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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, March 21, 2010

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You ***Favor to the Unfavored***

I Samuel 9:1 – 10:1

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Sometimes God gives us what we ask for even though it is not his first choice. The people wanted a king. The elders came to Samuel and asked that he give them a king to lead them. This displeased Samuel. And so he prayed about it.

Words fail to explain how necessary and profitable prayer is. In fact, the only stronghold of safety we have is calling upon God in the name of Jesus Christ. The prophet Joel writes, “And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.”¹

God heard Samuel’s prayer and told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”² It wasn’t Samuel the people were rejecting. It was God. God was the people’s king. But the people wanted to be like and look like everyone else. Their neighbors had kings. Why shouldn’t they? The people of Israel felt unfavored. God intended them to have leadership, but not like everybody else.

I Samuel 8:1-9 asserts that human kingship was a rejection of the kingship of Yahweh. Kingship in Israel was given reluctant authorization by Yahweh. Favor was given to the unfavored. Why? It is all about grace and God receiving glory through his providentially ordered will for our lives and his creation.

Sometimes God gives us what we ask for even though it’s not his first choice. Such is the case for you and for me. How natural and biblical to feel unfavored. In and of ourselves, there is no way we can have a favorable self-esteem or self identity. We are sinners. Outside of Jesus Christ we exist in an unfavored condition. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.³ Yet, we often receive favor.

¹Joel 2:32

²I Samuel 8:7

³Romans 3:23

God's will for our lives is to know him and make him known. We are to be and make disciples. Whether single, married, wealthy, poor, White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, renter, homeowner, employed, unemployed, young, old, male or female, God's will is clear. Be a disciple. Make disciples.

Just like the people of Israel, we want what we want. We want favor. The story before us, Saul looking for lost donkeys and Samuel needing to tell Saul God's plan for him, teaches us that God gives favor to the unfavored. This is grace. God's favor is the grace of divine peace, the grace of a deathless Shepherd who guards and guides you, the grace of an eternal covenant that secures an unbreakable relationship, the grace of God's commitment to equip us with all the resources we need to do his will, and finally, lest any of his own ever be lost, the grace of God to work in us what pleases him.

I propose to show that receiving God's favor as unfavored demonstrates that we are chosen, designated and empowered to do his will. Furthermore, experiencing God's will is known in and through prayer, not our abilities and intelligence. I will show these things to the end that you, the hearers will be: alert to the God who chooses, designates and empowers by giving favor to the unfavored; aware that prayer, not our abilities or intelligence, is the way we experience God's will; and assured that God's will is to know him and make him known.

1 Samuel 9 traces Saul's journey of receiving God's favor, a journey which demonstrates that Saul was chosen, designated and empowered to be the king. Saul's authority was rooted in the will of Yahweh. The choosing, designating and empowering of Saul was set in the context of Saul's everyday life. Some of his father's sheep were lost and Saul was sent to find them. Is not that the way God works? God works within the everyday story of man.

The key actors in the text are Yahweh and Samuel. Saul is only a passive recipient and takes no active part in coming to power. The narrative is a long, slowly paced account of Saul coming to Samuel. The search for the lost donkeys was the only reason Saul journeyed to Samuel.

Samuel and God had a conversation. Yahweh sent Saul to Samuel. Samuel anointed Saul. Saul was called by Yahweh for a very special mission. As God had responded to the cries of the people in Egypt, he did the same with Samuel. Yahweh stated that Saul will be the "prince over my people," will "save my people" and will deal with the "affliction of my people." Samuel's anointing of Saul was Yahweh's answer to the affliction of Israel. But God also told Samuel that the king would make sons serve in the military. Some would be assigned to tend to the king's harvest. The daughters would be the king's valets, cooks and bakers. The king would take the best of the people's land for himself. He would take a tenth of the grain and livestock. And the people would cry out for relief, but God

would not answer them.

