

# “More Than Skin Deep”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
June 13, 2021

- 1 Samuel 16:1-13 (edited) Good News Translation

<sup>16</sup> The LORD said to Samuel, “...get some olive oil and go to Bethlehem, to a man named Jesse, because I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”

...“Take a calf with you and say that you are there to offer a sacrifice to the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will tell you what to do. You will anoint as king the man I tell you to.”

<sup>4</sup> Samuel did what the LORD told him to do and went to Bethlehem, where the city leaders came trembling to meet him and asked, “Is this a peaceful visit, seer?”

<sup>5</sup> “Yes,” he answered. “I have come to offer a sacrifice to the LORD. Purify yourselves and come with me.” He also told Jesse and his sons to purify themselves, and he invited them to the sacrifice.

<sup>6</sup> ...When they arrived, Samuel saw Jesse's son Eliab and said to himself, “This man standing here in the LORD's presence is surely the one he has chosen.” <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to him, “Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is. I have rejected him, because I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart.”

<sup>8</sup> Then Jesse called his son Abinadab and brought him to Samuel. But Samuel said, “No, the LORD hasn't chosen him either.” <sup>9</sup> Jesse then brought Shammah. “No, the LORD hasn't chosen him either,” Samuel said. <sup>10</sup> In this way Jesse brought seven of his sons to Samuel. And Samuel said to him, “No, the LORD hasn't chosen any of these.” <sup>11</sup> Then he asked him, “Do you have any more sons?”

Jesse answered, “There is still the youngest, but he is out taking care of the sheep.”

“Tell him to come here,” Samuel said. “We won't offer the sacrifice until he comes.” <sup>12</sup> So Jesse sent for him. He was a handsome, healthy young man, and his eyes sparkled. The LORD said to Samuel, “This is the one — anoint him!” <sup>13</sup> Samuel took the olive oil and anointed David in front of his brothers.

Immediately the spirit of the LORD took control of David and was with him from that day on....

- 1 Timothy 4:12-16 (Good News Translation)

<sup>12</sup> Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but be an example for the believers in your speech, your conduct, your love, faith, and purity. <sup>13</sup> Until I come, give your time and effort to the public reading of the Scriptures and to preaching and teaching. <sup>14</sup> Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you, which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the elders laid their hands on you. <sup>15</sup> Practice these things and devote yourself to them, in order that your progress may be seen by all. <sup>16</sup> Watch yourself and watch your teaching. Keep on doing these things, because if you do, you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

I imagine something like this has happened to most people at some time or another: while you're out shopping, another shopper asked you a question assuming you were a store employee. Something about you caused them to assume you worked there: maybe what you were wearing that day, or how you were examining a product. Your appearance or behavior caused them to mistake you for a store employee.

Another mistaken identity could happen if you accidentally wear a red blazer to a theater at Playhouse Square. If you do, someone will most certainly ask you for help finding their seat, mistaking you for a “Red Coat,” one of Playhouse Square's volunteer ushers.

When I was age 17 our family was returning to the United States from our first three-year stint as missionaries in Jakarta, Indonesia. We had a several-hour layover in

the Paris airport. Unlike today where you'll see air passengers wearing sweatpants or shorts and flip-flops or pajamas, back in those days people dressed up to travel. I was wearing the suit I had recently worn to the Junior/Senior Prom: a double-breasted number in a brilliant navy blue.

As a seventeen-year-old not wanting to be seen with my family, I went off by myself, leaning up against an unoccupied Air France ticket counter, just standing there doing some people-watching. More than once people approached me to ask me questions, as if I knew anything about that airport or could even speak French. Then it dawned on me: my suit was the same color as the Air France logo on the wall behind me. My attire caused people to assume I worked for the airline.

We make judgments based on outer appearance. It's part of human nature. It's an evolutionary tool we use to learn from experience: for instance, if eating that plant with the purple leaves made me sick the last time, I'm going to be cautious about eating other purple plants. Our minds try to place experiences and things in categories.

We do that with people. Based on past experience we make judgments – we prejudge people according to a variety of lifestyle qualifiers: what they do for a living, where they live, their education background, the language they speak, what if any religion they practice. We also prejudge people based on visible attributes: the style of clothes they wear, the color of their eyes or hair or skin, their age, height, weight, body shape. We put so much stock into physical appearance and what we presume because of what we see.

That got me wondering. Looking at the Bible's New Testament, I was hard-pressed to find physical descriptions of what people looked like. There are a few mentions of physical abnormalities, such as a boy who was foaming at the mouth (Lk. 9:39), a man whose arms and legs were swollen (Lk. 14:2), a woman who could no longer stand up straight (Lk. 13:11), a man with a paralyzed hand (Lk. 6:6), many mentions of people with skin diseases (Lk. 4:12, 17:12).

We know that the tax collector Zacchaeus was of short stature (Lk. 19:3), and we are told that a certain woman had long hair because she honored Jesus by anointing his feet with oil and drying them with her long hair (Lk. 7:38). But other than that, the Bible doesn't describe what people looked like: not the disciples, not Joseph or Mary, not even Jesus. We're never told that he had "chiseled features" or "kind eyes" or "a ruddy complexion." In the New Testament, people aren't categorized by their physical appearance.

