

SICK OF GREED? 2 Kings 5:14-16, 20-27

We are familiar with the story of Naaman the Syrian or Aramean general who had leprosy or some other dreadful skin disease. He was advised by a young Israelite girl who worked as a slave for his wife that he could be healed by the prophet Elisha in Israel. As the story unfolded, he traveled to Samaria and consulted the king of Israel about being healed of his condition. The king thought this was a trick to justify an invasion from Syria and he was really upset. News reached Elisha of what was happening and he sent word to the king to send Naaman to see him.

There was an interesting exchange between Elisha and the Syrian commander. Elisha did not bother meeting with Naaman but simply sent instructions by a messenger as to what should be done. The instructions were simple enough. Wash yourself in the Jordan River seven times. The story showed how the personal and national pride of Naaman caused a stumbling block to his healing. It also showed how the servants of Naaman had more wisdom than this important general had. Their argument was very straightforward. What do you have to lose by just doing what the prophet said? It turned out that Naaman had to abandon his pride and take on humility to do what seemed to be an action that was totally unrelated to his problem.

Grace Not for Sale - 5:14-16

¹⁴ So he went down and dipped *himself* seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean. ¹⁵ When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now." ¹⁶ But he said, "As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing." And he urged him to take *it*, but he refused. 2 Kings 5:14-16 (NASB95)

There are many lessons in this accounts that are applicable to our lives today. One obvious lesson emerges is the relationship between faith and obedience to the word of God; or, in this case, to the word of the man of God. In a message entitled "9 Preaching Tips That Will Change Lives" Rick Warren said the following:

The purpose of preaching is obedience. Every preacher in the New Testament — including Jesus — emphasized conduct, behavioral change, and obedience. You only really believe the parts of the Bible that you obey. People say, "I believe in tithing." But do they tithe? No? Then they don't believe in it.

Another obvious relationship is the importance of believing to receive the benefits of the promises of God. We can find evidence in the Scriptures that some people were healed just based on the sovereign grace of God and others that required a component of faith as seen in the story of Jesus healing two blind men (Matt 9:28-29).

We could also learn that God does more that we might imagine or even hope for. Naaman wanted to just be healed of the leprosy, but God did more in that his skin was restored to a condition of a young child. When we are asked to do something, how do we respond? Do we do only what is asked and just enough to get by or do we strive for excellence as a way to honor God? As Paul said in Col 3:23 "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."

The behavior of Naaman following his healing is a great example of how to show gratitude for a gift received. The simplest and most basic response is to acknowledge the gift. If you do something for someone and there is no feedback, then you may wonder if what you did was offensive or appreciated. If you attempt to help some people, they may interpret the offer to help or the thing done for them as your being condescending to them. If you have a neighbor who is recovering from surgery and you mow his yard, then he may think that you are criticizing

the appearance of his yard. Naaman almost wound up in that trap since he thought that the simple instructions to be healed were beneath his dignity to carry them out.

Naaman did acknowledge the gift he received, appreciated it, and was wise enough to recognize that such miraculous results were of divine origin. We also see that he was like so many of us in that he wanted to pay for the gift or he felt an obligation to give a gift in return for the one he received. Why do we think that we need to pay someone who has helped us? It could simply be a way to tell the giver of the gift that you value what was done since it was of benefit to you. It also could be that you make such an offer knowing that most people will not accept any payment. When I help someone and they offer to pay, I will sometimes encourage them to “pass it on” or do the same thing for someone else in need. Others may insist on giving a gift in return so that they do not have a sense of obligation for the help (gift) they received. In Naaman’s case, we cannot tell if his motivation was “payment” for services rendered, a gift in appreciation for the healing he experienced, or if he thought it was simply the appropriate thing to do from an etiquette standpoint. Remember that he first of all went to the king of Israel and it was appropriate to give a gift if one is asking a favor of the leader of a country.

What can we learn from the response of Elisha? First lesson is that we should not take credit for what God has accomplished through us. If we could objectively examine what has happened in our lives, then we could come to the conclusion that much of our successes could be related to being at the right place at the right time. Most of the time we attribute these successes to “luck” or “coincidence.” If we truly recognize that God is in control, then all the praise and glory must go to Him. We can also see that God acts out of His grace and grace really defines the nature of a gift. In other words, it cannot be bought and we are unable to ever give enough in return to match the gifts from God to us that we constantly enjoy even without recognizing or acknowledging these gifts.

