

The Covenant Pulpit



Pursuing the heart of god
"David, a man after God's Heart"

"The heart of the matter"

1 Samuel 17

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Dr. Robert Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church
6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108
(239) 597-3464
www.covenantnaples.com

After a lifetime of taking America's pulse, pollster Louis Harris wrote,

"The scarcest and most precious commodity today is time."

A man in Miami bills his ophthalmologist \$125 for keeping him waiting for an hour. An agency in Southern California sends professional shoppers to malls and supermarkets for people who are too busy to do their own shopping. A line of greeting cards tells your children things you want to say, but don't have time to say: "Have a great day at school!" or "Wish I could be there to tuck you in."

America is the land of shortcuts and fast lanes—the only country on earth with a mountain called *Rushmore*.

In 1965 testimony before a Senate subcommittee, a blue-ribbon panel of futurists predicted that, by 1985, Americans would be working twenty-two hours a week and would be able to retire by age thirty-eight.

The reason? New technology would create time saving devices that would do our work for us while stabilizing our economy. By 1985 Copy machines replaced mimeographs. Computers turned typewriters and file cabinets into dinosaurs. In 1985 there were high tech marvels like FAX machines, floppy discs, cassettes, VCRs, and car phones.

We laugh because the technology of 1985 is now as obsolete as the Stone Age. Those futurists in 1965 could not imagine a world of YouTube, Face Book, IPAD, Text Messaging, Twitter, Skype, handheld devices that are both entertainment centers and workstations, Kindles that electronically store up to 1900 books and can fit neatly into a purse, and laptops that have way more firepower than the massive 1965 IBM computer that took up a whole room and cost \$5 billion to create.

Those 1965 predictions did *not* come true. Instead of working only twenty-two hours a week, our leisure time has actually shrunk 42 percent since 1973. The average workweek has increased from forty-one to forty-nine hours. Instead of retiring at age 38, Americans are retiring eight years later than their grandparents did.

Why didn't the forecast come true? What did those futurists miss in 1965? They misjudged the appetite of consumers and failed to see the rampant materialism of the 1980s. Instead of making them relax, more free time made folks run even harder. Gadgets saved more time to make more money. More money meant buying more stuff. More stuff meant working harder to keep it (and get even more). Time saving

devices allowed us to multi-task so that we could do *more* things at the *same* time, turning us into the Attention Deficit Disorder Generation.

Life is now louder, busier, and faster. In the end, time consumers are consumed by time. As demands become greater, life becomes emptier. Maybe you can relate to the complaint of one young father: "I've got so many irons in the fire, I can't keep any of them hot."

In our frustration we often repeat two common myths: "I don't have enough time!" or "We have less time nowadays!" The truth is: every one has the same 24 hours in a day. And we don't have a second less in our day that did our grandparents. The issue is never how much time we have, but how we will use what time we do have. Will we pursue great things or play video games? Will we consume stuff that poisons our soul or feed on what is spiritually nutritious? Louis Harris was right: our scarcest and most precious commodity is time.

King David wasn't always perfect. During a midlife crisis he used his time to do some awful things. But he spent the bulk of his life pursuing the thing that is most important. The Bible sums up his life in a phrase:

"...a man after God's own heart..."

He was the greatest king in Israel's history. In God's eyes, he became the gold standard for every king that followed him. But the thing that sets him apart was his pursuit of God. David was passionate about knowing God. He meditated on him day and night. Outside of Christ, David was arguably the greatest worshipper ever to walk this earth. The first line of a song he recorded sums up his life: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so does my soul pant for you, O God." (Psalm 42:1)

In a face-paced world, you can be consumed with trivial pursuits that will ultimately leave you empty. You might even fill up your time with good things, but neglect the best thing. Socrates said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." Let this series on King David cause you to examine your priorities. When your time on earth is up, this alone will matter: did you pursue the heart of God, seize it, and make it your own? Today we learn the first principle of pursuing the heart of God:

The heart of the matter *is* the heart.

