

POVERTY ON SPYGLASS HILL

1 Samuel 25

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Our Scripture today is taken from 1 Samuel 25 on our journey through this great historical book of the Old Testament. My title today is “Poverty on Spyglass Hill.” Here is a person who is living in a wonderful area—with expensive real estate and a wonderful house at the top of the hill. Yet, he’s poor. I think we all know you can be externally wealthy and internally poor. We also ought to know that you can be externally wealthy and internally wealthy. They’re not mutually exclusive. You can also be externally poor and internally wealthy. The worst of all—you can be externally poor and internally poor. There are three people in Scripture today on Spyglass Hill—Nabal, Abigail, and David. We’ll spend the most time with Nabal.

I. There are four things this chapter tells us about Nabal.

A. First, Nabal is a person who is a success in regard to things—materials, position, and possessions. There are several ways Scripture tells us of his success. First, he owns property. Here is a person who has substantial real estate. And on that piece of real estate, he has a house that was rather large. In verse 36, we can see he even held a banquet fit for a king—suggesting a rather substantial estate. He’s also a person who is described as a success in regard to the cattle he owned. He raised them for meat purposes. It’s also clear he was part of the chain of production in the textile industry. When we look at verse 4, we find it is shearing time. When the lambs and goats are being sheared, the raw material is going into the manufacturing of wool products. Nabal is a capitalist—maybe a venture capitalist getting behind new companies. He not only is a herd farmer, but he’s also raising crops. In fact, in verses 18 and 19, Abigail has at her immediate disposal a rather substantial quantity of groceries—all home-grown produce and two

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hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep, five bushels of roasted grain, one hundred kegs of raisins, and two hundred kegs of pressed figs. That suggests they had a rather large farm and substantial reserves in that farm. They grew grain for their bread. They had vineyards for their wine and raisins. They had fig trees for the pressed figs. That meant they had grain mills, ovens, wine presses, donkeys, and employees. Everything you could want in wealth, Nabal had. That's one thing Scripture tells us about him. The next three things Scripture tells us about him aren't so good.

B. Second, here is a person who has not learned to balance giving with gaining. His whole life has been centered on acquisition. "What can I gain?" He has not focused on sharing. "What can I give?" Since he is the kind of person who is stingy in life, it is not surprising that we have these qualities "surly" and "mean" describing him in Scripture. These are part of the personality package of a selfish individual. Surly. That's an old word. It means arrogant, harsh, or rude. He was surly as well as mean in his dealings. And the illustration for that is reflected when David sends men in verses 7–11 to Nabal to ask for provisions to feed the company with David. But David is very insulted by Nabal.

I believe there are two ways of looking at David's request. One way is to look at it the modern way. What is David in anyway? The Mafia business? The racketeering business? The protection industry? "I'm going to offer you protection for a price." Is his action culpable or immoral? I think we have to look at the answer from the vantage point of what was going on politically in that day. Saul, as king of Israel, was unable to protect the people who lived on the borders of Philistia. Therefore, David had raised up a private security force and had given protection to the company of people who lived on those dangerous areas. So, Nabal and all the other ranchers and farmers had not suffered personal loss or property loss during this period of time.

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David is, therefore, not acting as a racketeer, but as a person hired as a security guard. When the security guard finishes his duty, it is only fair that he receive payment. David comes from the aspect of fair payment. It is a modest amount of food he's seeking. But Nabal's unwillingness to be a giving person cost him dearly.

In fact, Nabal had scriptural reasons why he should have given to the refugee David—to the poor and distressed David. There was enough Bible written at the time Nabal lived to govern his responses. “If one of your countrymen becomes poor [David was one of his countrymen, and he had become poor. So he qualifies] and is unable to support himself among you, [David was unable to support himself] help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you” (Leviticus 25:35, NIV). Or in Deuteronomy 10:18, “[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing” (NIV). Would not this apply to David, now this temporary alien who needs food and clothing? Or Deuteronomy 15:11, “There will always be poor people in the land [David now was such a poor person]. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers [David and his company were brothers. They were fellow Jews] and toward the poor and needy [Again, David qualifies] in your land” (NIV).

