

“Cultivating the Outward Appearance vs Cultivating the Heart”

1 Samuel 16:1-13

June 2, 2019

Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service

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Our text this evening is from First Samuel, chapter sixteen, verses one through thirteen.

To bring us up to speed again: Israel asked for a king like the other nations have, and Saul has been called to the position. We read in earlier chapters of his anointing, his selection, and his formal installation. And then, over the past few Lord’s Day evenings we have witnessed Saul’s turning away from God, his refusal to listen to the Word of the Lord, and his sin regarding God, regarding God’s people, and regarding the world.

At the end of First Samuel fifteen God pronounces his final rejection of Saul, through the prophet Samuel. Saul and Samuel then go their separate ways. And at the very end of the chapter we read that Samuel “grieved over Saul.” And that the Lord, that Yahweh “regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

That is how First Samuel fifteen ended. Which brings us to our text tonight.

And so, with all that in mind, we turn now to First Samuel sixteen. Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

^{16:1}Yahweh said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” ² And Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.” And Yahweh said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to Yahweh.’” ³ And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you.” ⁴ Samuel did what Yahweh commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, “Do you come peaceably?” ⁵ And he said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to Yahweh. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely Yahweh’s anointed is before him.” ⁷ But Yahweh said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For Yahweh sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks on the heart.” ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “Neither has Yahweh chosen this one.” ⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has Yahweh chosen this one.” ¹⁰ And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “Yahweh has not chosen these.” ¹¹ Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.” ¹² And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And Yahweh said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.” ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let's pray ...

Righteous are you, O Lord,
and righteous are your rules.
You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness
and in all faithfulness.
Your promises are well tried,
and we, your servants, love them.
Though we be small and despised,
yet we do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is righteous forever,
and your word is true.
Even when we face trials,
your commandments are our delight.
Give us now understanding as we come to your word,
that we might here find life.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:137-138, 140-144]

Before we zero in on the verse that our focus will hinge on this evening, let's first look over our text as a whole.

In verse one the Lord, Yahweh, calls Samuel to prepare to go to Bethlehem, where Yahweh will point out to him the next king of Israel, the king who will replace Saul. And once Yahweh has pointed him out, Samuel is to anoint him.

Verse two then is a bit jarring in two different ways.

First, in the first half of verse two we learn that Samuel is worried that Saul will kill him if Saul finds out that he is going around looking for Saul's replacement. On one level this is not unusual for a king who wants to hold on to his position ... on another level we see that for whatever reason, Samuel now *expects* Saul to have this sort of murderous response to Yahweh's prophet carrying out Yahweh's command. And based on verse four, that concern might not be ill-founded. It's not clear why the elders of the city come out to meet Samuel trembling. Some wonder if their fear was of Samuel and some sort of condemnation from him. But it seems to me just as likely (and maybe more likely) that they feared Samuel's visit being for a purpose that would evoke the wrath of Saul. (The question they ask of whether Samuel comes peaceably could be asking whether he comes peaceably towards them or peaceably in regard to Saul's rule.) In either case, we learn in verse two that Samuel now fears that Saul will try to kill him.

And then in the second half of verse two the Lord tells Samuel what to say ... and his directions sound a lot like deception ... like functional lying, even if not technical lying. And if that raises some questions for you, I'm going to ask you to hold on to that. Deception comes up a few times in First and Second Samuel, and we will address it at some point – and when we do we'll bring this verse in as well. For tonight though, we will leave it aside.

God commands Samuel, and Samuel obeys. And when Samuel gets to Bethlehem he invites the elders to the sacrifice, as well as Jesse and Jesse's sons. The Hebrew word used there indicates that this was a kind of sacrifice where part of the animal was then enjoyed and eaten by the people as part of a feast. [Alter, 96] That's why he says they won't sit until David is there – the idea is

less about them all standing around awkwardly while they wait for David, and more about how they will not sit for the feast until all the sons of Jesse are there. [Davis, 172] And so Samuel is not simply inviting the elders and Jesse's family to come and observe the sacrifice, but he is inviting them to share in a religious banquet with him.

Then, in the context of the sacrifice and the gathering for the feast Samuel observes the sons of Jesse, he hears from the Lord which one he has chosen as the next king, and he anoints Yahweh's choice. We see from verse thirteen that though the elders were at the sacrifice and feast, the anointing would have been less public than that – a “clandestine act” “within the family circle” since we read that Samuel anointed David only “in the midst of his brothers.” [Alter, 97]

The stress of this passage is that now Yahweh will choose the kind of king he wants over his people. And the key word – or key root word – of this chapter is the Hebrew word for “see”, which shows up nine times in the Hebrew. [Davis, 168]

And at the center of those two themes – the theme of God's choice and the theme of seeing – is verse seven. There, when the eldest son appears before Samuel – Eliab who has the kind of outward appearance that people in the ancient world (including Samuel) would have expected for a king – there we read this: “But Yahweh said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For Yahweh sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks on the heart.’”

