

September 4, 2016
Sunday Morning Service
Series: *The Life of David*
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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“VENGEANCE IS MINE,” SAYS THE LORD
2 Samuel 3:22-39

One of my favorite stories is *The Count of Monte Cristo*, completed by Alexandre Dumas in 1844. In this story of intrigue and unexpected turns of events, the main character Edmond Dantes was falsely arrested on his wedding day. It was the work of a couple of jealous acquaintances. He was quickly sentenced without a trial to life in prison at the Chateau d'If, located in the Mediterranean Sea in the bay of Marseille. In prison, Dantes gained an extensive education from a priest who also told him about a fortune buried on the island of Monte Cristo. In time Dantes escaped from the prison, found the treasure, and returned to France as the sophisticated, worldly-wise Count of Monte Cristo.

In this new life, Dantes works out a long and elaborate plan to wreak vengeance on everyone who was involved in his false arrest and years of imprisonment. His plan was a smashing success; but in the end, he discovered that vengeance offers no satisfaction and only hurts self and the people we should love.

So why do we like stories about successful vengeance? There is something in our souls that longs for deceivers, thieves, murderers and other criminals to get their just due for harming innocent people. History and the world is full of such criminals and sinners who try to destroy the innocent. Often there is payback. And the corrupt human heart rejoices when it comes to pass.

I say corrupt human hearts, because righteous human hearts understand that vengeance is God's prerogative. We are not even supposed to desire payback for those who have sinned against us or hurt us. If we really trust God, we should be able to rest securely in His will about any such experience we have had in life. And even if

we could bring about vengeance, we, like Edmond Dante, would not be satisfied and our actions would cause more pain.

In a story about real people like David, Abner, Ish-bosheth, and Joab, we are going to run across vengeance sooner or later. Someone, somewhere is going to take it upon themselves to pay back the perceived evildoer. Everyone is not like David who spared Saul's life and was even convinced by Abigail to spare the life of her foolish husband Nabal when both men had wronged David. People who are motivated by fleshly desires will engage in vengeance, which stirs up someone else to practice vengeance, which causes a seemingly endless cycle.

Looking at the examples of vengeance in this story about David, we must realize that God, who reserves vengeance for Himself, actually uses willing participants to carry it out. So God allowed Abner to take vengeance on Ish-bosheth because of his false accusation. And God allowed Joab to take vengeance on Abner for the death of his brother. And through it all David was just thinking, "I am going to trust God to bring about His promise to make me the king of Israel."

Instead of becoming willing participants in carrying out the lust of the flesh, we who love Christ should rest in His ability to fulfill His word. Christians should stand out as either odd or remarkable in a very sinful world because we trust God and wait on God to bring about His justice, rather than running into questionable circumstances in order to do what we think is just.

Abner Died as a Fool Dies (vv.22-27).

Someone felt compelled to share the "news" about David's reception of Abner with Joab. It might have been necessary because Joab had been out doing what Joab did. *Just then the servants of David arrived with Joab from a raid, bringing much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David at Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace (v.22).* Joab, the commander of David's army, and the servant soldiers returned from a successful raid. Who they raided is not stated—that they raided seems to be the norm.

As a matter of God's timing, by the time Joab showed up, Abner was gone. David had just sent him away in peace. "Peace"

seems to be the important issue here. The word shows up three times in the story (vv.21,22,23). When Joab and army showed up, someone was quite sure he needed to know about what had just transpired. *When Joab and all the army that was with him came, it was told Joab, “Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has let him go, and he has gone in peace” (v.23).* The statement almost seems to convey concern. Maybe it was common knowledge that Joab saw Abner as his personal enemy. Certainly they were citizens of Judah who saw the strong man of Israel as the enemy.

Almost certain is the fact that whoever felt compelled to inform Joab had not been in the meeting, had not attended the feast, and was not aware of the details of the agreement to unite the two nations. Therefore, the statement sounds like, “You are not going to believe what David did. He welcomed Abner and sent him away in peace!” This is the nature of gossip. It hears a bit of news. It forms an opinion apart from the facts. It shares the news with the personal opinion being the most important part.

David did what he did in order to bring about unity peaceably. But both Abner and Joab had been engaged in the kinds of activity that are not at all peaceable. Joab was an aggressive warrior and Abner was an aggressive deceiver and a somewhat warrior. As a result of this character trait, Joab took control and peace disappeared (vv.24-27). Very quickly after arriving home, the powerful man straightened out his king. Notice how Joab implied error on the king’s part. *Then Joab went to the king and said, “What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you. Why is it that you have sent him away, so that he is gone?” (v.24).*

The captain of the army boldly approached the king with an accusation. “*What have you done?*” states emphatically that the king had done the wrong thing. That should make us wonder what information Joab had that would make his accusation accurate. Based on what truth did he come to this conclusion that his king was wrong? Submission to the God-ordained authority would have required Joab to ask for some details, and then ask the king if this was a wise decision. But as we shall see throughout the story, Joab was like a bull in a china shop, not submissive to anyone.

Therefore, as he kind of repeated what he heard, it is significant that Joab didn’t mention anything about Abner leaving in peace.