So what can we take from that? That Jesus didn't decide whether to engage with people or how he would treat them based on who they were or what they looked like. He approached each interaction as an opportunity to engage with an individual with sincerity, openness and respect.

Relating with openness and respect rather than prejudging is the approach the Bible aspires to. In the Old Testament passage from the book called 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel we heard the story of how King David came to be king. God's prophet Samuel was directed to go to Bethlehem and look up a man named Jesse who had eight sons. (Imagine!) God would show Samuel which son to anoint with oil – it sounds messy to us, but pouring olive oil on a person's head was a "slick" way that kings were identified in those days.

When Jesse presented his oldest son, Samuel was blown away – this guy looked like a king: tall, good-looking, apparently a commanding presence. But God stopped Samuel. God said to him, “Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is. I have rejected him, because I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart.”

As Jesse brought out Son No. 2, then No. 3, and on, Samuel got the same message from God. When seven sons had been paraded before Samuel and God hadn't yet told him to tip the horn of olive oil, Samuel asked Jesse, “These are all of your sons?”

Jesse said, “Well, my youngest, David, isn't here. He's in the field tending the sheep.” Samuel had Jesse send for him. When the youngest appeared, God told Samuel, “Now, he's the one; anoint him!” Like his brothers, David was handsome. But God wasn't filling the throne via a beauty contest. God knew David's heart. A heart of passion for the Lord. A heart of love for his family. A heart that was not perfect, as you'll know when you read through the Bible's account of David's kingly exploits. But God challenged Samuel not to prejudge the sons based simply on how old they were or what they looked like.

The apostle Paul counseled his assistant Timothy to resist being prejudged. Timothy was a devout, dedicated preacher and church planter despite his young age. Paul told Timothy to discourage people from forming a negative judgment of him based on his youthful appearance. Paul wrote, “Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but be an example for the believers in your speech, your conduct, your love, faith, and purity.”<sup>1</sup> Paul wanted Timothy to invite people to look beyond his physical appearance and to see his heart, to see his commitment to God in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a day that is still a dream in our world and in our nation. He dreamed of a day when his children and your children and you and your grandchildren will “...live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Dr. King envisioned a society committed to overcoming our prejudging nature so that, as God counseled his prophet Samuel, “...I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart.”

To look at the heart takes intentionality. We're more accustomed to making snap judgments about people. Seeing beyond appearance to begin to know their heart takes deliberate effort.

It also takes practice. We're too good at making prejudgments. We need to train ourselves away from that. Referring again to my high school years spent in Indonesia, on our trip from the U.S. to Jakarta, one of our flight's fueling stops was in Karachi, Pakistan. In the transit lounge the restroom had an attendant whose job was to keep the place clean and, when you washed your hands, hand you a paper towel (actually it was a length of toilet paper). After accepting the paper towel I pulled the door open and exited the restroom, only to have the door slam into my feet before I had cleared the threshold and almost send me sprawling across the floor. The attendant had slammed the door into me.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12 Good News Translation

Once we had reboarded our jet I told my father about the incident. He said, “You probably should have tipped him, even a nickel or dime.” That was the first I had ever heard of the practice. But the lasting result of that incident was that for many years, I found myself viewing with suspicion any man who looked like that Pakistani restroom attendant. That was a learned prejudice. For many years I had to train myself to overcome that instinctive reaction.

Like me, perhaps you need to examine your thoughts to know what prejudices you unconsciously bear, to own up to them, then resolve to try to look beyond them to seek the heart of people. We shouldn’t beat ourselves up when we find ourselves making a prejudgment, but let’s notice it and then try to avoid it the next time. Practice may not make perfect, but it does make better.

Looking into the heart is the compassionate, Christlike thing to do. There are a number of variations on a quote that’s been attributed to sources as varied as Greek philosopher Plato to the actor-comedian Robin Williams, but apparently was penned by a Scottish Presbyterian minister from the nineteenth century named the Rev. John Watson. He wrote something to the effect of, “Be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle you know nothing about.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a great reminder of the importance of having a compassionate disposition in order to be sensitive to what we can’t see, to be sensitive to what’s in another’s heart.

We all are very familiar with our custom of greeting people with “How are you?” and expecting a response of “Fine, thank you.” But beneath that façade of normality may be a pit of emotional turmoil: financial worries, health concerns, a struggling child, a difficult boss, a nosy neighbor, grief, anxiety, depression. It’s only when we don’t settle on judging by outward appearances and instead strive to see the heart that we can offer a compassionate response to their hard battle.

In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel Jesus describes a day of reckoning when his followers would be called to account for the way they treated their fellow human beings. The tag line, so to speak, of the story is when the Divine King declares, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”<sup>3</sup>

When we strive to show compassion for everyone – even those with little influence, power, visibility, voice, clout – then we’re better able to move beyond the limitations of prejudgments. Christlike love enables us to see people’s hearts. We begin to embody the unconditional, all-encompassing love of Jesus for all people.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://minimalistquotes.com/robin-williams-quote-6020/>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian\\_Maclaren](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Maclaren), <https://checkyourfact.com/2019/08/15/fact-check-plato-hard-battle/> accessed 6/9/2021

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:40 New International Version