

## A HEART LIKE GOD'S HEART

1 Samuel 13:13, 14; 1 Samuel 16:4-13a; Acts 13:21, 22; Psalm 139:23, 24

Wangaratta, 1/3/15

I wonder, do we have any "*Eliabs*" here in church this morning? Some of the less well-known names from the Old Testament are becoming popular with parents choosing names for their children these days. Any *Eliabs*?

Do we have any *Abinadabs* here with us today? I can still remember some interesting discussions Loris and I had before our children were born. I wonder how long it took Ash & Bron to decide on names for their boys. Like them, we had to choose two sets of names each time, but for different reasons! Back then, we didn't know if we were expecting a boy or a girl, so we had to have both options covered.

Are there any *Shammahs* here this morning? I'm not really surprised! I don't actually know anyone named after the first three of Jesse's sons; considered by Eli as a future king of Israel, but passed over by God. The next four boys who came before Samuel that day aren't even named.

Samuel liked the look of Eliab! But one by one, seven times, God assessed the potential of Jesse's sons to rule Israel, and deemed them unsuitable. And through this process, we're given insight into God's criteria for leadership. "People look at the *outward appearance*," we read, "but the *Lord* looks at the *heart*."<sup>1</sup> We can be pretty superficial at times, and of course, we can only see what we can see. God has a much better perspective.

Are there any  *Davids* here this morning? It's no coincidence that parents, down through the generations, have chosen to name their sons "David", after Israel's greatest king.

He was very young; described as "only a boy" when he bravely took on the Philistine giant, Goliath. What did he know about leadership? What could he list on his resume? Well, he'd had extensive experience, leading sheep! He'd once killed a lion, and a bear, when they threatened his father's flock. There was no questioning his bravery; but bravery alone doesn't qualify a boy to become king.

We invest a little time and emotion in choosing names for our children; what is involved, what does God look for in choosing a king? We discover this in 1 Samuel 13; and it's repeated in Acts 13. God chose a man *after his own heart*. Why then, did he first choose Saul? We know that a king was not God's preferred option for the government of his people. He was their King! He'd given them judges to guide them through the period of resettlement in their Promised Land. Why change that now?

The people were insistent. They wanted a king, like the other nations around them. To teach them a lesson, did God, decide to give them a dud? Maybe... but I doubt it. I suspect Saul started well, but became a little complacent, a bit slack, a bit arrogant, and allowed his long time in the role to go to his head.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7b

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Wangaratta, 1/3/15

He seemed to forget that God had given him the job, and expected him to obey. Saul had an impressive physique. For Israel's next king, God would choose a man with a good heart.

Is this qualification only for kings in Israel? What does God look for in those he seeks to serve him today? Does it have to be a man after God's heart; or is he seeking women too? Surely, in every form of leadership and service – and God seems to use these terms interchangeably – God is looking for men and women and boys and girls whose hearts are in tune with his own heart. So this morning, as we've dedicated our two young men to God, I want us to consider in turn, *Understanding God's Heart, Moulding the Hearts of our Children, and Nourishing our Own Hearts*. We start with

### I. Understanding God's Heart.

That seemed logical, at least to me. If we want to develop a heart like God's heart; if we want to see our *children* develop hearts for God and his ways, it helps if we understand at least something of the way God's heart beats. This could be huge, but I want to note just two core components this morning. Firstly, God has

#### A. A Heart of Compassion.

This is important, because we're in big trouble if he doesn't! Far more than we realise I'm sure, we depend, daily, on God's compassion, his love for his children poured out – lavished on us John writes<sup>2</sup> – seen principally in his forgiveness and provision. Where would we be, without these demonstrations of God's compassion?

How do we know God has a heart of compassion? He's *told* us in his word! "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;"<sup>3</sup> And it's David, the shepherd king who tells us this. Twenty-three times, in the psalms alone, we find the term "*loving kindness*" describing God's dealings with his people.