So Nabal had enough Scripture written at the time he was living to know what his response should have been. But he violated it. And he violated these fundamental principles of giving. He lived in a little world bound on the north, south, east, and west by himself—Nabal.

In today's society as well as then, Nabal was really not under a legal obligation to the poor and distressed. The government cannot arrest you. The Orange County District Attorney will not prosecute you for not helping the homeless or feeding the poor. It is not a crime to not do good. So, you can't violate the law by not exercising mercy. But there's a moral obligation. It's

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interesting that from God's point of view in this eternal system of justice, moral obligations also become mandated obligations. For the Christian, the needy and poor include both the physically needy and poor as well as the spiritually needy and poor—those who do not have the gospel.

While it is not a legal requirement in our society to help them, from the Christian point of view, we are under a moral obligation.

Jesus, in Matthew 25, says, "In the day when we all stand before God, He's going to ask us some questions. 'Did you clothe the naked? Did you feed the hungry? Did you visit the prisoner? Did you give a cup of cold water to the thirsty?'" Not doing any one of those things will cost you no jail time right now. But in God's eternal reckoning, those are requirements for His people. Not only now, but back in Nabal's time as well. He violated a fundamental principle of giving and not just getting.

C. The third thing this chapter tells us about Nabal is that he was a person who lacked good judgment in human relationships. It says in verse 17 that his servants couldn't talk to him by their own admission. When they had distressing news, they needed to get to the chief executive officer, the CEO. They needed to tell him the company was going down the tubes.

Unfortunately, many people in places of spiritual and secular responsibility have the tendency to be unwilling to listen to the people who have their hands on the situation. They only want good news. Nabal was foolish in that he lacked good judgment in these human relationships. His lack of judgment prevented people from coming to him and talking honestly.

Can people talk with us honestly? Are we open enough? Can someone we live with or a friend of ours tell us something they know we won't like to hear? Do they still feel free enough to come to us anyway? Or must people do an end-run around us because we cannot be talked to?

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Another thing that shows he lacked good judgment in relationships was that his beautiful and intelligent wife had no respect for him. Here is a woman who would have made any man proud to be her husband. But Nabal treated her as one of his possessions. He did not respect her. And she doesn't respect him. I don't know too many wives who would have done what Abigail did here. When David comes along, she says to him in describing her husband, "He is a fool. His name is Fool. He's just like his name. And folly goes with him." They had a really warm marriage relationship. By the way, Nabal's name in the Hebrew means "fool." So that's why she says, "His name is Fool."

Nabal shows a lack of good judgment in human relationships when he is ungrateful toward those who try to help him. He hurls insults upon David's men and accuses them of being shiftless no-goods who have rebelled against their master and are pirating away people's lawful assets. He misreads others' motives. That is destructive in relationships—when you misread another person's motives and attribute to them things that are not true. So Nabal shows himself to be a person who lacks good judgment in human relationships.

D. The fourth thing this chapter tells us about Nabal is that he embodies the essential elements of self-destruction. What are the essential elements of self-destruction? First, he has no relationship with God. Read through this chapter. There's no reference to God by Nabal. He never prays to God. He never mentions God. He's out of contact with God altogether. All the more surprising, he is a Calebite. His ancestor was Caleb who, along with Joshua, was one of the two men who believed the children of Israel could take the Promised Land. They had the minority report. Caleb was forty years of age at the time. Forty years went by, and Caleb and Joshua were the only two people to enter the Promised Land who had been in the wilderness. Five years after they entered the land, Caleb was eighty-five and still as strong as when he was young. He went

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to Joshua and said, “We’ve now subdued the land. I can start thinking about myself. I’d like a piece of territory I can call my own.” So he gets Joshua to let him have the area around Hebron, and he goes up and conquers the land and possesses it. Three times in Joshua 14 it is said of Caleb in his old age, “He served the Lord wholeheartedly.” All his life he had done that. Not half-heartedly, but whole-heartedly. Here now was a great-great-grandson who had totally abandoned his spiritual heritage. Nabal had no time for God. He had inherited all the physical, material assets the ancestor had left, but he had imbibed none of the spiritual qualities. He was self-destructive as a result of so much spiritual poverty.

