

Saul, David and the Acid of Envy

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

September 22, 2024 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

1 Samuel 18:1-16

So Saul doesn't come off very well in this passage, and if you remember last week's sermon, he didn't come off well in the David and Goliath story either. Goliath had got inside his head and was filling up Saul's imagination, which made him dismayed and terrified. In this passage his behavior is even worse. He's raving and hurling a spear at the young man who just saved Israel. He is dominated by anger and fear. His soul is tormented by dark thoughts. Saul is in a bad place.

Now maybe some of you read this and you think, "Typical Saul. That's just the kind of guy Saul is. Saul is a bad guy." I understand why you might think that, I went to Sunday school too. But if you actually read all the stories about Saul in the book of 1 Samuel, you realize that it's a little more complicated than that.

Saul didn't used to be this way. Go back and read 1 Samuel 9 - 11. Those are the chapters where Saul starts out as king. If all you had were those chapters, you would think Saul was a good guy and you'd think he was going to be a good king. He's humble and shy when he's chosen; he doesn't think he's worthy of his call. He's devout! Right after Samuel anoints him as king, God sends his Spirit into Saul's heart. Here's how that's described: "As Saul turned to leave [after he was anointed] God changed Saul's heart...when he and his servants arrived at Gibeah, a procession of prophets met him, and he joined in their prophesying." So Saul begins his reign walking down the road, waving his arms like a Pentecostal preacher! Full of the Holy Spirit! And then there's this. After Saul had been chosen king, there were some naysayers. There were people who said, "Can this guy really be our king?" Chapter 10 says they despised Saul. Well, after Saul consolidates his kingship by winning a victory over the Philistines, a group of Saul's allies come to him and say, "Hey, now that you're in charge, this is probably a good time to kill all those naysayers who didn't believe in you." But Saul says, 'No. We're not doing that. This is a day that belongs to the Lord.' He's gracious. Forgiving. Magnanimous. Pious even! So when we meet Saul at the beginning of his reign, we meet a Spirit-filled, gracious man.

So what happened? How did the generous, Spirit-filled Saul of chapter 11 become this paranoid man, brooding in his throne room and flying into rages? Saul's heart has been taken over by an evil Spirit, a harmful spirit, and we know the name of that Spirit. It is envy. Saul has allowed the spirit of envy to infect his soul.

Where did the envy come from? The same place it always comes from, from comparing himself to others. And in this case from comparing himself to David after the defeat of Goliath. David showed courage and faith and won a great victory, completely without Saul's help, which wasn't a great look for Saul. Saul was a proud man and so he was almost certainly uncomfortable with all the attention given to this handsome young shepherd boy. And now, in our passage, discomfort becomes the evil spirit of envy. After the victory over Goliath, Saul orders a victory parade. The army rides through the streets, and the people come out to cheer. The women come out with lutes and tambourines and they sing Saul's praises: "Saul has killed thousands, yay for Saul!" they sing! That's good, right!? The people are saying nice things about Saul. But Saul can't hear it. Instead of getting joy from the victory and the praise, Saul is angry and displeased. Because while the women praise Saul for killing thousands; they praise David for killing tens of thousands. They credit David for more deaths than Saul. Saul's proud and envious heart can't stand to be second. He can't stand the fact that David's light is brighter than his, so his soul goes dark and he wants to put out David's light.

Do we all understand the spirit of envy and its dangers? Young people here, do know what envy is and what it feels like when it's in your soul, when it's in your feelings? For instance, If I asked you could you tell me the difference between jealousy and envy? They're different. Jealousy is when you want something that someone else has. Say that you have a really good singing voice, but I croak like a frog. So I say to you, "I wish I could sing like you; I'm jealous." Jealousy isn't great, but it's not a deadly sin. I can be jealous of your voice, I might wish that I could sing like you, but I could still enjoy your company, and I could still love hearing you

sing. When you envy someone who has a beautiful voice, you feel no pleasure when they sing. When you are filled with the spirit of envy, and the person you envy starts singing, something inside you clenches like a fist. When you are filled with the Spirit of envy, when you hear that person praised for their beautiful voice, it makes you frown. When you are filled with the Spirit of envy, you want their voice to crack during their solo, you want them to get laryngitis the day before the tryout for the school musical. That's envy. When you envy another person, their success makes you sad and their failure makes you happy. When you envy you start cheering for bad things and rotting against good things; you start cheering for the wrong team. It's a hellish place to be.

That's what happens to Saul. Saul's heart has gone down deep into envy. His envy has made him hate goodness. David's victory over Goliath is a gift of God and a blessing to Israel, but, as we've already seen, it brings him grief because the people praise David more than him. Saul's envy also sets his heart against love. Notice how in this passage, everyone loves David. Jonathan loves David. The women singing in the streets love David. Later in the passage we will find out that Saul's daughters love David. And in verse 16 we are told, "All Israel and Judah loved David." But this love, the best of all God's gifts, does not bring Saul joy, it fills him with fear. And Saul sets himself against beauty too. Saul is agitated, so David comes to play for him. He's done this before and in the past, David's beautiful music has calmed Saul's spirit (1 Sam 16). But not this time. This time Saul's envy of David is so strong that the beauty of David's music provokes a murderous response. Envy has set Saul's heart against beauty, against love, and against the goodness of God.

You don't want to give this spirit a foothold in your heart. It's easy to do. It starts in a place where you measure yourself against others in a place that invites comparison; on your sports team, in your class, or in your office, or in your dorm, on your ministry team. It starts with a mild irritation with someone's gifts, "She's pretty, smart and everyone likes her. It's so annoying!!" A tiny nodule of resentment. It's very easy to let that resentment simmer and grow. I'm telling you: don't do it. You are messing with a dark power.