How do we know God has a heart of compassion? He has *shown* us his heart by giving us Jesus. There was no gain to God in sending Jesus to us; only loss. There was certainly no gain to Jesus in going to the cross; only pain, suffering and separation from his Father. The benefits were all ours. God bore the cost out of compassion, his loving kindness to us who were without hope, without him. Do we doubt God's heart of compassion for us, personally, today? As we look into God's heart, we also find

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<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:1

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 103:13

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Wangaratta, 1/3/15

### B. God Hates Sin!

Isaiah discovered this when he encountered God in the temple. When he saw God in his holiness, Isaiah understood, perhaps for the first time, how far short he fell from those standards himself. Here's how the writer of Proverbs sums up God's attitude to sin:

The LORD *detests the sacrifice* of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.

<sup>9</sup>The LORD *detests the way* of the wicked, but he loves those who pursue righteousness.

<sup>26</sup>The LORD *detests the thoughts* of the wicked, but gracious words are pure in his sight.<sup>4</sup>

Why would God feel any other way towards sin; sin in general, and our sins in particular? It was our sin that caused the rift between God and ourselves. Our sin was the direct cause of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross.

Such contrasting, conflicting dynamics when we look into God's heart as he reveals it to us. A heart of compassion. A hatred of sin. If we ignore either of these factors in favour of the other, we find ourselves with a very warped and inadequate understanding of God's heart. If we just see his hatred of sin, we see a harsh, condemning God. If we focus exclusively on his compassion, we make God out to be permissive, accepting of anything, no longer the holy God we know him to be. How does God manage these widely divergent concepts? In his love and mercy he takes on himself the punishment our sins deserve. See in the events of Easter, soon to be with us, both God's abhorrence of sin, and his love for sinners. It's a beautiful heart, when we stop and look into it.

Let me quickly note in this context, we are

### C. Made In His Image.

As God unfolded his blueprint for creation, we note with wonder and deep gratitude that he has made us in his own image. If we truly aspire to a heart like God's heart, we're really seeking to return to God's original intention for us. This morning we've joined with Ash & Bron in dedicating Ed and Monty to God. With them, we've promised before God to do those things within our reach and power to guide these young men towards a personal faith in him, and a lifetime of active service. In this context, let me talk about

## II. Moulding the Hearts of Our Children.

And not just for Ed and Monty of course; for all those who come among us who are young, in years or in their faith. Yes, we want to teach them right from wrong, and guide their

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 15:8, 9, 26

## A HEART LIKE GOD'S HEART

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Wangaratta, 1/3/15

behaviour. But first and foremost, is the moulding of their hearts. Long after our time of influence has finished, we want them to be guided by their own godly hearts.

What a privilege to be entrusted with this element of our care for our children! What a big task, if we are to do this to the best of our abilities, for the best of all possible outcomes for our children! Let me offer three suggestions this morning. The first one is a bit negative:

### A. Avoid the "Heart Hardeners"

Like clay, our hearts are easier to work with when they are soft and malleable. Our children arrive with soft hearts. We can help keep them this way. So, some things to avoid:

Too much television! Too much exposure to the kinds of things their immature minds are not yet equipped to assess with discernment. Too much conflict which easily damages soft and gentle hearts. Stress is an everyday reality as part of life, but too much stress is no good for any of us. Let's de-stress our children's environment, as much as possible.

There is a seemingly relentless push through the media these days to entice our children to grow up too quickly. If God had wanted to, I'm sure he could have found a way to deliver fully grown adults into our world! In his wisdom, and consideration for us, he gives us little babies! Why would we ever want to short-circuit their childhood years and have them grow up too quickly? These are just a sample of the things that can serve to harden the hearts of our children. I'm sure you can think of others best avoided! On to something more positive:

### B. Show Them Your Own Soft Heart.

As with most things, from measles to manners, attitudes are more often caught than taught! If we speak disparagingly about certain people or groups around us, do you think our children will block their ears, or fail to notice? That's the negative again. What if we make it a principle to speak positively, to notice and comment on the good things we see others doing?