God's electing choice of Saul was rooted precisely in the intention of God. Saul never was able to ask about the donkeys. Samuel focused Saul on seeking what was desirable for Israel. Saul was Yahweh's means of resolving the conflict between the Philistines and the Israelites. Saul was the means of the Word of the Lord becoming flesh. Saul's mandate was to save. Unfortunately, Saul squandered his election and lost the gift of God's spirit. Saul and the people turned kingship into another aspect of their covenantal infidelity.

There are two lessons to be learned. First, the people of God are not to have their ultimate confidence in human ability. The fact that God chose Saul, a giant of a man, caused the people to be elated. Saul was from the right family. But we can't trust human ability. We cannot just look on the external. Later, in 1 Samuel 16:7, when Samuel was sent to replace Saul, God reminded 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." Any time we make our decisions, friendships, associations with others based on externals, we have fallen into error; we affirm the unfavored.

Second, the people of God are not to have their ultimate confidence in human intelligence. We see Saul stumble in 1 Samuel 13. The Philistines, an enemy people to the West, had been oppressing the Jews. Saul went to war with the Philistines. When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks and in pits and cisterns. Saul was fearful. The men began to scatter. Samuel had told Saul to wait for him to arrive. Something needed to be done. So Saul took action. He offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived. Saul had not kept the command of the LORD to wait. He acted foolishly. If he had waited, God would have established Saul's kingdom forever. Because of Saul's disobedience, the LORD sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people. That new king would be David. Saul stopped believing God. As a result, Saul ended his life a failure, losing the favor of God, losing the following of his people, losing the kingdom of Israel and finally losing his life as he fell on his own sword in 1 Samuel 31.

In Mark 3:20-30, Jesus was accused of doing his ministry under the power of an evil spirit. Relying on their own abilities and intelligence, the religious leaders concluded that it was the prince of demons who was driving out demons, not God.

But the victory over death, as displayed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, demonstrated the

Father's favor to the Son who was unfavored by the religious leaders. This truth is demonstrated in 2 Corinthians 4:13-18. Jesus, the Son of God, was chosen, designated and empowered by the Father. Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, was raised from the dead so that we too will be raised at the final judgment.

The sole source of our favor is God; not our abilities or intelligence. Sometimes God gives us what we ask for even though it's not his first choice. The people wanted a king. Saul went looking for lost donkeys. Samuel obeyed the LORD and anointed Saul king. Receiving God's favor demonstrates that we are chosen, designated and empowered to do his will.

The choosing, designating and empowering of Saul came as an answer to Samuel's prayer. The outcome of Samuel's prayer was set in the context of Saul's everyday life. Is not that the way God works? If we do not pray, we cannot see. By praying, we invoke both God's providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs and his power, through which he sustains us. It is through God's goodness, which he receives us unto grace; favor to the unfavored. It is through prayer that God reveals himself to us as wholly present. It is through prayer that we experience the will of God.

Prayer is never superfluous. Even though God knows our needs and troubles, prayer was not ordained for God's sake, but for ours. There are three reasons to pray. First, we pray that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire to ever seek, love and serve God, for God is our secure anchor. Second, we pray that we be prepared to receive God's benefits with true gratitude, because they come from his hand. Third, we pray that we confirm God's providence⁴, because God's promises never fail his people and he extends his hand to help his own.

God works within the everyday story of man. He works in your everyday story. The people wanted a king. Samuel prayed to God. Saul was looking for lost donkeys. Samuel anointed him king. No accident; not a coincidence; but the clearly ordained action of God in everyday life.

Be alert to the God who chooses, designates and empowers by giving favor to the unfavored; be aware that prayer, not our abilities or intelligence, is the way we experience God's will; and be assured that God's will is to know him and make him known. Sometimes God gives us what we ask for even though it's not his first choice. Favor to the unfavored. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. Let us pray!

⁴See 1 Peter 3:12; Psalm 34:15 and Psalm 145:18

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