In 1 Samuel 16 the Bible introduces us to David for the first time. It is a moment of high drama. God has rejected Saul, the first king of Israel. Saul was a great warrior and a giant of a man. The Bible says that he stood heads and shoulders above everyone else in Israel. But

Saul was a big man with a small heart—self-centered, petty, and fearful to the point of paranoia. He spent his life running away from the heart of God. So the prophet Samuel came to deliver these devastating words to Saul:

“Your kingdom shall not continue...the Lord has sought a man after his own heart.” (1 Samuel 13:14)

Right off the bat, these four facts should grab your attention: 1) **the kingdoms of this world belong to God *alone***. Jesus prayed to his heavenly father, “For *yours* is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.” History is *his* story. Our time is *his* time. Let these words to King Saul serve as a warning. Whenever his kingdom becomes *your* kingdom it will not continue. 2) **The Lord is seeking a person**. 3,000 years have come and gone since Samuel stood before Saul and uttered those words, and God is still seeking a special person who will advance *his* kingdom. Are you the one of those? 3) **He is pursuing someone who will pursue him**. That single word “*after his own heart*” is powerful. It speaks of a restlessness that will not be satisfied until it has captured the object of its pursuit. St. Augustine wrote, “God has created us for himself, and we will be restless until we find our rest in him.” 4) **God has a heart waiting to be grasped**. “The Lord has sought a man after *his own heart*.”

D.L. Moody was a poor, illiterate shoe salesman. But he was given this challenge by a man sitting next to him on a park bench: “The world has yet to see what God will do with and for and in and by the man who is fully consecrated to him.” This challenge became the driving force in D.L. Moody’s life. The shoe salesman became one of the greatest evangelists in history, and the illiterate built a school that has sent thousands of pastors and missionaries around the world. Tanya Moore says, “A person’s world is only as big as his or her heart.” Is your heart open to pursuing and possessing the great heart of God? Only those with such a heart will ever slay giants and advance God’s kingdom.

Back to the story: Samuel leaves Saul and begins his search. It leads the old prophet to Jesse’s farm outside Bethlehem. God whispers in Samuel’s ears that he is to anoint one of Jesse’s boys as the next king. But it has to be the right one—the son of Jesse who has a heart that pursues the heart of God. Remember, our first principle: the heart of the matter *is* the heart. I see two great truths in Samuel’s search:

1. God takes little notice of the things we notice.

If you were standing next to Samuel, what would you look for? Or, if you were one of those young men parading before him, what would you

want him to see? But, does it really matter how we evaluate others, or how we come across to them, in the light of God words in verse seven?

“The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

In sense, we are reduced to looking at outward appearances. None of us can read another person’s heart. But our evaluations are dangerously flawed when we are too taken with these three things:

1) Outward Beauty

Jesse has now rounded up all but one of his boys. As those seven are paraded before Samuel, one immediately strikes the old prophet. Verse six says, “When they arrived Samuel saw Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the LORD’S anointed stands here before the LORD.’” What is it about this son of Jesse that strikes the prophet’s fancy? The God who reads our hearts, knows Samuel’s heart. In verse seven he whispers in his soul, “Do not consider his appearance or height, for I have rejected him.”

I find this incredible. The people had chosen Saul to be their king because he was heads-and-shoulders above everyone else in Israel. Saul cut an impressive figure. He was a bigger-than-life superstar on the battlefield. Yet he fizzled out as a king. You would think that Samuel would know better. And yet this prophet who had anointed Saul is about to make the same mistake again.

But, before we come down hard on Samuel, let’s check out our own hearts. Don’t we all tend to evaluate people on their beauty? Studies show that, when selecting a political leader, American voters will almost always chose the taller of the two. I heard a political consultant say on *CNN* that being the more attractive of the two candidates is worth 7-10 points in the polls. A recent university study had several hundred babies look at glossy photos of women. They measured the response of these 10-16 month old babies, and were shocked to discover that they almost always gravitated to the photos of the women with universally accepted marks of beauty while turning away from those who were plain or ugly. From the moment of birth, our human hearts gravitate toward that which is physically attractive—whether we are choosing a mate, an employee, a politician, a pastor, or a friend. We sometimes do so at our own peril. The wisest man who ever lived wrote in Proverbs 31:30, “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting.” Samuel is willing once again to choose the big man with the small heart. But God will choose the runt of the litter—the little shepherd boy with the big heart.

