

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? Saul will hear about it and 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 man looks at. Man looks 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, “but he is tending the sheep.”

Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.”

¹² *So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features.*

Then the LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; he 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 upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)*

People Make the Same Mistakes Over and Over Again

I love history. My wife gave me a book about the French and Indian War for Christmas and I finished it before New Year’s Eve. But there’s one sad lesson that I’ve learned from my armchair interest in the subject: human history is very repetitive. The same things – or at least the same kinds of things – happen over and over again. Are you dismayed by the infighting between the two parties in our country? Don’t let the media fool you into thinking it’s something new. Most of our country’s history has been defined by bitter feuding between two dominant parties. The two party system emerged while George Washington was president and those two parties battled over every issue. During the War of 1812, one party, the Federalists, nearly led New England out of the union. History is very repetitive. The names change. The issues morph. But people are people and they rarely ever learn. Sad to say, this isn’t just true about politics. Anyone who’s done any counseling will tell you that people get “stuck”. They repeat the same behavior day after day. And it happens spiritually, too.

People make the same mistakes over and over again.

I.

What mistakes do we make spiritually? There are so many that I could spend my entire sermon this morning just listing them. But that wouldn’t accomplish much. We want to get at the heart of the matter.

People make the same mistakes over and over again: they judge by what they can see.

The Old Testament prophet Samuel illustrates this truth this morning. Samuel was mourning for Israel’s first king, King Saul. Now, Saul had not died. In fact, he was going to rule of Israel for years to come. But Saul had turned away from God and God had rejected him as king. God sent Samuel to anoint – to designate – a new king. So Samuel went to Bethlehem, the city where Jesus would be born a thousand years later, because the new king would be one of the eight sons of a man named Jesse, who lived there. Jesse paraded his sons in front of the prophet, waiting to hear God’s choice. Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab, was tall and handsome. He was a soldier. He looked like a king. And Samuel thought, “This has to be the guy!”

But what did God say? **“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”** God is not impressed by outward appearances. God chooses men to serve him based on what he sees in their hearts. Now, that does not mean that some people are born less sinful or more spiritual. It does not mean that some people have good hearts while others don't. All people are sinners and David, like Saul, sinned terribly during his reign. What God looks for is faith. The difference between Saul and David was that King David repented when he sinned and he trusted in God for forgiveness.

What does all this have to do with us today? We're not talking about politics. God didn't record all this as a guideline for voting. Israel was God's people. It was the church of the Old Testament. The king of Israel held a spiritual office. He ruled as God's deputy over God's people. The people of God today is the Church. The New Testament Church is the new Israel. How God anointed and chose leaders for his Old Testament people speaks to how he chooses and sends those leaders today.

What do we want in a spiritual leader, whether we're talking about a pastor or a principal or a teacher or a synod president? Sad to say, we make the same mistakes that Samuel was making until God corrected him. We look at what we can see. And we want to see something impressive. We want a man that can speak. We want a man that can solve our financial crises. We want a man who can keep the youth here with his charisma. We want a man who keeps us on the edge of our seats when we're in church and who brings people in by the hundreds if not the thousands.

What's wrong with that? Very simply, it's trying to measure something we can't see. Our work here is spiritual – it takes place in people's hearts. Many of the greatest and most gifted preachers and prophets in the Bible served shrinking congregations. But we live in an age that tries to measure success with numbers and statistics. We live in a time when entertainment rules. We care today much more about our feelings than we care about carefully phrased and well thought out presentations of the truth. Consider courtroom dramas on TV. Almost always, the most emotional, moving argument wins, no matter what the law says. Those programs are written that way because that's what resonates with us today.

So when it comes to spiritual matters, we want 40 days of purpose and the purpose driven life and church. We want the kind of emotional spirituality that reigns at the evangelical book stores and at the local megachurches. We want to be moved more than we want to be instructed. There are exceptions, of course. The more mature your faith is, the less you are susceptible to this kind of thinking. But Samuel was a pretty spiritual guy and he was getting near to the end of a lifetime of service to the Lord. And he fell into the same mistakes Israel had been making all through Saul's reign.

Be honest for a minute: who would you rather listen to, a guy who stumbles around up here and maybe even just reads his sermon, a guy who is dry but whose message is filled with the good news of Jesus Christ, or a guy who is a great speaker, who's dynamic and interesting and who moves you, even if everything he says isn't 100% correct? Who would you rather have up here, a tall, good looking, photogenic guy or some short, balding, dumpy guy who can't even tie his tie straight? Don't we all have a desire for the great speaker? But God's work does not depend on the smoothness of the presentation. The power is in the gospel. And that boring, fat, dumpy guy may give you a clear injection of the power of God through the gospel while that interesting, moving, good looking guy gives you nothing but empty entertainment that's full of man's thoughts instead of God's.