Another reason for his self-destruction was his massive ego: “When Abigail went to Nabal, he was in the house holding a banquet like that of a king” (1 Kings 25:36, NIV). He wasn’t a king, and yet he was acting bigger than he was. Verse 36 also shows substance abuse—another reason for self-destruction. He was very drunk.

This area of South Orange County is one of the most affluent in all the United States. Also, we have one of the highest rates of alcohol and substance abuse anywhere in the United States. Like Nabal, we understand that having material things does not bring satisfaction in the inner life. Nabal also self-destructs because he is unwilling to change. See verse 37. We see that special unwillingness to change because Abigail waits until he is sober to tell him that he could have lost his life by his stupidity and his heaping scorn upon David. It nearly cost him his life. By the way, Abigail has a marvelous sense of timing in the relationship.

Whether it is a husband-wife or parent-child relationship, if we have bad news to give, we need to find the right time to give it. It’s not always propitious to give bad news at any given moment. That may produce a negative reaction. She waits until he’s ready for it. He’s awake and sober.

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She also gives him the good news, “I saved your life.” What would have been a normal reaction?

I think a normal reaction would have been, “I had no idea how stupid I’d been! I’m sorry! You saved my life! Let’s get a message to David. I want to prepare a banquet. I want to repair my relationship with him.” But Nabal said none of this. Abigail tells him the news, and then it says in verse 37, “Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone” (NIV). He’d had a stroke or a heart attack.

Psychologically, he’d been a stone for years—inflexible, unbending, and rigid. Nothing is going to change his mind, his temperament, or his behavior. Now in his body, he actually becomes what his spirit has been all along—inflexible, rigid, unbending, unchanging, and self-destructive. Nabal—the man who had everything. But he did not balance giving with gaining. He did not have good judgment in his human relationships. And he embodied the essential elements of self-destruction.

Perhaps, one of the subapplications here is that we need to always take seriously what our wife or husband is attempting to communicate to us. They’re the ones who have our best interest at heart. We need a listening ear and a listening heart. We need to have a listening heart, lest we shipwreck our own families like Nabal shipwrecked his.

II. The second person in this story is Abigail.

Her name most likely means “My father is joy.” That suggests a young lady who was growing up with a marvelously warm and healthy relationship with her dad. When you have a good father-daughter relationship, generally you have a very healthy daughter emotionally. She was that.

A. The Scripture calls her intelligent and beautiful. By the way, we don’t know what is meant by “beautiful” here because beauty is in the eye of the beholder. In some cultures, beautiful means Miss America. We don’t know what the standard in Judea was at this time. But whatever it was,

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she was it—beautiful and intelligent. She was a twenty-first century woman living in the tenth century before Christ. She was a marvelous person.

B. She's not only intelligent and beautiful, but she's responsible. The servants know they can lay a problem on her, and she'll take care of it. They do an end-run around Nabal to her. She is decisive. When there's a decision to be made, verse 18, she loses no time. She is a strategist. She knew what to do from the story of Jacob and Esau. When Jacob was coming back home, prior to his meeting Esau who was angry with him, he sent a bunch of stuff over the river to calm Esau down—a lot of gifts and presents. She said, "I'm going to load these donkeys down with gifts and food. David is mad, but when he sees this food coming toward him, maybe he'll stop and eat and start getting more positive. Then I can approach him." It was a very positive strategy. If you want to win somebody over you're in a spat with, send them some gifts. Get on their good side.

C. She is assertive. See verse 19. She didn't tell Nabal what she was going to do. She would not have done very well with the teaching that came out a few years ago—always get clearance from your husband before you do anything. Scripture is not condemning her for doing an end-run on her husband. For every general principle, there may be an exception. The general principle is wives submit to your husband. The exception is in Abigail's situation—when human life is at stake. Where there's a priority that is even more important than submission, God gave her freedom to do a complete end-run around him and not get his permission. She could take authority and not be out of God's will.