2) Surface Spirituality

When Eliab passes by and Samuel negatively shakes his head, Jesse excitedly shoves his over sons forward. It's not everyday that a country farmer gets to see one of his sons become a king. Look at verse ten: "Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has not chosen them.'" It's not by accident that seven sons are paraded before Samuel. The writer of Scripture is making a point. In Hebrew numerology, seven is always the number of perfection. It stands for holiness. These were good Hebrew boys. As far as we know, they kept all the rules and rituals of Judaism. Search the Bible in vain, and you will not find a blemish on the record of these seven sons of Jesse.

On the other hand, you will read that David had moments of pride and anger. At times he was a violent man. God never allowed him to fulfill his life's dream of building the temple because he had shed too much blood. He married a string of women even though Moses had said that the kings of Israel should have only one wife. He kept a harem full of concubines. He committed adultery and murdered an innocent man to cover up his affair. The seven pious sons of Jesse all together couldn't match their youngest brother in the sin department. But they do teach us a powerful lesson: proper piety is no substitute for a heart that is passionate for God. David was a great sinner. But he was an even greater repenter. He understood what touches the heart of God. After his adultery he said in his public confession, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it...the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart O God you will not despise." (Psalm 51:16&17)

I fear that the church too often promotes the seven sons of Jesse. We are satisfied with prissy (and even sissy) rule-keepers who mince through life impressing religious folk. But only bold sinners saved by grace, who get up from their falls into sin and passionately pursue God will ever slay giants and change their world. No wonder Jesus always chose the bold sinners rather than the goody-two-shoes Pharisees to follow him.

3) Popular with People

In frustration, the old prophet says to Jesse in verse eleven, "Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse replies, "There is still the youngest...but he is tending the sheep." The Hebrew word *youngest* could be translated, "least in my estimation." Jesse probably shrugs apologetically. He is saying that David is the runt of the litter—of such

small stature that it would be a waste of time to call him in from the fields.

Don't pass over that other phrase: "...but he is tending the sheep." In Israel, tending sheep was considered the lowest kind of work reserved for servants and hired hands. This shows you what Jesse's family thinks of this runt of the litter. While they fellowship around the dinner table, this lonely boy is exiled to the faraway fields. If you want to understand what his brothers think about him, turn to 1 Samuel 17:28. When he brings supplies to his older brothers at the battlefield, his tall, handsome brother Eliab spits out these hateful words, "I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle." These vile words are all the more shocking when you realize that Eliab was the man that Samuel almost chose to replace King Saul.

We will do almost anything to be popular. We admire those who have great people skills. They are almost always the ones with whom we choose to align ourselves. But then David comes. He is the smallest and youngest. Maybe he is even the most flawed. Above all else, he is a loner and outcast. But God whispers to Samuel at the end of verse twelve, "Rise and anoint him; for he is the one." I think of the Anointed One who will later come as our Savior—Jesus, the great descendant of David. He too was unattractive to a lot of folks—a poor carpenter's son from the no-account village of Nazareth. Isaiah 53:2 says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Like David, the properly pious of his day looked down on him as a sinner (even though he was sinless) because he fellowshiped with those who had committed the same sins that David committed. Like David, Jesus came to his own people and they rejected him too. I wonder, if Jesus had passed by on that morning at Jesse's farm, would Samuel have recognized him as the King of kings? Would you and I have recognized the runt of the litter as God's anointed?

