Winners and Losers

Final in the winter series: Spiritual Heritage

# Scripture: 1 Sam. 25:2-31

# Key Thought: By contrasting Nabal and Abigail, we can learn to truly be a winner.

# Intro:

Last Sunday was the Superbowl. It is always preceded by much bragging, often by team members themselves. But if not by them, by many who promote them. In the end, someone wins, and someone loses, though we all know that from a monetary standpoint they all earn a great deal just by being there. So, it is hard for us to shed any tears for them even if they lose. In the case of last Sunday, it was an amazing, and record setting display of football offense, the likes of which playoff football has never seen. It was a great game to watch.

This week, our attention is on the Winter Olympics in South Korea. Once again there will be winners and losers. We will celebrate with the winners by watching the awarding of medals and share the disappointment of losers who have worked so hard just to get a chance to compete at this level.

Discussions of the announcers and commentators and prepared video clips will frequently turn to what it takes in terms of preparation and personality to become an Olympics winner.

Today I would like us to think about what it takes to be a winner in life itself. The immediate problem we find with discussing what it takes to win in life is that people have such different ideas of what winning in life is about. That is precisely why I have chosen this Old Testament story to help us. It will help us find some perspectives that we need and begin to get some wisdom about what it means and what it takes to be a winner in life itself.

# Nabal— the world’s idea of a winner

The store that I want us to look at is the story of Nabal and his wife Abigail. In the way that much of the world looks at things today, Nabal was a very successful man. Many people would call him a winner in the game of life. To begin with he had property and he was wealthy in the terms of that era. In those days wealth was not counted in stocks and bonds and bank accounts but in livestock. Nabal had thousands of sheep and goats, many helpers to take care of them, and the property upon which to pasture them. He also had a very intelligent and beautiful wife named Abigail.

There is something else about Nabal that today is much admired in some circles. Nabal was very much a no-nonsense type of guy. He was a bottom-line type of person with little or no empathy for others to hold him back from making very business-oriented decisions.

In addition, Nabal liked to party hardy as they used to say. When his wife found him to report to him what had happened, he was living it up at a party and quite drunk (1 Sam. 25:36). So, Abigail waited until the next morning to tell him about her errand. We live in a partying culture today too with way too much tolerance and even approval for alcohol abuse.

But as you might expect, Nabal’s character had a downside too. The Bible also describes Nabal as a surly and mean character. To put it mildly his personality was lacking when it came to understanding relationships with other people. He had what our culture sometimes calls “attitude.” He was over-confident and cocky. His “In your face,” “take no guff” answer to David‘s men would do for a TV detective’s line. The Bible says he was a surly man - surly means bad tempered and hostile. A Biblical Proverb that seems to apply to Nabal is Prov. 10:14 “The mouth of a fool invites ruin.”

At this time in the history of Israel, David and his band of soldiers wee roaming the rural areas of Israel, avoiding King Saul. The Bible says that in the process of doing this, they had also been protecting Nabal’s ranching operation. So in this particular incident, David sends messengers to Nabal to ask for some food for his men, specifically some of the animals to help feed his troops.

Nabal answered harshly and refused David’s reasonable request. But Nabal was not the kind to consider even a reasonable request if it “wasn’t in the contract” and if it decreased his wealth somehow.

David was very angry when he heard about Nabal’s “stiff-armed” response. He ordered his men to strap on their swords and he started the journey to Nabal’s place to get what he needed.

Nabal looked like a winner. Many in today’s world would think of him as a winner. But ultimately, his lack of relationship skills, his uncontrolled tongue, and his innate greed were his undoing. It was clear in the biblical story that he was not really a winner in life. He was a loser.

# Abigail—a true winner

## Abigail was humble and respectful

But Abigail was different. As soon as she met David, she got down off of her donkey and bowed herself to the ground. She begged for pardon, even though she personally, had not done anything wrong, which she obliquely points out. Rather than defending her husband’s actions, or making excuses for them, she points out to David that there is a reason why her husband’s name is Nabal which meant, “fool.” Again Nabal and Abigail are living illustrations of an Old Testament proverb.

 “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” Prov 11:2 NIV

## Abigail was wise

In contrast to Nabal, Abigail showed wisdom in the way she responded to the situation.

### She listened

First, she listened to her own servants and understood the situation that they were reporting to her. Nabal had not listened when the situation had been explained to him.

As a result of not listening he did not seem to get the bigger picture, the necessary perspective to understand the danger that he was in, even though his servants understood it well.

There is a particularly apt proverb that goes like this:

 “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.”
Prov 12:15 NIV

When Abigail met David, she said that it was no accident that his her husband’s name meant “fool.”

### She took gifts and supplied the need

Whereas Nabal had refused to meet David’s reasonable offer for some sheep to help feed his crew, Abigail, in contrast, immediately had the sheep butchered, and took them to David along with roasted grain, cakes of raisins, pressed figs, and wine. She brought not just the minimum gift, but a generous gift. Wisdom knows that generosity in this kind of situation opens the heart. In this act, Abigail also showed herself to be a person of quick and decisive action. Once she had the facts of the situation from her servants, she moved quickly.

### She answered wisely

Nabal’s answer to David’s messengers was the essence of foolish. But Abigail’s answer showed great wisdom. Not only did she understand the situation, but she answered David in a way that showed an understanding of how he would receive her words. Only the wisest people are able to anticipate how their words and actions will be received. Abigail exemplifies a proverb that we often quote.