Which is how we should think about verse 10. Verse 10 says that God sent an evil spirit that caused Saul to prophesy in his house. First of all, as I've already said, most translations say that Saul was raving in his house. That's a more helpful translation of the Hebrew because the picture here is Saul speaking at the impulse of this evil spirit. And when it says that this evil spirit is from God, I agree with Tim Keller that we should understand that to mean: God gives Saul over to his own impulse. God gives Saul over to the spirits Saul has summoned. That's a pattern you see throughout the Bible. Romans 1 gives a list of the sins human beings commit in this world, and then it talks about how God gives us over to our sinful desires. We summon the spirits, and God says, 'Ok. If that's what you want.' And he gives us over. God is not the author of sin, but if we nurse it, mess with it, flirt with it, he will give us over.

So Saul flirts with envy, and it grows into a murderous passion that sees the goodness and beauty in David and wants to snuff it out. The fire of Saul's envy keeps growing. Envy will lead Saul to mass murder. Go read 1 Samuel 22 later today. David is running from Saul, his men are hungry and tired, so they take refuge with some priests in the town of Nob. There is a whole community of priests there and out of compassion, they give him bread. It's not a political act on their part; it's an act of mercy. Saul finds out that David has been to Nob and was given bread by the priests there. So he goes to Nob and he accuses them of a conspiracy, of being on David's side." The priests say, "No! we were just helping out some tired soldiers!" But, insane with envy, Saul orders them to be killed. First 85 priests are put to the sword, and then, because the raving Spirit of Saul's envy is still not satisfied, he orders all the residents of the town of Nob to be slaughtered as co-conspirators. Women. Children. Animals. All sacrificed on the altar of Saul's envy.

So Saul goes from a good man, who praises God and prophesies and shows mercy to his enemies, to a man who massacres a town full of innocents. It's a terrifying change and one that shows not how wicked Saul becomes, but how dangerous the spirit of envy is for all of us.

If Saul's reaction to David is murderous envy, there's another character in our story whose reaction is placed in contrast to Saul's, and that's Jonathan. Here's a question: who has more to lose from David's rise, Jonathan or Saul. It has to be Jonathan, right? Jonathan is roughly the same age as David so David's popularity

is much more threatening to his kingship. And yet, when David is cheered and when David wins victories, Jonathan rejoices with him and Jonathan loves him. For Jonathan, David's success is not a source of threat or pain; it is a source of joy. In fact, Jonathan even goes so far as to give David his royal robe and his sword. That's remarkable. It's almost like he's giving up his kingship to David. It's almost like he's saying, "Here David, God is with you! If God wants me to give up my kingship for you, I'd do it." It's a totally different attitude. Saul's envy wants to cut David down. Jonathan's love wants to lift him up.

And this is where Jonathan's attitude points to Jesus. What Jonathan does here for David is a faint echo of what Jesus will do for us all. Jesus also gives up a kingship. He takes off his royal robe and exchanges it for swaddling clothes. He leaves the throne room of heaven to come down to us and calls us brothers and sisters. And when he walks among us, he doesn't use his power to exalt himself; he humbles himself and takes the form of a servant. In his whole ministry Jesus gives himself up. He gives his life so that we can be lifted up. In this story, Jonathan represents an entirely different way of being in the world, and even though he doesn't know it now, it is the way of Jesus Christ.

Another way of being in the world. Throughout the David stories, we will see two different ways of being in the world. Read the stories and you will sense these two competing ways of coming at life. I'm going to call one the way of the clenched fist, the other is the way of the open hand.

When you live the way of the clenched fist, the world is a hard place and a dangerous place, so you better watch yourself. Watch your back out there because you better believe someone will stab you in the back if you don't pay attention. And if someone does you wrong you've got to hit 'em back harder because otherwise people will walk all over you. And hold onto your hard-earned stuff with both hands because someone will always be trying to take it from you. That's the way of the clenched fist and you can guess what grows in the soil of this way. Envy. Fear. Anger. Ruthlessness. Vengefulness. Greed. Slander.

In the way of the open hand, life is a blessing and the world is full of God's goodness. In the way of the open hand God sustains this world with tender care and promises. Hard things will happen in this world, but you can trust God to carry you through. Every day is an opportunity to bless others and help others and love others and to live in the shelter of God's care. You can guess what grows in the soil of this kind of life. Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Generosity. Faith. Hope.

One of these ways is rooted in God and his covenant promises; the other is rooted in human power and human will. Throughout the stories these two ways will come into conflict with each other. We will see people living by the way of the clenched fist. We will see people living by the way of the open hand. But what's interesting and what makes the stories complex is that both ways will show up in the life of the same person. Saul starts out with an open hand, praising God and forgiving. Tragically he ends up with a clenched fist that kills the people of Nob. David mostly lives as a person with an open hand, but as we will see, sometimes David's hand closes into a fist, and bad things happen.

These two ways are not confined to these stories, they are completely alive in our world today. Look around you in the world of sports, politics, business, life and you see people living by the way of the clenched fist. And you see people living by the way of the open hand. And if we're honest, these two ways live in us too. We wake up one morning and our hands are open and our hearts are full of hope and kindness, but during the day something happens and our fists slowly close and we start swinging. And we wonder what's the matter with me? Why am I like this?

But only one of these ways will have its way with us. Only one of these ways will fill this world. Only one of these ways has triumphed. Only one of these ways will live in us when God finishes his work in us and it is the way of Our Lord who opened his hands for us on the cross, who put his spirit in our hearts and who is breathing new life into our souls.

©Rev. Peter Jonker