



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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The Lord's Day
June 17, 2012

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“But the LORD Looks at the Heart”
1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13

You’ve heard the old adage time and time again: “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Some of the books that are most valuable to me, either because of their content or their sentimental value or both, have the most worn and ragged covers of any in my library. Some others have impressive covers, but their contents don’t live up to their covers!

It’s the same with people, isn’t it?

In her book *Another Day in the Frontal Lobe*,

Dr. Katrina Firlik, the first woman admitted into the neurosurgery residency at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, offers a glimpse into the training of a brain surgeon. She devotes a part of one chapter to a story from the last year of her residency—a time when she was already becoming a bit hardened to the tragedies of neurological devastation. She writes:

I walked into yet another examining room ... a brand-new consult from out of town: 18-years-old, cerebral palsy, spasticity. Okay, okay, I've seen this before, I just need to get a good history before my attending [physician] walks in. Efficiency is key. I looked at the patient for a second: very skinny, special wheelchair, arms contracted, head support in place, mouth hung open. It was clear I wasn't going to get the story from him, so I turned to the parents, my back toward the patient, and started to take down the history

[When my mentor walked in], I cringed He sat down on the examining table, the only seat left in the cramped room. After introducing himself, he surveyed the compact scene—the patient, the parents—and then focused his gaze back on the patient. After what seemed like several, almost uncomfortably quiet seconds, he looked the patient in the eye and asked, “So, when did you graduate from high school?” The young man's face lit up like I had no idea it could.

My mentor had noticed something I had missed. The patient was wearing a large high-school ring, so large that it looked a little silly on his bony finger. His body, far more than his mind, had borne the brunt of his cerebral palsy. He was a proud, beaming high-school graduate, who used a specialized computer to help him communicate. For the remainder of the visit I sat in the corner, duncelike, humbled by the enormity of this ring now staring me in the face.¹

¹ Katrina Firlik, *Another Day in the Frontal Lobe* (New York: Random House, 2007), 138-139; submitted by Hugh Poland to www.preachingtoday.com.

Dr. Firlik had looked at the outward appearance and affliction of her patient, and had totally missed the essence of who he was.

We often do the same thing, but in the other direction. We see the tall person and automatically assume that he or she plays basketball. We make judgments about people based on their appearance or how they comport themselves. You have to be very careful with that. One of my seminary professors was an absolutely brilliant historical theologian and church historian. He had studied the early church fathers so thoroughly and drunk from their writings so deeply that when he talked about them, it was as though he was talking about old friends he'd known personally for years. And he could translate German theological works into readable English—no small accomplishment! He had grown up in the Ozark Mountains, and wore a long goatee beard. Dressed in a suit and tie, he looked like a brilliant, thoughtful scholar. But I always thought that if he had put on a flannel shirt, overalls, and a straw hat, he'd look like the caricature of a hillbilly!

Nothing new

In reality, judging people by their outward appearance is nothing new.

Our text today, 1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13, is about Samuel's anointing of David to become the second king of Israel. Israel's first king, Saul, was being rejected by God because of his disobedience to God's commands through Samuel, the prophet-priest and judge of Israel.

Though he never had a high opinion of himself—he was small in his own eyes (15:17)—Saul's appearance was impressive. He was a head taller than anybody else, so he had a strong, imposing physical presence and appearance. Yet he was reluctant when Samuel anointed him to be the king. Samuel gave him three confirming signs that he was to be king, all of which came to pass that very day. But later, when Samuel brought the people together to cast lots to select their new king, and the lot came down to Saul, he was nowhere to be found! He was hiding among the supplies! When some of the men went and brought him out, most of the people accepted him, but some of the scoundrels despised him.

