HOW TO HANDLE A FOOL

Have you ever become so angry with somebody that you said something or did something to them, and then later regretted it? I think at one time or another we’ve all been there. Let’s face it. People can bring out the worst in us sometimes! The Bible reminds us that it’s not up to us to get even with a person who has wronged us. Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” Paul goes on to tell us in this passage that as Christians we are to “overcome evil with good.” That’s the heart of God. This verse in Romans is quoted from Deuteronomy 32. God tells the nation of Israel: “Vengeance is mine and recompense, for the time when their foot (speaking of Israel’s enemies) shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly” (v 35). Then later God says, “I will take vengeance on my adversaries and will repay those who hate me” (v 41). God is the avenger and not us. This message is at the core of our lesson this morning in 1 Samuel Chapter 25.

In last week’s lesson (Chapter 22), we saw where Saul took it upon himself to be the avenger of a perceived wrong against him. A bloodbath ensued. Innocent people including 85 priests of God, were butchered unnecessarily. On the heels of that horrific account in the life of Saul we have several stories told about David further contrasting David’s character with Saul’s. In Chapter 23 the citizens of Keilah (a city in Judah) request that David come to their aid against the Philistines who are threatening to attack them. David inquires of the Lord whether he should go up against the Philistines. God tells David to go ahead, that God will give David the victory. So David and his men strike down the Philistines and the city of Keilah is saved. This is in contrast to Saul’s failure back in Chapter 13 when he refused to wait on the prophet Samuel to inquire of the Lord before he went into battle. His failure to wait for Samuel was an egregious offense to God. Then, in Chapter 24, Saul is pursuing David. David and his men are hiding out inside of a cave in the wilderness of Engedi. Saul goes into this same cave “to relieve himself.” Saul is alone unaware of David’s presence. David and his men are so close they can literally reach out and touch Saul. But they remain hidden in the darkness of the cave. David’s men see this as the opportunity they’ve been waiting for, to kill Saul. But David exercises restraint. He cuts off a corner of Saul’s robe and, when Saul is a safe distance outside the cave, David reveals himself. He shows Saul the piece of his robe which he had just cut off. David says to Saul, “May the Lord judge between me and you, may the Lord avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you…” Of course this profoundly affected Saul who declared to David, “You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil…I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand.” So David’s restraint against Saul despite the urging of his men to kill Saul was deeply convicting to Saul and for a time he stopped pursuing David.

Today’s passage in 1 Samuel 25 is yet another story about David which contrasts him from Saul. Here God tests the true character of David. Up to this point David has looked pretty good. For the most part he has been acting like a godly king, a strong moral leader, a righteous man. Now his seemingly good character is put to the test by a man who is described by his own wife as a “worthless fellow” – a man named Nabal. The name Nabal in Hebrew means “foolish.” And as we will see Nabal certainly lives up to his name!

As Chapter 25 opens the prophet Samuel dies. We are told that “all Israel assembled and mourned for him and they buried him” at Ramah. It is the end of an era – Samuel is dead. It won’t be much longer now until God’s man, David, assumes the throne of Israel. However, for now, Saul is still the king while God continues to prepare David to be the king. God’s preparation of David involves putting David thru a series of personal hardships and trials. Out of these David’s good character emerges. But David is about to face yet another test.

For the time being Saul has stopped pursuing David. David and his 600 men are enjoying a time of relative peace. They are busy policing the southern frontier of Israel. This is a rather large remote area, away from cities where even today, in modern day Israel, one can see a lot of sheep, goats and camels grazing. Its land that’s really not good for much else. It was commonplace for Israel’s enemies and rogue bandits to plunder whatever goods and animals they could find in this area. It was not unlike the situation that existed in the American West back in the 1800s. Ranching and grazing lands were plentiful but there was no rule of law. Most of Israel’s army was located in the central and northern part of Israel where most of the population was at. So this area in southern Israel was for the most part unprotected territory and was vulnerable to attacks by evil men.

Well, according to Chapter 25, David and his men have been down in this southern region providing protection for Israelite shepherds. One group of shepherds they protected worked for a man by the name of Nabal. The Bible says this man Nabal had 3000 sheep and 1000 goats. So he’s quite a wealthy man. But he is NOT a good guy! Nabal is described as “harsh and badly behaved” (v 3). He has a beautiful and spiritually discerning wife by the name of Abigail. More on her later. The common practice in that day was that in exchange for protection provided for flocks and resources, such as what David and his men have been doing, wealthy ranchers, like Nabal, would repay their protectors with food and supplies. After all it was in their best interests to have this protection. Without it they stood the very real risk of losing everything. So, most of these ranchers were more than willing to pay for this protection. It was just the cost of doing business.

So David sends 10 of his young men to Nabal to request payment for the protective services they have rendered. They go to where Nabal is working in Carmel (just south of Hebron) and Nabal does not speak to them very kindly. He responds rather harshly to David’s men: “Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse?” Of course Nabal knows full well who David is. David’s fame has spread throughout the entire nation. But then Nabal disrespects David when he accuses David of being nothing more than one of many servants who is breaking away from his master. Perhaps Nabal was insinuating that David was in rebellion against Saul. This foolish statement shows Nabal’s lack of spiritual insight. It is a slap in the face to the Lord’s anointed and future king of Israel. So Nabal is completely wrong about David. And to top it all off, Nabal refuses to give David and his men anything in return for their protection. Nabal demonstrates by his actions that he is indeed a fool. By the way, the biblical definition of a fool: “a person who lives his or her life apart from God.” A fool is a person with no spiritual sense. And that describes Nabal. He is a fool in the true sense of the word. He’s clueless about David.