As we look at Yahweh's rejection of Eliab, his choice of David, and his words of rebuke in verse seven to Samuel, there are a number of ways we can approach this hinge verse in the passage.

What I want us to consider tonight is how *we respond to the fact* that the man looks on the outward appearance while God looks on the heart.

How do we respond to this reality?

Because as we reflect on these categories, I think that what we should note in our own lives and the lives of those around us is that most of the time, *we care much more about cultivating the outward appearance that man sees, than we care about cultivating the heart that God sees.*

We care much more about cultivating the outward appearance that man sees, than we care about cultivating the heart that God sees.

Let me explain what I mean by that, and then we can turn together to what solution this passage offers us.

Let's start with the first part of this claim: That we care a great deal about cultivating the outward appearance that man sees.

And what I mean here by “outward appearance” is not just physical attractiveness, but much more about what our culture looks for and approves of.

We should note that what is mentioned about Eliab is that he is both attractive and tall. And these are the kind of attributes one would look for in a king in the ancient world. A king needed to attract people to himself, he needed to have a commanding presence, he needed to stand out, and he needed to be a good fighter. And in a day before soft-focus cameras, jumbotrons, or modern

weapon technology, physical attractiveness and physical height both helped in those areas. Eliab had the appearance that his culture looked on with approval – what they looked for in one they would want to hold up and follow. That was the kind of outward appearance that was honored in their culture.

So, what, then, is the kind of outward appearance that is similarly honored in *our* culture?

And this is where things get a little more complicated. Because we live in a fractured culture, with a number of subcultures that each have their own outward attributes and appearances that they prize.

Author David Brooks has described it like this – he writes:

“As you look across the landscape of America – from hip bohemia to ethnic enclaves [...] through the diverse suburbs into exurbia and the farthest farm towns [what you see is a lot like] a big high school cafeteria with all these different tables. The jocks sit here, the geeks sit there, the drama people sit over there, the druggies sit somewhere else. All these different cliques know the others exist, and there are some tensions. But they go to different parties, have slightly different cultures, talk about different things, and see different realities. Although individuals may live in two or three overlapping cliques, the cliques don’t know much about one another, and they all regard the others as vaguely pathetic.

“In America, too, people find their own social circles, usually with invisible buffer zones. You may have moved to suburban Des Moines, but then you find a quilting club, and there are quilting meetings, national quilting conventions, and quilting celebrities such as Ike Winner, the Quilting Cowboy, and Marianne Fons and Liz Porter, hosts of the PBS show *For the Love of Quilting*. You’ve found your community, and as in every clique, it has its own status system, its own causes, its own validation system, and its own exaggerated sense of its role in society.

“There is no one single elite in America. [...] [And so] everybody can be an aristocrat within his own Olympus.” [...] Your clique will communicate its code of honor, its own set of jokes and privileges. It will offer you a field of accomplishments and a system of recognition.” [Brooks, *On Paradise Drive*, 71-72]

Brooks is showing us that while in David and Samuel’s day there was a more unified vision of what kind of outward appearance men and women looked for and approved of, in our own culture today there are many more subcultures, and each has its own set of external traits that gain one approval and prestige. And we might each live in several of these subcultures.

Something that complex quickly gets unwieldy. How do we talk about it here – how do we identify the kind of outward appearances we especially care about cultivating?

Well, while the subject matter or the topic that different subcultures focus on might vary a lot, I think we can still divide most of them into three different genres of the kind of outward appearance that they prize, and which they lead us to strive for – those three common patterns of life being: “The Achieving Life,” “The Aesthetic Life,” and “The Virtuous Life.”

So – what do those look like?

Well first, let’s consider “The Achieving Life.” As the name suggests, the outward appearance that is valued and therefore pursued in these subcultures is about what we have achieved. The area of achievement can vary widely, be it our work, our home, our family, our children, or something

else. But in each case, the thing we cultivate, the outward appearance we don't just want to have but that we *want others to see and approve of* is our achievements. We cultivate this outward appearance *because* we know others will see it, and we want them to judge us by it and approve of us.