D. She is athletic. She rides a donkey.

E. She's a real diplomat. See verses 23–31. She gives David a marvelous speech. Her body language—falling down on the ground to show her obedience to him. Then her well chosen words—which help him see he's in error. Her words are kind words. If you're trying to rebuke

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somebody and you're mad yourself, you're not going to be very successful in changing their behavior. She also remembers to call him "lord" two times and "master" eight times. She's a real diplomat.

F. She is extremely articulate. In verse 29, she says "Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God. But the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling" (NIV). In other words, "David, God's got you in the bundle of His protection. Don't worry about my husband. God's protecting you." Verse 29 is a wonderful verse for God's promise for our own life.

G. She was spiritually sound. In verses 32–34, David thanks her for saving him. He said in essence, "I was going to commit murder. I had no defense—no justification for what I was going to do. Just because someone refuses to give you food doesn't give you an excuse to kill him." That's exactly what David was going to do. David said, "You spared me." It was spiritually sound advice she'd given him.

H. She had a marvelous sense of timing. She waits until her husband was sober to tell him.

I. She is honest, verse 37. She doesn't hide what she did from her husband when he is ready to hear it.

J. And she is humble, verse 41. She bows on the ground before David.

All of these are great qualities in her. But now—the kicker to the story and the sad part of the story. In spite of all these great qualities, they were insufficient to stop her from making a very bad decision. We have this whole litany of all these wonderful characteristics of her personality the Scripture recites with obvious approval. Then we come to the punch line—she's going to marry David. What a bad decision! How can I say such a thing? I'll give you the reasons.

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First of all, if you marry anybody on the basis of one conversation—you're crazy. That's what she did. And it's not even a one-on-one conversation. It's in the company of a group of people, and they're both sitting on donkeys. Dumb.

Number two, David was a bigamist. She didn't even check to see if David had current wives who were living. She was too quick to hide her strengths under the guise of becoming one of David's servants. She throws away her golden qualities in order to assume some false posturing of servant hood. Not that there's anything wrong with servant hood. The Lord himself commends it.

But she goes from this extremely bright, talented, capable, and godly person to one who is willing to throw it all away to serve in some minor capacity in relationship to David—with a bunch of other people. It doesn't add up. She goes straight from one bad marriage to another, even though she's a great person. Because she does that, we only hear from her one more time.

The only other time we hear from her is in 2 Samuel, where she's mentioned because David made her a mother. She birthed David's second son by the name of Chileab. Remember what he did? He's mentioned once, and that's it. He did nothing. Zero. Like Chileab, Abigail fades from the scene in history. Abigail—with marvelous potential.

I want to warn anyone, male or female, about rushing into marriage. Abigail rushed into marriage. She hadn't recovered from her first marriage. And she wasn't ready for another one. Not only that, but she was going with her emotions. All of her past life, she had developed this wonderful sense of acuity—hearing from God, looking at the facts and data, and making good, sound decisions. In a streak of emotion, she throws it all away.

When we face major decisions in life, we should not come to those major decisions with a trigger reaction. We need those decisions to take time, so that we can work out—with God and with others—our destiny.

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III. The last person is David.

Here, we do not see him as a shining star, but as a soiled sinner—failing in two respects, anger and sexuality.

A. He fails in anger. Up until now, we've been able to say of David, "If anyone kept their anger in check, it was David. Saul tries to kill him ten times, and he's always forgiving." The last chapter we looked at, David had the chance to kill Saul when Saul was going to the toilet at En Gedi. But David spared his life—a marvelous study in forgiveness. He's a hero in respect to dealing with his anger in 1 Samuel 24. He's a total failure in dealing with his anger in 1 Samuel 25. He goes into a rage against Nabal, and he's ready to kill the guy. That suggests the real heroes God gives to us in the Bible are not always on an even keel.

