

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 21, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 SAMUEL 16:7

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

THE SECRET OF GREATNESS

In our series on “How to Make Your Life Count,” we come today to study the life of King David. What is the secret of greatness? Well, it all depends on whom you ask. If you went to Hollywood and asked that question, they might say, “A pretty face is the secret of greatness.” Here in Washington, D.C., they might say, “Connections: knowing the right people.” If you went to Wall Street, they might say, “Financial clout and leverage is the key to greatness.” You ask a football coach, and he might say, “The ability to tackle, physical conditioning, or the natural gift to perform with perfect coordination.”

But what does God say that greatness is? Look at our text, 1 Samuel 16:7 -- “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 says that greatness is determined by character, not by reputation. God says, “The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.” Character is the bottom line, and if you want to make your life count, if you want to be great in God’s eyes, it is a matter of your heart.

David was one of the greatest men who ever lived. He was a shepherd, he was a giant killer, he was a king, a general, a poet -- he wrote the most beloved book in the Bible, the Psalms -- just an incredible list of achievements. But God wasn’t impressed with any of those things. What impressed God about David was his heart. And, in Acts 113:22, God says, “I have found David... a man after My own heart.”

Are you a person after God’s own heart? Do you want to be? God says that David had a heart for God. How do you know a person’s heart since we can’t see inside? We can tell by the way that person responds to four circumstances in life. There are four great tests of the heart: sin, stress, service, and success. And today we are going to compare how David handled these things with how we handle them.

- The first test is sin, and David’s response to sin was a repentant heart.
- David’s response to stress was a trusting heart.
- David’s response to service was a servant’s heart.
- David’s response to success was a humble heart. He didn’t let success go to his head.

1. David's response to SIN was a repentant heart: He had a tender, sensitive conscience. When David blew it, he admitted it. He didn't hide it; he didn't deny it; he didn't make excuses for it; he didn't rationalize it. When somebody confronted him with his sin, he said, "You're right; I did what was wrong." He was quick to repent.

One of the best examples is Psalm 51:1-3 (Living Bible): "Oh loving and kind God, have mercy. Have pity upon me and take away the awful stain of my sins. Wash me, cleanse me from this guilt. Let me be pure again. For I admit my shameful deed." Now you know the background of this. Psalm 51 is David's prayer of confession after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. And he just lays all the cards on the table. He doesn't deny or excuse his conduct. He doesn't blame Bathsheba. He is honest to God, and that is the first characteristic of a heart after God.

I like the Bible because it always tells the truth. It's called the "Holy Bible," but you couldn't find a book that has more murder and rape and incest and problems untold! It's all there. Why? Because the Bible tells the truth. When it talks about man, it talks about his good and his bad.

When Oliver Cromwell was sitting for a portrait, he said to the artist, "Paint me warts and all." He didn't want any air-brush stuff! The Bible paints David warts and all. He was a king, a poet, a renowned leader. But he was also a liar, a betrayer, an adulterer and a murderer.

But here's the good news: you don't have to be perfect to have a heart after God. Isn't that good news?! Many people are called "a man of God," or "a woman of God," in the Bible, but only one person is called "a man after God's own heart," and that's David. He was a great sinner, but he was also a great repenter. Notice Psalm 51:17 (Good News Bible): "God will not reject... a repentant heart." David believed in a gracious, forgiving God. He focussed more on God's forgiveness than on his own failure, and that's why God said, "He's a man after My own heart."

Now hear me when I say this: Satan has conned some of you into thinking, "Because of my past, God can never use me. Because of my past, I'll never amount to anything great in the Kingdom of God." And I say, "You're wrong, dead wrong." If God could use David, He can use anybody. And don't let the devil intimidate you. You don't have to be perfect; you just have to repent quickly and sincerely and admit it when you're wrong.

How do you react when you sin? Do you deny it, or excuse it, or rationalize it; or do you repent immediately? Question 87 in the Shorter Catechism asks, "What is repentance unto life?" Listen to the glorious answer: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, by which a sinner, being truly aware of his sinfulness, understands the mercy of God in Christ, grieves for and hates his sins, and turns from them to God, fully intending and striving for a new obedience." God says, "A man after My own heart is one who, when he sins, has a repentant heart."

2. David's response to STRESS was a trusting heart. Few people have experienced more stress than David; and, in Psalm 118:5,6 (Living Bible), he says, "In my distress I prayed to the Lord, and He answered me and rescued me. He is for me! How can I be afraid?"