Rather he concluded, “You have sent him away and now *he is gone for good.*”

Furthermore, Joab implied that the king should have known better. “*You know that Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing*” (v.25). This statement belies extreme arrogance. By it Joab indicated that he is the authority, that he had a corner on truth. His statement indicates that he is the only one who knows best; and if his king would have been wise, he would have checked with Joab before making a decision.

Such a pompous and self-assured response often indicates that there is strong personal motivation under the surface. Joab was not interested in the good of the kingdom. Concern to do God’s will was not even on his radar. Joab had a personal agenda that was consumed in vengeance, and he would willingly keep the entire nation from obeying God in order to satisfy his will.

Therefore, the powerful man of Judah took vengeance. How ironic that we read that Joab deceived Abner—the very thing he accused Abner of doing to David. *When Joab came out from David’s presence, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern of Sirah. But David did not know about it (v.26). And when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him privately (v.27a).* Immediately after telling his king that Abner was a deceiver, Joab sent a messenger to deceive Abner. He also deceived David as the text pointedly says, *David did not know about it.* Can we say hypocrite? When Abner showed up, Joab pretended he needed to speak to him privately. The really sad thing is that there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that Joab ever repented of being vengefully deceptive in this case or in any situation in his life.

Joab’s deceptive action was all a matter of vengeance. Having deceived Abner into meeting with him, *there he struck him in the stomach, so that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother (v.27b).* It is the story of two arrogant, strong-willed, deceptive, vengeful men in confrontation. Abner deceived his king Ish-bosheth. He informed David that the land belonged to him and he could dispose of it according to his desires (3:12). He vowed to accomplish God’s will in his own strength (3:9). He got revenge on King Ish-bosheth for

accusing him of violating Saul's concubine (3:7). God warns against attitudes and against like that, telling us they lead to an unsavory end.

Joab was no better than Abner. He deceived his king, David. He brashly confronted his king about his personal opinion. He accused his king of acting foolishly in light of what he should have known. He deceived Abner. All of his actions flowed from a spirit of vengeance.

Not much good can come out of a meeting between men like this. And so Abner died from the same wound that he had inflicted on Joab's brother, Asahel. Someone might argue that Joab was justified in his action because the Law of Moses actually permitted a relative to execute a murderer if the evidence proved he killed with malice and forethought (Numbers 35:20-21). But Abner did not commit murder in the case of Asahel. There was a significant difference between what Abner did and what Joab did. Abner killed Asahel in self-defense in a battle in the context of a war. Joab killed Abner who was defenseless having been deceived.

Apparently, Joab did not care that vengeance belongs to God. If payback was truly necessary, God would determine that and God would bring it about. What if God permitted Joab's vengeance against Abner? That is possible. But it puts Joab in line for judgment because he was a willing participant in vengeance.

David's Response Revealed the Difference Between Joab and Himself (vv.28-35).

David quickly explained to the people what really happened (vv.28-30). He distanced himself from his hot-headed relative, the captain of his army. He told the people, "We are innocent before the LORD." *Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, "I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the LORD for the blood of Abner the son of Ner (v.28).*

The news of Abner's death must have been shocking. The day had begun with the establishing of a new friendship and alliance. Finally God's will would be done as the nation was again united. But the action of one vengeful man threatened to undo all that God had done. Would Abner's murder sink the whole process? Would there be lingering animosity because of it? David made clear public statements

distancing himself and the kingdom from the personal vengeance of Joab.

David's opinion was, "May the LORD take vengeance on Joab and his family." *May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge or who is leprous or who holds a spindle or who falls by the sword or who lacks bread!" (v.29).* David's curse on Joab is virtually a synopsis of God's promised curse on His people if they violated His covenant (Leviticus 26:14-39). Joab had blatantly violated God's law and should be held responsible for his actions. It would be many years before the finality of this curse came to bear. On his death bed, David gave Solomon the responsibility to exercise God's judgment on Joab for this very crime (as well as a lifetime of self-centered aggression) (1 Kings 2:5). That was not personal vengeance, but a long awaited justice according to God's law carried out by the king, which is God's plan.

The sad truth is that the brothers of Asahel killed innocent Abner out of vengeance. *So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon (v.30).* In this verse, the author of the story took a quick aside to remind us that vengeance was the underlying motivation. In some way Abishai, Joab's brother, was involved. It all went back to Abner's self-defense maybe seven years earlier. National security, kingdom rivalries was not the issue. Selfish vengeance was.

David also required a public display of humiliation (vv.31-32a). He deemed humiliation fitting for all the people involved, but especially for Joab. *Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and mourn before Abner." And King David followed the bier (v.31).* The king required all the people involved in the death of Abner to show public remorse for what they did. It is doubtful they were really sorry for their actions, but they were certainly humiliated publicly because of their actions.

This reminds us of a story that occurred long after this event with Mordecai the Jew and Haman the Gentile who hated him. Haman desired to kill Mordecai, but as God turned the events, Haman had to publicly honor the very man he hated by leading him through the streets seated on the king's own horse. In a similar way, David

forced the vengeful people to make public display of mourning and walk before Abner's bier in order to honor him.