Are you always on an even keel? Is your life always flat and predictable? Can you always be counted on to have the exact same emotional response? No, we go up and down and around. Real biblical people do that.

David shows us, by his loss of temper, that no past spiritual highs in your life can give you power to resist the devil the next time he comes. The call to be a Christian is a call to pick up your cross daily. Any day we don't pick up our cross, we're in a lot of trouble. This particular day, David didn't pick up his cross—the cross that calls for forgiveness, reconciliation, and going the second mile. He didn't pick that cross up. And he got into a bit of trouble.

B. We also see David in a bad light in regard to sexuality and family. See verses 43–44, "David had also married Ahinoam of Jezreel, and they both were his wives. But Saul had given his daughter Michal, David's wife, to Paltiel" (NIV). David's a bigamist.

I went to all the commentaries I could. It's amazing how, when you have a difficult text, people will skirt around it. I looked at sermon after sermon. They said nothing about verses 43 and 44.

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It's as if those persons didn't even exist. But God does not gloss over the sins and failures when He writes the biographies of His people's lives. David is a bigamist.

David is going to build in his kingdom something that's very unacceptable to God—marital alliance as a means of securing position and foreign relations. Abigail is wealthy. That money is going into his treasury. Ahinoam is from Jezreel. That's going to cement his relationships with those people on the east of the Jordan and south of Galilee. Then he's going to continue to consolidate his kingdom by marriage with other people of other districts to cement power.

You might say, "What's really interesting is there is no condemnation of him for doing this. God doesn't say, 'You're doing wrong, David. Stop.'" But God doesn't do that toward us. Most of us, when we do something wrong, do not hear God suddenly saying, "Stop it." We hear the voice of conscience—the voice of Scripture. There's no evident punishment either for David. He's going to go on and have other wives.

You say, "How can God let that go on?" There will be punishment, but God has a unique way of judgment. He doesn't choose, most of the time, to do it by direct action. He exercises punishment by forcing us to live with the consequences of our decisions. What were the consequences of David's decision of building a harem—being a bigamist? Do you think he had a happy home life? The story of Bathsheba, which comes a few years down the road, ought to tell you his home life wasn't happy. Do you think he had a good relationship with his kids? One kid tries to kill him. Do you think his kids had happy relationships among themselves? One of them raped his sister. And there was murder between brothers. Verse 43–44 looked so innocent. But the kicker is down the road—when you have to live with what you did. Ecclesiastes 8:11–12 in the Living Bible puts it so eloquently. "Because God does not punish sinners instantly, people feel it is safe

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to do wrong. But though a man sin a hundred times and still lives, I know very well that those who fear God will be better off.” That’s the confession of faith.

Three negative examples—Nabal, Abigail, and David at his almost worst. The Scripture is not only written for our encouragement, but also for our warning. Therefore, we have examples to spur us and motivate us toward good things. We have examples that warn us to abstain from certain behavior, attitudes, and ways of life.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we come to You now. None of us want to be a Nabal—a foolish person, insensitive to others, living with the potential of rich relationships and throwing them overboard in a mad, selfish quest of life. Help us to be wise, to balance giving and gaining, to sort out proper relationships, to listen to counsel, to be approachable, and to most of all have relationship with You. Relationship with You will keep us from self-destructing.

Help all of us, men and women, to emulate in our life the wonderful qualities we find in Abigail. Some of those are special gifts from You that we could never imitate, but we have our own spiritual gifts that You give beyond our natural abilities. We want to thank You for that. For anyone here who is facing major decisions in their life—whether it be marriage or investment or work or career or choice of educational opportunity—Lord, spare us from rushing into those decisions on the basis of our feelings. Or on the basis of impulse. Help our decisions to be well sought out, wisely counseled, considered prayerfully, and carefully made. Help us, Lord, in dealing with the disappointments of life that occasion our anger or immorality. Spare us from living with consequences we never dreamed were out there. Help us to be Your people. Help us to take up our cross daily and follow You. We ask this in Christ’s name. Amen.