And cultivating this kind of appearance takes hard work. And that hard work becomes increasingly consuming. When we are fixed on projecting a certain outward appearance with our achievements, we can get increasingly distracted from other things, and focused instead on the image of achievement we want to project. We work harder and harder at the area we want to achieve in and we neglect other areas.

David Brooks again is helpful – he writes: “Workaholism is a surprisingly effective distraction from emotional and spiritual problems. It’s surprisingly easy to become emotionally avoidant and morally decoupled, to be less close to and vulnerable with those around you and to wall off the dark jungle deep inside you, to gradually tamp down the highs and lows and simply live in neutral.”

He goes on: “The meritocracy [– the achievement-oriented approach to life –] is the most self-confident moral system in the world today. [...] It organizes society into an endless set of outer and inner rings, with the high achievers at the [...] center and everybody else arrayed across the wider rings towards the edge. While it pretends not to, it subliminally sends the message that those who are smarter and more accomplished are actually worth more than those who are not.” [Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, 22-23]

Of course, anyone who stays on this track long enough begins to feel how the relentless pursuit of an approved-of outward appearance leaves them feeling hollow and unfulfilled. There is nothing anchoring them, and they are always in fear of losing their status. As one author puts it, they are best characterized as an “insecure overachiever.” [Matias Dalsgaard, quoted in Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, 24]

Do you see that pattern in your life? Do you see it in how you treat your school work or career? In how you relate to your home or your family or your children? In the image you try to project at church or online? In the way you compare yourself with your colleagues or peers?

This is the first pattern many follow in our society – fixating on their outward appearance in the area of achievement. They cultivate an outward appearance of achievement *specifically because they want other people to see it*, and they hope that when people see it, they will approve of them. That is the pursuit of the outward appearance of achievement.

Now – that’s not the form it takes for everyone. As we said, others are more drawn to the outward appearance of “The Aesthetic Life” or “The Virtuous Life.” While the dynamics are the same, these other genres of outward appearance still look different.

The “Aesthetic Life” is the one that looks like a collection of wonderful and beautiful moments and experiences. This label comes from Soren Kierkegaard, and as another author puts it: “The person leading the aesthetic life is leading his life as if it were a piece of art, judging by aesthetic criteria – is it interesting or dull, pretty or ugly, pleasurable or painful.” [Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, 17]

Of the three types of “outward appearance” that subcultures in our society value, this one is the most image-based. The kind of images it is based on might vary – it might be images of the kind

of experiences you have had, or the places you have traveled, the luxuries you have afforded, or just how physically beautiful you can appear yourself. But the key is that these are things pursued not just for their own value, but they are things you cultivate as an outward appearance because you *want* other people to see and approve of the image you project. And whether you hope for them to see it in person, to hear of it when you tell them about it, or to see pictures of it on social media, you work to cultivate an outward appearance of your life that is primarily aesthetic – that is based on appearances – and you want other people to see it and approve of you. That is the second major genre of “outward appearance” pursued in our society.

A third option is “The Virtuous Life.” Now – by this I do not necessarily mean a life that is more moral than those around it, but a life that is focused on cultivating and presenting an outward appearance of morality for others to see and approve of. The system of virtue being pursued can vary – there are conservative and liberal forms, religious and secular forms. While we might tend to think of our culture as divided between traditional moralists and more progressive relativists, others have pointed out that the reality is that our society is characterized by *competing* ethical systems, not the presence of ethical systems in some corners and the absence of them in others. And in each of these subcultures, whether the religious conservatives or the secular conservatives, the religious liberals or the secular liberals, or some other shade in between those options, people are working hard to project an outward appearance that will gain them approval as virtuous in their social circles. We make sure other people know we support the right causes, we hold the right opinions, we voted for the right politicians, we mock and despise the right groups of people. We virtue signal loudly enough and frequently enough for the right people to hear us. We cultivate an outward appearance that will gain us approval as living “The Virtuous Life.” This is a third genre of outward appearance that we might seek.

What each of these patterns shares is a fixation on cultivating an outward appearance that we want others to see, so that they will approve of us.

And we each fall into these patterns. You do, I do. The areas of life they play out in might be very different, but we all do the same thing.

Where do you do it? Where do you see it in your life? Where are you fixated on your outward image and appearance, and receiving the approval of others through it?

Our text leads us to wrestle with the fact that we care a great deal about cultivating the outward appearance that man sees.

But that, by itself, is not really the biggest problem. It *is* a problem – because these pursuits will not deliver what we hope they will. But the *biggest* problem is not that we care too much about these outward appearances, as if that excessive concern happens in a vacuum.

