

# Not Any of These

March 15, 2026

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

I learned something new this week. I learned about “Dark dining.” This is a restaurant where you eat with all the lights off. The idea is to focus your attention on the tastes and scents of the food. Thinking about one of these restaurants, Biblical scholar Roger Nam writes at Working Preacher, “Without the crutch of vision, textures, flavors, temperatures, and nodes of taste are enlightened. It is amazing how the deliberate restriction of sight may enhance a dining experience!”

And that, says Dr. Nam, is the way Samuel found himself approaching the task of identifying God’s chosen successor to Saul, the first King of Israel. He continues: “I wonder how much our own sight blinds us to God’s wishes, and prevents us from truly experiencing God’s intent. Perhaps the occasional experience of blindness can remind us how the gift of sight may prevent us from seeing the heart of God... 1 Samuel 16 implores us that sometimes we only need to deliberately close our eyes to see what God wants us to see.”

“[Samuel] looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely his anointed is now before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’”

As you can probably tell from the beginning of the text, things were complicated in Israel. Samuel had anointed Saul as the first King of Israel possibly as little as two years before. God and Samuel hadn’t been enthusiastic about replacing the system of judges with a monarch, but the Israelites had been hard pressed by raids and military incursions from their neighbors, and the people demanded a reliable, consistent leadership. Samuel, at God’s direction, had chosen Saul. It wasn’t long, however, before Saul began to do things he wasn’t empowered to do, such as offer sacrifices, and he failed to do things he was supposed to do. Samuel confronted Saul about it and informed him that God had rejected him.

It seems from the Samuel’s concerns about his safety at the beginning of this passage, and the trembling question of the leaders of Bethlehem – “Do you come peaceably?” – that everybody knew that the King and the prophet were at odds.

What he was doing, of course, was setting up the nation for a lengthy civil war. That’s the best name for it. As you might remember, Saul and David worked as a team for several years. David even married one of Saul’s daughters. A day came, however, when the relationship fractured

into open conflict. As Patricia Tull writes at Working Preacher, "Samuel secretly anoints him [David] as God's chosen future king while Saul is still reigning, and for the next fifteen chapters, that is, most of the story, the conflict between the two kings Samuel has anointed, a conflict neither of them created, balloons from rivalry and jealousy to deadly hostility: the recognized king of Israel, who still had a following, periodically determined to destroy his hidden heir, who time after time eludes his grasp."

King Saul: Not this one.

God guided Samuel to the sons of Jesse, a respectable resident of Bethlehem. Samuel asked to meet the young men one at a time, or at least the authors presented it as something of a parade, with each one "passing by" in turn. The first was the eldest, Eliab, and Samuel thought he looked like a likely candidate for king: tall and good looking. God chimed in, however, to say, "I have rejected him, for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

If God told Samuel what was in the heart that disqualified Eliab, the story doesn't say. We only know that Eliab got angry at David later on for asking an embarrassing question – which is, I'm afraid, the usual fate of younger siblings who ask questions that embarrass their older siblings. Was that it?

My guess is, probably not.

Eliab: Not this one.

Then son number two: Abinadab. And: Not this one.

Son number three: Shammah. Not this one.

After that the storytellers ran out of names, because four more young men were run by the prophet, and four more young men were rejected.

Not any of these.

But now Samuel was out of candidates.

It turns out there was one more, one whose utility as a shepherd outweighed the prophet's request to meet all Jesse's sons. That was David, of course. You've heard the story read, and you've heard it before. God told Samuel, "This is the one."

Not any of these.

This one.

Why?

That's the crucial question, isn't it? We don't know what God saw in the heart of Eliab or the other six brothers that disqualified them. We also don't know what God saw in the heart of David to qualify him. What made him a good potential king? What made the others less good – we don't actually know they'd have been bad – what made them less suitable candidates than the youngest of Jesse's sons?

The closest we can come is to look at what David did after his anointing. What qualities did he show? What did his behavior say about what was in his heart?

The first virtue, I have to say, was compassion. The very next story, wrapping up this chapter, tells how David became a member of King Saul's entourage. Saul suffered from some kind of mental health ailment, described as "an evil spirit." Music soothed him, and the musician was David.

The story told in the next chapter of First Samuel is David and Goliath. There are a lot of things you can learn about David in that, but the first and foremost is that he was brave. There are a lot of ways to show courage. David displayed many of them.

Another virtue David displayed repeatedly was loyalty. His friendship with Saul's son Jonathan is iconic. The two maintained a relationship even when King Saul sought David's life. Further, David, even as a rebel, remained oddly loyal to Saul himself. There are two stories of David having the opportunity to kill King Saul, and refusing to "raise his hand against the LORD's anointed."

Finally, David showed a quality that Saul so lacked that it was what provoked God and Samuel to anoint him in the first place. David displayed a trust in God and a humility before God that clearly separated him from his predecessor. Saul assumed that his status as king gave him priestly powers. David routinely asked God about the things he should do. His relationship with God governed his decisions far more than Saul. David's relationship with God was further recorded in the psalms he wrote. They reveal a trust and faith that even the storytellers of First Samuel could not fully describe.

What David did not possess, the virtue of the heart that God did not discern, was perfection. It would be nice if he had, because the stories of his reign would be different. But it's also a relief, isn't it? God isn't looking for people who make no mistakes. God is looking for people who are brave, but not always. God is looking for people who care, but not for people who always know exactly what to do. God is looking for people who trust in God, but not people whose faith never falters.

God knows that people are people. God knows that people will fail from time to time.

What God wants is people who try, and try again, and try again.

What God also wants is for people not to be in positions where they cannot or will not fulfill their responsibilities. God wants the inclinations of the heart to be consistent with the roles they're called to play. Those inclinations may change – that seems to have happened with Saul – but if they're preventing someone from fulfilling their kuleana, it's time to move on.

You and I might envy God that ability to see into the heart, but I'll remind you that we are not so ignorant. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, the poet Maya Angelou said, "My dear, when people show you who they are, why don't you believe them? Why must you be shown 29 times before you can see who they really are? Why can't you get it the first time?"

May we be visible as people of good hearts the first time and the twenty-nine times after that. When God looks into us, may we not hear: "Not any of these."

Amen.

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