David had to fight a giant. He had to run from Saul and hide in caves. As king, he was constantly at war with neighboring nations. He had incredible family problems. His family was a disaster. He had one son who raped his daughter, and another son killed that brother. Another son rebelled against his father, usurped the throne, and then was killed. David had lots of stress and tragedy in his life, but he said, "Here's what I do: I pray, I trust, and I keep moving." Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is moving in spite of your fear. David said, "God is my Rock; God is my Shield; God is my Fortress; and when I'm under stress, I trust Him!" (Psalms 62:2, 33:20, 18:2).

Look at Psalm 73:26 (Good News Bible): "My mind and my body may grow weak, but God is my strength. He is all I ever need." Some of you need this verse today. Everybody else was afraid to take on Goliath, but David wasn't. Everybody else said, "He's too big to hit!" But David said, "No, he's too big to miss!" And he gave Goliath an Excedrin headache! You remember how David refused to wear Saul's armor as he went out to face the giant. He said, "God is my Strength; He's all I need."

Now everyone has his dark days. We all have our times of depression. But remember, depression is not a sin, it's what you do with it. Depression is just a warning light. David wrote some of his most beautiful psalms while he was depressed. What did he do when he was depressed? Notice his reaction in Psalm 116:10 (Good News Bible): "I kept on believing, even when I said, 'I am completely crushed.'" Some of you are going through tough times right now, and you need to keep on believing. Even when David said, "I'm going under; this is it, Lord" -- "in my heart I kept on believing!"

When you develop a photograph, you take it into a dark room. Photos develop in the dark through a process that uses very strong acid. In fact, if the acid isn't strong enough, the picture doesn't come out clear. Some of you are going through dark times right now, and you're having the acid applied to your life, and it's eating you up. But God is developing you, and a beautiful picture is going to emerge. What must you do? You must keep on believing; you must keep on trusting.

When you sin, have a repentant heart. When you're under stress, have a trusting heart.

3. David's response to SERVICE was a servant heart. He was more than willing to do whatever God wanted him to do. In Acts 13:22 God says, "David does everything I want him to do!" Could God say that about you? I know I don't do everything God asks me to do. David had a servant's heart.

Notice these characteristics of the servant heart:

a. He was wholehearted. Look at Psalm 119:10 (Good News Bible): "With all my heart I try to serve You." He had zeal and enthusiasm. It was a joy for him to do God's will. It was not simply a duty. That's so different from us today. So often we're lukewarm and say, "Get somebody else to do it -- I don't have time; I'm too busy."

A kid says on TV, "Why are you looking at me; I'm not your servant." That's such a

prevalent attitude today. People are servants to nobody, much less God. Jesus said to His disciples, “The greatest one among you must be your servant” (Matthew 23:11, Good News Bible). Greatness comes through service. You’ll never be great until you learn to be a servant.

David served wholeheartedly.

b. He was focused. That is to say, he refused to be sidetracked by less important things. Look at Psalm 119:37 (Good News Bible): “Keep me from paying attention to what is worthless.” That might be a good verse to paste on your TV changer! Or, you might need to put it on the cover of some books or magazines you’ve got. Don’t you see some raunchy stuff when you’re going through the checkout line at the supermarket?! You know -- “Woman bears a dog with two heads”! “Lord, keep me from paying attention to what is worthless!”

Have you noticed how easy it is to get distracted here in metropolitan Washington? The good is often the enemy of the best. For many people “Trivial Pursuit” is not a game, it’s a lifestyle. We get so involved in second-rate pursuits. David said, “I’m focussed! I want to serve God because that’s what’s going to count. All this other stuff in life isn’t going to count at all.”

“Keep me from paying attention to what is worthless.” You see, some things are not necessarily wrong, they’re just not necessary. Somebody says, “Can I be a Christian and do this?” “Sure you can, but why would you want to?” Get rid of trivial pursuits in your life and make your life count. Why? Because God says, “That’s what it means to be a person after My own heart.” So David was wholehearted, and he was focussed in his service of God.

c. He was sacrificial. David was willing to invest his time and his money in the Lord’s work. In 2 Samuel 24:24 (Good News Bible), he says, “I will not offer to the Lord my God sacrifices that have cost me nothing.” David was going to build an altar to God and a man came out and said, “Your Majesty, you can have my land, you can have these stones, and oxen to sacrifice, and I’ll just pay for the whole thing.” But David said, “Thanks, but no way. When it comes to serving God, I don’t serve Him with freebies. I don’t serve God when it doesn’t cost me.”

