psalm 51:10.

It was for that very purpose that God gave himself for us. When coming to John the Baptist, this Jesus of Nazareth didn't look like much. He was a regular Joe, thought of as the son of a regular carpenter, a blue-collar worker. "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." (Luke 3:21) He looked like everyone else, doing what everyone else was doing. But John said that he was not worthy to even untie Jesus' sandals. And when John baptized Jesus, "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" (Luke 3:21c-22) It was at Jesus' baptism that the Lord revealed him as his beloved Son, the one who has his full approval. This visible sending of the Holy Spirit and the audible voice of the Father made the approval of Jesus clear and undeniable. Jesus' heart was indeed clean. He was living the perfection for us, just as he set out to do.

Jesus lived the perfection that is not in our hearts to save us from our dirty hearts. "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:4-5) This washing of rebirth and renewal is baptism. With those simple waters combined with God's Word, his promise, he makes us new. He cleanses our heart, scrubs from us all imperfection and sin so that we are pure and holy in his sight – consecrated like Jesse and his sons with Samuel. By baptizing us, the Lord rescues us from hell. Instead of rejecting us and our dirty hearts, he accepts us because he has clothed us with Jesus' righteousness and perfection. Through baptism, God announces of us just as he did of Jesus, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Because you have been baptized, this is what the Lord sees when he looks at your heart.

That day when Samuel came to Bethlehem to anoint David, David didn't seem like much. Jesse made sure his other seven sons were there for the sacrifice with Samuel, but not David. When Samuel asked if Jesse had any more sons, Jesse replied by saying that the youngest was out tending the sheep. Jesse didn't even use his name, just called him the youngest. A little later on Eliab would say of David, "I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is." (1 Samuel 17:28) His family did not think much of him, even with the physical description: "He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features." (verse 12b) David's family had written him off, rejected him in a way.

Although his family basically rejected him, the LORD examined David's heart. He saw a clean heart, one that the LORD had purified for David. He chose him in spite of what others saw. The LORD thus directed Samuel to anoint David as the next king over Israel. "So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David." (verse 13) The LORD made David's heart clean. The LORD chose David to serve him as king. What David would do on the outside would match the clean heart the LORD gave him because the Spirit of the LORD was on him.

Since the Lord has made our hearts clean by baptism, our appearance is also to match our new heart. Although looked down upon by his family, David still faithfully worked as a shepherd. He worked faithfully from the heart that God gave him. We carry out our responsibilities faithfully because God has given us clean hearts.

With our clean hearts, we look at people differently. We look past outward appearance of people here to see people with hearts that the Lord has made clean as well. We can value them, cherish them, in the way the Lord has changed them and clothed them with Christ's perfection, just as he has us. We see the other people in our lives as those whom God has lived perfectly for as well, people whose hearts he offers to cleanse as he has cleansed ours.

God sees our whole hearts, every imperfection, every sin. He has all sorts of reasons to reject us, like he did with Saul. However, the Lord has instead made our hearts clean and pure through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are not rejected by the Lord, but we stand approved before him. Because Jesus stood approved at his baptism for us, we know that through our baptism we also are loved by the Lord and that he is well pleased with us. Work on us, Lord, by your Holy Spirit, so that our appearance matches the clean heart that you have created in us. Amen.