More than that, David himself showed honor to Abner by walking behind the bier. By the way, we cannot miss the significance of his title here. This is the first time in the Bible record that David is called "King David." The title is repeated five times in the next seven verses just to make sure we get it. God had completed His plan for making David the king.

David showed genuine remorse at the funeral. *They buried Abner at Hebron. And the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept (v.32).* It would have been considered undignified for the king to wail like this. David didn't care because he was truly grieved at the loss of this new ally. Besides, we will see other cases in the future where David acted in an undignified way to express his emotions.

David even went so far as to compose a lament for Abner as he had for Abner's king and relative, Saul (vv.33-35). This was another song from David, written to honor a member of the so-called "enemy's" family. He had written a lament at Saul's and Jonathan's death (1:19-27). Now David mourned for Abner who was probably Saul's cousin. While Saul considered David to be his enemy, David never described Saul as his personal enemy.

So, too, in this case there was no indication whatsoever that David thought Abner was the enemy. He lamented, *"Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound; your feet were not fettered; as one falls before the wicked you have fallen."* *And all the people wept again over him (vv.33-34).* What did David mean by asking if Abner should die like a fool? The Proverbs describe the fool as a person who is in rebellion against God; a person who is lawless, refusing to submit to God-ordained authority. Actually, it does appear that Abner did portray these characteristics to some extent. At the same time, Abner also died as one who had been fooled, been taken in by the deceit of Joab who was more deceitful than himself. Indeed, there is little argument that Abner was wicked, but he fell before one more wicked than himself. And yet to David, Abner had proven faithful to his promise. And in remorse David again fasted. *Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was yet day.*

But David swore, saying, "God do so to me and more also, if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!" (v.35).

David's Response Revealed Character of a Good King (vv.36-39).

In these verses we find four favorable traits of the king. First, he was pleasing. *And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them, as everything that the king did pleased all the people (v.36).* All the people noticed. It was not that David was intent on pleasing the people or made that his goal. Rather, when he was pleasing God, he was pleasing God's people. In light of the meaning of the Hebrew word for pleasing, we can say that the people concluded that David was doing "good." Even the unrighteous should have taken note because David was doing good.

Second, David proved that he was innocent. *So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's will to put to death Abner the son of Ner (v.37).*

Third, David the king was gracious. *And the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" (v.38).* Frankly, Abner had done some things that were not "princely." Graciousness gives undeserved favor.

Fourth, David was gentle. *"And I was gentle today, though anointed king. These men, the sons of Zeruah, are more severe than I. The LORD repay the evildoer according to his wickedness!" (v.39).* As king, David could have had Joab executed for his brash vengeance. But, instead he chose to respond in gentleness and wait for God to repay. Again David demonstrated so well the character of Christ who he foreshadowed. These are some of the very traits we find demonstrated in Christ the perfect King while He ministered on earth in human form.

Therefore, David's traits should sound very familiar to us who claim to follow Christ. Let's compare the traits of the followers of Christ the King. First, we must strive to be pleasing. We are foolish to try to be people pleasers because people are fickle and seldom pleased by blanket "niceness." Rather than seeking to please people, we seek to please God by knowing His Word and submitting to His principles. When God's principles govern our attitudes and actions, we will live the "good" life, even if that kind of life is not acceptable

in a world of sin. It is right to please God first. But often we discover that it is true that, *“When a man’s ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. (Proverbs 16:7)*

Second, we who follow Christ must strive to be innocent like He is. Innocence regarding evil is noticeable. Paul reminded us that, *For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8)*. So what does the walking in the light kind of lifestyle look like? One description is, *Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life (Philippians 2:14-16a)*. Our flesh loves to complain about everything that makes us uncomfortable. We must respond by resisting the devil. Because we love ourselves, we want to get even with people who do us wrong. We must respond by resisting the devil. David demonstrated a fair number of weaknesses of the flesh. But by the time we come to the end of his story, we will have to admit that he seldom, if ever, manifested vengeance.

Third, if we would illustrate Christ, we must strive to be gracious. Grace offers kindness and benefit to those who do not deserve it. A most common expression of this, or lack of expression, is in our words. *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Colossians 4:6)*. How do we respond to those who are unkind? How do we respond to those who we perceive have been unfair or even nasty to us?

It is football season. Therefore a football illustration is in order. As you watch the games this Fall take note about who gets the flag for unsportsmanlike conduct in a conflict on the field. It is almost always the fellow who responds to a taunt, a cheap shot, or an action he perceives to be unfair. How we respond to such incidents in real life is also important because when we cease to be gracious, God will throw the flag on us.

Finally, like David and like Christ, we must strive to be gentle. To be gentle is not the same as being a pushover or a doormat. David could have ordered Joab’s execution, but he chose to be meek. Meekness and gentleness is simply to have strength under control. I

don’t have to repay the enemy, and, therefore, I must control my response.

Payback, if any or if ever, is God’s business. God’s people illustrate His character to a sinful, needy world best by striving, 1) To please Him in all things; 2) To be innocent of sinful actions and attitudes; 3) To be gracious to those who deserve far less; 4) To be gentle, keeping our strength and perceived rights under control.