The biggest problem is that we care much *more* about cultivating the outward appearance that man sees, *than we care about cultivating the heart that God sees.*

The biggest problem is the relationship between those two categories – and that our care for the outward is not only excessive ... but that our cares are disordered – they are out of order. We care *more* about the outward appearance that man sees, and *less* about the heart that God sees.

And we should reflect on how much we care about the heart that God sees.

Think of all the concern you feel over people seeing and evaluating your outward appearance – your achievements, and aesthetics, and supposed virtuousness. And people are only looking some of the time. And most of the time they're not paying that much attention to you. As one author has said: "You will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realize how seldom they do." [David Foster Wallace] And yet, even with all that said, think of all the concern you still feel about how other people evaluate your outward appearance.

First Samuel 16:7 reminds us that God our Maker is looking at our hearts every moment, with perfect attention. He sees everything that comes out of our heart – every thought, word, and deed. He knows our deepest feelings. He knows our true disposition towards him. He sees your heart and your true attitude towards him and he sees it right now. How much concern do you feel about that from day to day? How much concern do you feel to cultivate a heart more devoted and loving and submissive towards him? How often do you even think about it?

First Samuel 16:7 is a reminder that the all-seeing eye of God is always gazing upon our heart. We should be taken aback by that, and we should be distressed that we worry *so much more* about what other men and women think of our outward appearance than we worry about what God thinks of our heart.

How would it change you if you lived your life constantly aware that God was observing your heart every moment of every day?

And it is the neglect of that that is really the key to our text. Because we even have a reminder that outward appearance is not the issue – the issue is wrongly prioritizing outward appearance.

God does not pass over a guy with a great external appearance in favor of a guy with a terrible external appearance. We are told in verse twelve that David was also good looking, and later on in the chapter, in verse eighteen, we will read that David was known as a good fighter.

As one commentator puts it, our text shows us that "external appearance neither qualifies nor disqualifies" before God. The point is that compared to the heart, external appearance "simply does not matter." [Davis, 171]

And yet we act so often as if the opposite is true.

So, we see, in reflecting on our text, that we care much more about cultivating the outward appearance that man sees, than we care about cultivating the heart that God sees. And we also see, as we reflect on that, what a grave mistake it is. We are seeking to be Eliab when we should be seeking to be like David.

And yet ... what are we to do we do about it? How do we fix the problem?

Our hearts are stubborn. So often, they seem to simply want what they want, and try as we might on our own, we feel like we cannot shake the fixation on outward appearance.

The fact is that often, our hearts are a mess. And *we* are not able to fix them. Any attempt we make on our own quickly falls back on itself and becomes focused on the external rather than the internal. So, what are we to do?

The truth is that there are multiple layers of typology in our text. And as we appreciate that, we recognize that while David *is* an example for us to emulate in this passage, he is also much more than that.

What our text directs us to is the fact that *we must look to the ultimate David, and then we can become more like David ourselves.*

You and I must look to the *ultimate* David, and only *then* can we become like David ourselves.

To begin: what does it look like for us to look to the ultimate David?

In a real sense, in the most real sense, you and I are not David in this passage. We are Eliab. We do not have what it takes to be God's king. And the primary problem is not our lack of skills or achievements, it is the state of our heart. And in light of that fact, we should be glad that God has called someone else to that role. We should be glad that he has called a man who *is* able to do it – a man who *is* able to deliver us from our enemies even better than the first David was able to.

Jesus Christ, the descendent of David, is the ultimate King David for the people of God. His external appearance was even lower than David's – for David, we read was ruddy and handsome, but Jesus, David's greater son, we will read in Isaiah 53:2 “had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” And yet, God the Father looked not at the outward appearance, but at the heart. And while the first David was commendable for having a relatively submissive heart towards God, Jesus had a perfectly submissive heart towards God – a heart of sinless love and devotion towards God the Father. And so, he was anointed as the ultimate and eternal king of the people of God.

And like David will be in the chapters ahead, Jesus, the ultimate David would also be called to rescue God's people from their enemies, including from the sin in our own hearts, the sin that has dominion over us, the sin that leads our hearts astray, and leads us to care so little about our hearts' condition.

Jesus has been selected to rescue us from our unsubmissive hearts – not because we earned it, but because he is able to do it as our gracious king.

If you think about it, what is the proper response for Eliab and David's other brothers at the end of our text tonight? They have just watched God pass over them and anoint David as king instead. After seeing his anointing, what should they do? Well, probably a few things, including some soul-searching. But the *first* thing they should do is look to David, pledge their allegiance to him, and then ask him to lead and deliver them from their enemies. The first thing they should do is take his kingship seriously.