I am struck by that parenthetical little statement about David tucked away in the beginning of verse twelve: "...He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features." Do you understand that David's good looks has nothing to do with God's choice? But we want to believe otherwise. Please allow me to take this unscientific survey. Pretend you are about to descend into the *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. As you are about to enter that dreadful chasm, you see two people—each one standing on opposite sides of the road. Each offers to accompany you down into the valley of death's shadow. One is a giant who stands nine feet tall, and so strong that he can wear 250 pounds worth of armor. He is the champion warrior who has beaten every opponent. He also has four other brothers, all of them giants too. On the other side is a little

shepherd boy with a slingshot. Now be honest. You have to pretend that you have never heard about David and Goliath. You only know what you see standing before you. Who do you think Samuel would choose? Who would Jesse and his sons choose? Who would you choose? My guess, if we were really honest, almost all of us would choose Goliath. It would be a fatal mistake, because victories are always about the size of the heart, not the bigness of the person.

2. God is looking for a heart looking for his heart.

The heart of the matter *is* heart. God whispers to Samuel in verse seven, "...But the LORD looks at the heart." I'm always struck by this line when applied to David—or any of us, for that matter. David's heart is a flawed heart. Lurking within it is the conceit his brothers later accused him of, adulteries, murder, and violent rage. If God chooses us based on our hearts, we are all doomed. Jeremiah 17:9 pronounces God's verdict: "The heart is deceitfully wicked and desperately corrupt. Who can even know it?" Princess Diana spoke for most folks when she said, "Do only what your heart tells you to do." But, following her heart turned her storybook life into a tragic nightmare. Better that we listen to the words of one of America's greatest writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne: "What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart. What jailor is so inexorable as one's self." After the pope excommunicated Martin Luther, and he sunk into dark depression, the Protestant Reformer wrote, "I am more afraid of my heart than the pope and all his cardinals. I have within my heart the great and terrible pope: self."

But, lest we give up on the heart, it is good to remember the words of writer, T.E. Kalem: "The human heart is the only broken instrument that can still work." But it can only function well if the heart of God transforms it. David understood that secret. Instead of offering God his flawed heart, he passionately pursued the heart of God. We often describe salvation as giving our heart to God. What would God want with our deceitful and corrupt heart? Instead, salvation is receiving the heart of God. This is a lifetime pursuit. David sinned greatly, but he also repented passionately. He spent lonely years as a shepherd boy, and later as a fugitive. But in those solitary times, he sought God's face. He wrote in Psalm 84:2, "My heart and my flesh cry out for the Living God." He said in Psalm 57:7, "My heart is fixed you, O Lord." In Psalm 86:12 he cried out, "I will praise you O Lord my God with all of my heart." Sometimes he had lustful desires and violent passions. But he sought to overcome those carnal desires. He said in Psalm 37:4, "Delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." Sometimes he fell flat on his face because of the sin in his heart. But

then he would cry out, as he did in Psalm 51:10, "Create in me a clean heart O God!"

The secret of the Godly life is not to be like the seven sons of Jesse, working on the pious religious front. It is to recognize with David that not much good dwells within your old heart, and to pursue God's heart with every ounce of your passion. There is no greater statement of David's passion than in his immortal 23rd Psalm. In it we see what a "heart after God's heart" looks like: 1) **It's a *possessive* heart.** "The Lord is *my* shepherd..." It recognizes that we not only belong to him, but he also belongs to us. His heart belongs to us, and is waiting to be seized—if only we believe that it is ours for the taking. 2) **It is a *meditative* heart.** "He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters." Like David, we need to put all the distractions of our high tech media world, get unplugged, and go away to quiet places. David again and again wrote about how he meditated on God's word day and night. 3) **It is a *holy* heart.** "He guides me in paths of *righteousness* for his name's sake." David wasn't always holy, but he sure wanted to be so. He begged God in Psalm 19:14, "Let the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD." Like a sheep pursuing his shepherd, he pursued his Lord until he got that holiness. 4) **It is a *faith* heart.** "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me..." Sometimes he abandoned God in a moment of passion, but he never doubted that a passionate God would always be at his side. And, if he strayed, his Great Shepherd would be there to pick him up again. 5) **It is a *grace* heart.** "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." He was always aware of the grace of God. As one was forgiven often, he was a man who practiced grace and forgiveness.

We only have so much time for our wounded hearts to find healing. In both our leisure and our labor, we should pursue the heart of God. In this world, there are many things that will catch your eye, but only One who will catch your heart. Pursue him!

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