Now, I'm not saying pastors and teachers shouldn't do their best to hold your interest. But I am saying that we human beings are too impressed with appearances and all too often we dismiss the real work God is doing. Why? Because we're sinners and all sinners are selfish. That's what's behind the “entertain me” attitude. That's why we judge ministers on whether they move us or not. But what really matters is what God is doing through the gospel. We can't see that and all too often, we don't care about it because we were born sinners. That spiritual failure is our fault, no matter how loud we yell, “But God made us this way.” It all comes back to our own sinful hearts.

But God doesn't just leave it at that. If he had, the sin that blinds us would take us to hell. But God sent his Son to save us from that sin. Isaiah says that Jesus had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him and that there was nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. King David was Jesus' human ancestor and in many ways serves as a kind of prophecy about Jesus. David was the youngest son, the least important, in the eyes of his culture, so the one least likely to become king. But God raised him up and saved Israel through him.

On the day that Jesus stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized, to be anointed as God's true King over his true people, he looked like a nobody. But that nobody lived a life of spiritual insight for us. He never trusted what was on the outside. He always put his faith in what God was doing. He did that for us. He died for us, too. He paid for our sin that blinds us and for all the times that we've repeated the same stupid spiritual mistakes. He paid because we want to follow what we can see. He washed all that sin away. Then he rose and God proclaimed that we are forgiven for all that these sinful hearts lead us to do. Jesus took every sin away.

II.

That forgiveness changes us. The more we hear that Jesus has conquered our real problem, the more God teaches us to trust in what he is doing. That leads us to the second insight that this text gives us into ourselves. **People make the same mistakes over and over again: they trust in what people can do.**

Right at the end of this reading, God said, **"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 upon David in power."** King David was going to do great things. He would kill Goliath. He would command armies in the field and protect Israel. Even when Saul drove him out, David would always come out on top until he became king himself and ushered in the period of Israel's greatest power and wealth under his son Solomon. But who did all that work? God did. The Holy Spirit came on David in power. God took the natural gifts he had given David and he set them apart for his own use. And in all probability, he gave him gifts that he didn't have before, so that he could serve the Lord. And God made all those things happen.

What kind of gifts did David need? He had to be a warrior and a general. He also had to be a wise and just ruler. But the Bible also says that David was a prophet. He wrote psalms which we sing every Sunday. He wrote about Christ a thousand years before he came. God gave David the gifts he needed to do all that work. We see the same thing in Jesus. Jesus was true God, but he was also true man. God gave to Jesus gifts so that he could serve as our Savior. That's the real lesson this morning. Do you want the power of God? Then you want a pastor or teacher or principal or synod president who relies on the gospel in the word and the sacraments to do what needs to be done.

What does that mean? Practically speaking, how does he get results? You know, it would be easy to raise more money here. There are all kinds of things we could do. There are ten thousand programs and counselors out there who will show us how to wring every dime out of this congregation and the community around us that we possibly could. And you know what? More money would come in, maybe even enough to build a gym. But if did it like that, we would be relying on what people can do rather than on what God does.

God works through the gospel. Person by person, he reaches into the heart and he changes people. He causes us to grow. Not all of us grow at the same pace. But step by step, according to his power and plan, God works on us. And the word takes a lot longer to produce visible results than gimmicks or arm-twisting or guiltig people. To the human eye, it doesn't even seem to work as well. But in truth, it works better because the new heart God is giving us is real change. The rest is just smoke and mirrors.

But do we trust God enough to rely on his power working through the gospel? Do we trust God enough to rely on the gifts he gives to those imperfect, annoying, boring men and women he calls to serve? Or do we think we know better – if we would just adopt this, that or the other plan or program, we'd get there? My friends, only sinful human pride thinks that it knows better than God does. Only sinful human pride can believe that substituting something other than the gospel will work better. Aren't we all guilty of that pride, at least some of the time? Unless you are much more sanctified than I am, you have to say yes. You have to admit that your heart is unworthy of the love God has given us.

But that's what makes God's love so wonderful. Our unworthiness can't beat it. God keeps loving us no matter how unlovable we make ourselves. God forgave us in Jesus Christ. He forgave for trusting in everything but his gospel. He forgave us and he comes to us in that gospel and he changes us. We can't see it. We can't even always feel it. But that power of God is always there. And you know what? It is the only power that can free us from slavery to making the same mistakes over and over again. Because it frees us from sin. Day by day, we grow in grace. One day, we will stand before our Lord, free from all the stupidity and power of sin. We will live with Christ forever. Amen.