And so, with us. Our first calling is to recognize that ultimately, we are not David. Our first calling is not to *be* David, but to *look to David* – the ultimate David, the descendant of David, Jesus Christ. And to look to him for deliverance.

Recognize that you *are* Eliab. That no matter how impressive the outer appearance you have cultivated is, at the end of the day, your heart is not what it should be. Mourn that fact, yes – but do not despair. A gracious king has been called, whose heart *is* right. And he wants to deliver you. Your first calling is to look to Christ and ask for him to deliver you from your sin and guilt – not just once, but again and again, throughout your Christian life.

That is the first thing our text points us to – we must look to the ultimate David.

But second, once we have done that, *then* we should also seek to be like David ourselves.

We should seek to be like David not to impress others (that would just be a twist on the pattern of life in pursuit of a virtuous outward appearance), and we should seek to be like David not to earn God’s favor (that would be impossible) – but we should seek to be like David because we love the ultimate David, we want to be like him, and we want God our Father to be more and more pleased with our hearts as he looks upon us.

In other words, as we seek to cultivate our hearts, our primary motivation should be love for God.

And the best way to cultivate our hearts is to be with one whose heart we want to emulate, and then walk in his footsteps, follow his directions, and imitate his ways.

If Eliab wanted a heart like David, he should spend time with David. He should watch him and imitate him. He should try to do what he sees him do.

And if we want a heart like Jesus, David’s greater son, then we should spend time with Jesus. We should watch him in the Scriptures and imitate him. We should try to do what we see him do. We should listen carefully to his instruction for us in all the Scriptures.

And we should want to be like Christ in our hearts.

For one thing, knowing the emptiness of fixating on our external appearance, and knowing that our hearts are always exposed before our Father in heaven, *why would we want* to live our lives devoted to our external appearance and neglecting our hearts? What could possibly be the appeal of that?

But along with that, if we have pledged our loyalty to Christ, if we have seen what he has done for us, then wouldn’t we *want* to be like him? Wouldn’t we *want* to obey his commands and walk in his footsteps?

Of course, we often do turn back from the heart of Christ and towards pursuing external appearances. And the frequency with which we turn to that can be discouraging. But that is also where I take comfort in the first of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses. Luther wrote that “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

To repent is to turn around. The Christian life is an entire life of turning around, again and again. What marks the Christian life is not its perfection, but the fact that every time we turn *away from* the heart of Christ to something else, *we turn back to Christ again*. We repent. And so it is here. Our calling is every time we turn from the heart Christ calls us to cultivate, and towards projecting a certain external appearance, we see our sin, confess it to our Lord, give thanks for his deliverance again, and turn back to the path of heart-level-devotion that he has called us to.

We seek to be people, like David, whose hearts, though imperfect like his, are hearts that are characterized by submission to our Lord.

It is easy to get caught up in outward appearances. The world screams at us constantly to do just that – in advertisements, in social media posts, in the comparisons we feel with others, in news stories, in resumes, in more. And our world is not that unique. Even Samuel fell into the trap in our text.

Achievement is not bad. It can be quite good, actually. Aesthetics are certainly not bad. Virtue – biblical virtue – is definitely not bad. Neither are height nor good looks, like Eliab had. Each of these things are good in themselves – when pursued for the right reasons, and in the right place.

The problem is when we pursue them *in order to grasp at the approval of others*. The problem is when we *care more about cultivating them, than about cultivating our heart before God*.

On their own, achievement, virtue, and beauty are good things. *But their relative value pales when compared with the value of a heart that is lovingly devoted to God*.

Honestly assess the condition of your heart. Honestly look at where you have been cold towards the Lord – where you have cared more about what men and women think about you than what your Maker thinks about you.

When you take that honest assessment of your heart, then turn to Jesus, David's greater son, and find your deliverance from him – your deliverance from your sin, from your shallowness, from your coldness of heart. Ask him for help.

And then seek to follow in his footsteps and cultivate a heart like his. A heart of loving devotion to the Lord.

God looks on the heart. He sees it perfectly, and he sees it all the time.

That can be scary. In some ways it should be scary.

But when we begin to feel the weightiness of that as we should, we must also remember that in Christ God looks on our hearts like a Father looking on his child. It is true that there is much he sees in our hearts that he is not happy with. But *his* heart towards his children is not one eager to condemn, but eager to see growth and give encouragement. He looks on expectantly to see the gospel produce fruit in our hearts.

Let us pursue hearts devoted to God, like children who are eager to bring a smile to our loving Father's face.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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