Well, of course, when David’s men report back to David everything that Nabal said, David is furious. He’s ready to go after this insolent Nabal. David orders his men, “Every man, strap on his sword!” And 400 of David’s 600 men follow David, swords drawn, ready to fight Nabal.

READ 1 Samuel 25:14-17. The pages of the Bible are filled with nameless heroes. Here we have yet another – a person referred to simply as “one of the young men.” He tells Abigail, Nabal’s wife, the whole story. If this man does not come forward and say something, there will probably be a bloodbath! So God intervenes. He sends this one young servant to Abigail for help.

READ 1 Samuel 25:18-22. Abigail knows what a fool her husband is. She quickly puts together the food and drink that David and his men have earned. Basically Abigail is making the effort to right the wrong done by her foolish husband. Just in the nick of time she meets David and his men on the road. Verses 21-22 offer us some idea of David’s indignation against Nabal.

OK, Timeout! We’ve already established that Nabal is not a good guy. But, does Nabal have the legal right to refuse to pay David and his men for their protection out on the frontier? Yes, he does. After all, Nabal is not bound by any contract to David. So, David is operating in the flesh here. He has not sought God’s direction in this matter. The bottom line is that David is upset about being disrespected and insulted by a rich jerk. Hey, you can understand why David is so angry at Nabal for how he treated him. But David is overreacting to the situation. Nabal and his household do not deserve to die for what they did any more than Ahimelech and the priests of Nob deserved their fate at the hands of Saul.

Thankfully God intervenes and sends Abigail to the rescue.

READ 1 Samuel 25:23-24

Notice the tone and demeanor of Abigail. It is completely opposite from that of her husband. Abigail is respectful and humbles herself before David. This goes a long way toward diffusing David’s anger.

READ 1 Samuel 25:25

Abigail intercedes on behalf of her foolish husband. She even calls her own husband “this worthless fellow.” Abigail acknowledges that her husband acted foolishly. She says that his nature is that of a fool – “Nabal is his name and folly is with him.” Modern translation: “My husband is an idiot! He can’t help it!”

As I was studying this I was reminded of how Jesus hanging on the cross looked out over that crowd of people whom Satan had so deceived and who had been responsible for putting him on the cross. And Jesus cried, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That was the heart of God. And here we see the heart of God in Abigail as she appeals to David on behalf of her husband for mercy.

READ 1 Samuel 25:26

In Chapter 24 David had exercised restraint in not killing his chief enemy, King Saul. This spoke volumes of David’s character. Here Abigail sees David as more than just a good man. She appeals to the fact that he is God’s servant and that God is the one who directs him. She says that it is the Lord who restrains David from seeking vengeance with his own hand. That little phrase, “Let your enemies…be as Nabal” is another way of saying, “May all your enemies be insignificant fools.”

READ 1 Samuel 25:27-28a

“Here’s a gift to make things right between you and my husband. Please forgive him.”

Abigail probably could have stopped there and everything would have been OK. David and his men would have left her in peace and returned to their home base. But Abigail makes a statement about David and his future kingship, insight she has from God (she is spiritually perceptive). These words serve as encouragement for David…

READ 1 Samuel 25:28b-31.

God will protect you as you fight the battles for Israel. And some day when you are king of Israel you will have a clear conscience that you did not shed innocent blood. David, there is a bigger picture here. Nabal is small potatoes. Let God deal with him.

And David is deeply moved by Abigail’s words. He responds, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me!” David blesses Abigail, thanks her and sends her off in peace. “Go up in peace to your house…I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition.”

What a contrast between how David, filled with anger, responds to the voice of truth and reason (Abigail) and how Saul had responded under the same circumstances. Remember, Saul had been angry. A man of God (Ahimelech) spoke words of truth and reasoned with Saul based on the evidence and eyewitness testimony. But Saul had his mind made up and he reacted wrongly and had Ahimelech and many others killed just to satisfy his own wrath. Here in this passage David listens to the voice of reason, to words of truth from God’s servant and he heeds them. His anger is abated. Instead of killing, David blesses. Wrath gives way to mercy. Unlike Saul, David is not driven by his emotions, but by the Spirit of God.

READ 1 Samuel 25:36-38

In the end it is God who strikes down Nabal, and not David. There is no big scene, no innocent blood shed – “the Lord struck Nabal and he died.” And at the end of First Samuel God, not David is going to strike down Saul. Of course God will choose to do this by the hand of Saul’s enemies. God is the Avenger of wrongdoing, whether it be offenses directly against Him or against His servants. “Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay.”

In the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21 the rich fool says to himself, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”’ But God says to him, “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?” That was Nabal, a rich fool who the Lord strikes dead.

READ 1 Samuel 25:39 – So how do you handle a fool? Well, you can’t really say anything to them. It doesn’t do any good. No, you pray for them, you intercede to God for them, maybe even do some damage control from time to time, but ultimately, you let God deal with them. God is sovereign. He is in control. God in His providence restrains us. And aren’t you glad?