Now let me ask you a tough question: As a Christian believer, what is it costing you? I heard about a church that was worshipping in the first unit they had built. And now they were going to build their sanctuary. And the minister got up one Sunday morning and said to his people, “I have some good news for you and some bad news. The good news is that we already have all the money we need to build the sanctuary. The bad news is that the money is still in your pockets!”

Greatness always requires sacrifice. Mediocrity means that you’re just trying to get by. “What’s the minimum I can do and still call myself a Christian?” Greatness always requires sacrifice. We think today of a little black boy in South Carolina whose mother and grandparents kept saying to him, “Clarence, we’re poor black folk, but if you’re prepared to work hard, and trust God, you can make something of your life.” And that boy took their advice, and today he is a nominee for the Supreme Court of the United States.

So David's response to sin was a repentant heart. His response to stress was a trusting heart. And his response to service was a servant heart. And when you respond in that way, success is inevitable in your life. Does God want you to be a success? Of course He does. But what He wants to do is to use success in your life to take you deeper into Him and build and refine your character.

4. And David's response to SUCCESS was a humble heart. 1 Samuel 18:14 says, "In everything David did he had great success, because the Lord was with him." David was perhaps one of the most successful men who ever lived. After he knocked off Goliath, he became a national hero. People even wrote songs about him -- "Saul has slain his thousands, and David (has slain) his ten-thousands" (1 Samuel 29:5, Living Bible). He was the darling of the nation. The Bible says, "All Judah and Israel loved David" (1 Samuel 18:16). He was "Mr. Popularity." He could do no wrong. And he had one string of successes after another. He has it all -- the power, the prestige, the popularity.

And that is the ultimate test of your heart. How do you handle praise and success? How do you handle "the good life" on Easy Street? How do you handle material success? Do you spend all the more on yourself? David's response was totally admirable - he gave all the glory to God. Someone has said, "Man is an amazing animal. He is the only animal whose head swells when you pat him on the back!" There are very few people who can handle success without being destroyed by it. You show me 100 people who can handle adversity, and there isn't more than one who can handle success. When everything's going great, we just tend to forget God. "Hey, look at me; I'm doing OK. I'm on my own. Life's great. I don't need God. I don't need to pray about anything; I'll just charge it!"

Look at David's attitude. In Psalm 115:1 (Good News Bible), he says, "To You alone, O Lord, to You alone, and not to us, must glory be given." David gave all the credit to God. He did not let his successes go to his head. And that is so unusual. He had a humble heart.

Now, how was it that David was so balanced? What caused him to adopt this godly attitude of humility? Because he knew the truth. Look at Psalm 75:6 (Living Bible): "For promotion and power come from nowhere on earth, but only from God. He promotes one and deposes another." "Yes, I got promoted," says David, "but God did it!" David knew this from his personal experience. You see, he had been anointed king by Samuel while he was still a shepherd. But he had to wait for years before ascending the throne. And, during those years, King Saul, whom God had rejected, made every attempt to kill David. But David refused to grasp for power. He refused to push his will or try to force his way to the top. He said, "God is in control!" And he waited on God's perfect timing. That's a humble man!

We ought to know, here in the nation's capital, that those people who grasp the most for power are often those who are least qualified to use it. They don't have the character. Like some photographs they are overexposed and underdeveloped.

David said, "I'm going to trust God for my future."

How do you handle success? When things are going great, do you tend to pray less? Do

you tend to let the spiritual disciplines slide? When you get that promotion, do you have a haughty heart or a humble heart?

You know, the standards of the world are so screwed up that when they're looking for a "great" person, they don't look for someone with a repentant, trusting, servant, humble heart. But the very qualities that the world overlooks, when they're searching for greatness, are the exact qualities that God looks for when He says, "That's a great person. That's someone after My own heart. That's a person who has got it together!"

And God is still looking for people with a great heart. 2 Chronicles 16:9 (Living Bible) is a verse worth memorizing. "For the eyes of the Lord search back and forth across the whole earth, looking for people whose hearts are perfect toward Him, so that He can show His great power in helping them!"

God is doing a heart search for people to use. And when He finds someone with the right heart, He just blesses them for all He's worth!

God is looking for people to use; and I honestly believe that many of you good folk are on the edge of greatness spiritually! You have the gifts, the talents -- God sees it in your life, but perhaps you don't see it. God didn't call you to be a mediocre Christian. He is looking for people who will be mighty for Him; and it all starts with a commitment that says, "Lord, I'm not perfect, but more than anything else, I want to have a heart after You." And that sincere prayer could open the gates to greatness in your life.

AMEN.