After several key military victories, Saul consolidated his power. But he overstepped his authority before a battle against the Philistines. Samuel had said he would come by the seventh day to offer a sacrifice. When Samuel delayed, Saul went ahead and offered the sacrifice in order to keep his troops from scattering. When Samuel arrived and found out what had happened, he rebuked Saul, declaring to him that his kingdom would not endure because of his disobedience, but that the LORD had "sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people."²

It was all downhill from there for Saul. By chapter 15, Saul doesn't carry out fully the LORD's command to destroy the Amalekites completely because of how they had mercilessly attacked the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness. Saul kept the best of the cattle and sheep, supposedly to offer to the LORD, and kept the king Agag alive. Samuel confronted Saul for his disobedience and told him that because he had rejected the word of the LORD, the LORD had rejected him as king. This turn of events truly grieved Samuel. And it grieved the LORD as well—he "regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel" (15:35).

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, 2011 edition.

Anointing a new king

In time the LORD told Samuel to stop mourning for Saul, to fill his horn with oil, and to go to Jesse of Bethlehem and anoint one of his sons to be king. Samuel knew Saul's personal insecurity, so he was reluctant to go, fearing that Saul might kill him if he found out. So the LORD told him to take a heifer with him for a sacrifice, and to invite Jesse to the sacrifice.

Samuel took the heifer with him and invited the elders of the town, including Jesse, to consecrate themselves and come to the sacrifice. He consecrated Jesse and his sons himself.

Once Jesse and all his sons—all but one, that is—were there, Samuel began to look them over. He saw Eliab, the oldest, and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD" (16:6).

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" (16:7).

One by one, six more of Jesse's sons passed before Samuel, and none of them was the one. Samuel told him that the LORD had not chosen any of these, and asked him, "Are these all the sons you have?" (15:11).

Jesse told him, "There is still the youngest" (literally the *smallest*). "He is tending the sheep" (16:11). Samuel commanded them to send for him." When he came in, they were all waiting with anticipation to see what would happen. Though he made a fine appearance, David was small compared to Saul who was a head taller than anyone else.³ But Samuel had declared to Saul that his kingdom would not endure because of his disobedience, and that the LORD had "sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people."⁴ God was more interested in David's heart than in his being a head taller than anybody else!

So Samuel anointed David to be king "in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David" (16:13). The LORD directed Samuel to anoint David because he looked on David's heart.

The LORD looks at the heart

"People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (16:7).

It's just that simple.

I wonder what the LORD sees when he looks at our hearts . . . Only he and we really know what's in it, and sometimes we don't fully know. But he does.

When the LORD looks at my heart and your heart, does he see a genuine love for him and for our neighbors? After all, when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he said that the greatest is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and that the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Does that love for God and others fill our hearts, or are they filled with self-centeredness and ill-will? In reality, for most of us, if we're brutally honest, there's probably some of both. But which is there more of, the love or the self-centeredness?

We spend so much time worrying about outward appearances, whether it's physical

³ Robert D. Bergen, 1,2 Samuel in *The New American Commentary* 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 179-180.

⁴ Tony Cartledge, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 201.

appearance or social status—you know, the right style and brand of clothes, the right kind of cell phone, the right car, the right house, and on it goes. We're often more like Hyacinth Bucket (which she insists is pronounced "Bouquet") on the British comedy "Keeping Up Appearances." Everything is about impressing others, about how things about our lives look to others.

People might take notice of it, *but God looks at our hearts*. And all too often when people *do* take notice of it, they see that it's all an empty façade with no authenticity.

On this Father's Day, I can't stress enough how important this is. As parents, we do our best to provide all the outward things that will give our children the best opportunities, and that's not a bad thing. But so often we focus so much on the outward that we *neglect the heart*. We involve them in so many different activities and opportunities to try to prepare them for the future that we neglect their spiritual formation and nurture. We expect the church to do that for them, but then when it comes down to one of those activities or opportunities being scheduled at the same time as a church event or worship, the church event or worship loses out to the other activity or opportunity and goes by the wayside. After all, we want our kids to be successful and liked and popular and have a head start and a leg up! Right?

But what about their hearts?

And what about *our* hearts? What does the LORD see when he looks at them?

David's heart was by no means perfect. But when it was all said and done, despite his spiritual frailty and failures and outright sin, he loved God and wanted him more than anything else. Do you?

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