What if we let our children see that we care about the needs of others; that we're willing to pay the price of helping those who are struggling? Have you noticed that kindness and compassion and helping others seem to run in families? What an incentive then for us to keep our own hearts soft, and our words and actions kind.

Our next point may come a little out of left field. As we seek to mould our children's hearts, let's

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Wangaratta, 1/3/15

### C. Allow Them to Ask the Right Questions.

Let me explain what I mean. Evangelical Christians and churches take seriously our responsibility to teach and train our young children. I get a little concerned that we can teach them all the right answers, without giving them opportunity to ask the right questions.

I remember a time when I must have almost driven our youth leader nuts! I had so many questions, especially around my faith. Did I really believe all the things I'd been taught in Sunday School? How could I know that it was all real? Plenty of people didn't believe in God at all. How could I know for sure that he was real?

How can I grow to love a God I'm not sure exists? You'll be pleased to know I found answers to most of my questions; and developed another dozen along the way! I still have questions! And I love it when our young people ask questions. We have nothing to fear when our young people ask questions about their faith. Because our faith stands up well to close scrutiny and honest investigation. Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. The hearts of our young people are shaped and moulded as they ask their questions. We can help them in this. Which brings us to,

### III. Nourishing Our Own Hearts.

In a moment, three quick tips for feeding our own hearts, to keep them healthy and useful in God's service; and especially as an example to those who are younger, watching us live. First though, can we simply acknowledge the need to actively care for our hearts? (Of course I'm not referring to that all important muscle that pumps blood throughout our systems; we should take good care of those, too!) But that soft and sometimes fragile centre of who we are and what we care about; that place from which our emotions rise and our actions are motivated; it really needs looking after too. Firstly then, let's

#### A. Choose to Stay Close to God.

If we want to stay warm in winter, we move in close to a good source of heat (and I have fond memories of open fireplaces.) If we want to keep our hearts healthy; and soft and open and compassionate; we're wise if we move in close to God, and stay there!

It does require an active choice. If we simply take each day as it comes, we'll drift away. You're here today because you chose to be. It isn't as though you couldn't have been somewhere else. Thank you for choosing as you did. What about the other six days of the week? Will you choose to take advantage of the means God gives us of staying close to him on these days, too? Keep reading your Bibles! It's still one of the best ways of staying close to God. Our hearts, like our bodies, need regular nourishment.

## B. Keep Them Clean.

There's some pretty unpleasant stuff in the world around us, and we're regularly exposed to the world's contamination. We trust God to guide us, and we ask him to protect us, and sometimes we fall. We never reach that place of maturity and sanctification from which it is no longer possible to sin; and if we ever think we have, then we're particularly vulnerable.

Praise God for his wonderful provision! We read the following in John's first letter: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody *does* sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."<sup>5</sup> Earlier, John has written, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."<sup>6</sup>

God has provided the means for us to have a clean heart. We understand this. Many of us have taken advantage of his kindness, many times.

One last suggestion; it isn't mine, and it's more than a suggestion!

## C. Refuse to Worry.

Let me read what Jesus had to say about this: "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear." And he went on to remind his followers how well God provides for the lower orders of creation; why would they ever think he would fail to meet their needs too?

Here's Paul's instruction to the Philippians on this; well-known words, but they stand repeating: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."<sup>7</sup>

It almost seems that worry becomes our default setting in this busy, contaminated world. Instead, Paul encourages us to pray. Let me ask you, which of these two options – worry, or prayer – is going to nourish your heart?

Throughout the Bible, and in our own personal experiences, God reveals his heart to us. He has provided us with everything we need, to nourish our hearts, and keep them soft and open, and pliable before him. He has trusted us with the privilege of helping to shape and mould the hearts of the precious children he brings among us. As we seek to do all these things, let me give the last word to the Apostle Paul, from that great chapter in Philippians:

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<sup>5</sup> 1 John 2:1, 2

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 1:9

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 4:6

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“And the peace of God which transcends understanding, will guard your hearts, and your minds, in Christ Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Philippians 4:7