 “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
Prov 15:1 NIV

In her greeting, she complemented David and she prayed for God’s protection over him and blessings upon his dynasty. Then in words that required great wisdom, Abigail humbly suggested that by David accepting her gifts and turning from his purpose of revenge, that David would be better off because David would spare himself from the heavy burden of conscience brought about by bloodshed and vengeance. David agreed with her wise and spiritual assessment.

“May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands.”
(1 Samuel 25:33)

As a result of Abigail’s wise words, David turned back from his anger and accepted Abigail’s gift. Again the whole incident illustrates the words of another of the Bible’s wisdom sayings.

 “A fool's talk brings a rod to his back, but the lips of the wise protect them.”
Prov 14:3 NIV

There is no doubt that Abigail is revealed to be the true winner in this story. Actually the story of her life does not end here. David remembered his admiration for Abigail. After Abigail’s husband died, David sent for her and asked her to be his wife (1 Sam. 25:39). She was even more highly rewarded for her humility and her wisdom.

# Learning to be wise

In response to this teaching from this Old Testament story, the question for us is this; How can we learn to be wise?

Ever since I set up my personal website in 2013 and named it “learntobewise.com” I have been very interested in documenting the answers to that question. How do we learn to make wise choices rather than foolish ones? How can we recognize when we are being unwise before it harms us greatly? In view of the story that we’ve just reviewed, I would suggest several takeaways that will help us in our quest to “Learn to be wise.” When we learn to be wise, we will also learn to be winners in life.

## Winners and those who are wise understand the bigger picture.

## The wise and those who are successful in life in the long run have an ability to take the longer view of the situation.

They seem to look farther ahead in evaluating the consequences of their current actions. On the other hand, people who are not so wise tend to live mostly for today. They often do not see or think about the long-term consequences of what they are doing. They seem unable to project their current behaviors and their current habits into their future and see where those present actions will likely take them. Nabal thought only about how to save money in the current confrontation with David servants. He thought nothing about his ongoing relationship with the man who was going to become the next king of Israel. Big mistake. Short-term thinking. But before we condemn him too heartily, we can all point to places in our lives where our decisions have been made based on very short-term thinking.

## Winners and those who are wise value relationships over pleasure and treasure

This is another way to look at and measure up the difference between Nabal and Abigail. Nabal was not concerned about relationships; only about his treasure and his pleasure. But Abigail’s answers showed that she understood the priority of relationships over material things. Wise people always do. Long-term winners in life do as well.

My son-in-law and I were discussing a book that I read some years ago called, “Good to Great,” by Jim Collins. It is a book that reports on research done on comparable companies. In each pair, the companies began very similar, but one company exiled and became a great company. The researchers looked for the reasons. They were surprised to find that the key was that the great companies had a certain type of leader. It was not the dictatorial, get things done in a hurry no matter what it costs kind of leader that we always think of as the epitome of leadership. Rather, the kind of leader who was able to take companies from good to great can be described more as a servant- leader. This kind of person has a dogged determination for the company to succeed, but they are also very humble and care very deeply about the relationships around them. This combination enables them to lead the company to greatness. The book would agree that winners, those who truly learn to be wise, are those who value relationships over pleasure and treasure.

## Winners and those who are wise accept appropriate responsibility

In the situation that the Bible describes, and in the era in which he lived, it would’ve been appropriate for Nabal to accept responsibility to help David, even though it wasn’t written down anywhere. Nabal did not. That was part of his foolishness. But Abigail wisely accepted responsibility to generously help the next king of Israel.

Taking appropriate responsibility is part of how we learn to be wise. Some people unwisely take on responsibility that is not their own. This leaves them overburdened and trying to control situations and the lives of others when they should not be. This is stressful and unhealthy. Other people seem to avoid responsibility and pass it off to others even when the responsibility is rightfully theirs. This borders on slothful.

Have you ever been on a small team, where you were the ambitious one, and you tended to take on this little job and that little job and another job. You saw what needed to be done and did it. At the same time there was another member of the team who seemed perfectly happy to sit back and let everybody else do everything. That will not be a happy team for very long. The overburdened one will become angry with the others and cooperation will cease. The one escaping responsibility will be deemed unnecessary and lose their position, which weakens the team by removing whatever gifts the person had from the mix. The wise person has a sense of what is the appropriate responsibility to take on.

## Winners and those who learn to be wise are humble and respectful.

Nabal was arrogant, surly and mean. But Abigail showed humility and treated David with the utmost respect. I’m sure her servants also felt respected because she listened to them and took their advice. Great leaders are respectful, not only of those who are over them but of those who work for them as well. People like Nabal think they increase their influence by being harsh. This is an illusion and untrue. In fact they are resented for their harshness and people don’t like working for them. On the other hand, perhaps counterintuitively, respectful listeners like Abigail, actually increase their influence among those who work with them. People enjoy working for superiors who listen to them, who take their advice occasionally and generally make them feel valued in their workplace.

## Winners and those who are learning to be wise choose their words well

Nabal and people like him tend to say the first thing that comes into their head. Their tongue has no filter. They are the kind who tend to talk first and think later. We’ve all done it, and most of us have been sorry afterwards. These are the kind who write the nasty email and send it instead of saving it and waiting until the next day to read it again and see if it still makes sense when you’re not quite so hot. These kind don’t count to 10 before they blurt out angrily. Nabal was like that. Proverbs advises:

Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly. Prov 14:29 NIV

On the other hand, Abigail represents those who think before they speak. She chose her words extremely carefully. People like this are able to diffuse difficult situations because of their wise words. Sometimes they don’t say very much, but when they do say something, people listen.

# Concluding Question

What trait of Abigail can help me to learn to be wise and become a true winner in life?