Does Elisha’s response mean that we should never accept a gift from someone? In the previous chapter, we see an incident in which a man brought twenty loaves of bread and gave it to Elisha so that the people associated with Elisha could have something to eat. Could we not make an argument that Elisha could have taken the gold and silver and provided for the needs of the “sons of the prophets?” What is the difference that allowed Elisha to accept the bread but not the gold and silver? It seems that the difference was in the intent of the gift. In the case of the bread, this was an offering that was not related to anything Elisha had done or been involved in. It was a first-fruits offering that the giver was providing in response to the law given through Moses. The present that Naaman offered had the appearance of a reward or payment as opposed to a simple gift. The question was, would Naaman have given the gold, silver and clothes if he had not been healed?

Thoughts of a Profit - 5:20-23

²⁰ But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, “Behold, my master has spared this Naaman the Aramean, by not receiving from his hands what he brought. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from him.” ²¹ So Gehazi pursued Naaman. When Naaman saw one running after him, he came down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Is all well?” ²² He said, “All is well. My master has sent me, saying, ‘Behold, just now two young men of the sons of the prophets have come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothes.’” ²³ Naaman said, “Be pleased to take two talents.” And he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags with two changes of clothes and gave them to two of his servants; and they carried *them* before him. 2 Kings 5:20-23 (NASB95)

It is very obvious that not everyone has the same value system as Elisha. His servant, Gehazi, saw an opportunity to help himself by taking advantage of Naaman. The problem had its origin in Gehazi’s thoughts which he expressed (either aloud to himself) that the reason Elisha

had not taken the gifts from Naaman was because he was being too easy on him. The term used in most translations was that Elisha “spared” Naaman. It was not out of compassion for Naaman that Elisha refused the gifts, but it was to make the point that God cannot be paid or bought. Because Gehazi believed something that was not the truth it led to sin. In the same article referenced early by Rick Warren, one of his main points he made was that *behind every sin we commit is a lie that we believe*.

Since Gehazi believed a false notion that he imagined, this belief led to action that resulted in sinful behavior. He acted on what he believed or perhaps rationalized. Rationalization allows us to distort “what we believe” so that the action that we wanted to take can be justified in our own minds once we have carried out the sinful behavior.

We still haven’t answered the question of what motivated Gehazi to do what he did. What was the thing that got him started down this path? The simple answer is that it was greed or a strong desire for more than he needed. If Naaman had not come along with all the gold, silver and fancy clothing, then Gehazi would not have committed that sin when he did. So should we put the blame on Naaman? While some might want to do that, the underlying problem was in the heart of Gehazi and it would have eventually found expression in some other action.

John addressed this situation in 1John 2:15-16 in which he warned us that the love of the world and the desire for the things of the world are contrary to the love that God puts into our heart when we become His children by the new birth. He saw the glitter of the gold and silver and the beauty of the new clothes and he desired to have it. If someone had asked him what he was going to do with the silver and clothes he would have had difficulty coming up with an answer. The most likely thing would be that he would be able to admire it and look at occasionally. This is what John meant by the “lust of the eyes.” The problem with that is there is no real satisfaction in just having something to look upon. Solomon commented on the futility of this in Ecclesiastes 5:11 “when goods increase, they increase who eat them; so what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes?”

Gehazi did not think through the actions and consequences but he acted impulsively. He literally ran after Naaman. It is thought Naaman had not gotten more than a half mile from where Elisha lived. He was concerned that something was wrong since this servant was running to catch up with his caravan. Not only was Gehazi greedy, he was also dishonest. He made up a story and attributed the request to Elisha. This lie was damaging to the reputation of Elisha and perhaps to the reputation of Elisha’s God. I would think that Naaman had a very high opinion of Elisha and Jehovah when he was treated so graciously by both. Now with the apparent reversal, the great opinion Naaman had of the character of Jehovah and Elisha was likely tarnished.

We can’t be sure if Gehazi did not understand the concept of grace or if he just chose to be a recipient of it without being a giver of grace. Many times we fail to treat others with the same mercy and understanding that God has shown to us. The idea of ministry to others as our simply being a channel of God’s blessing was lost on Gehazi. If we attempt to profit from what God has done, then we are stealing what belongs to God. We could argue that Gehazi had a failure to trust God to meet his needs or that he was simply overtaken with a desire to possess material things. The predominate character flaw that may have been the root problem was his lack of integrity – he had no appreciation for the truth. Closely associated with lack of integrity was his lack of loyalty and respect for Elisha. He knew what Elisha wanted to happen with regard to the material possessions of Naaman and that knowledge did not deter him from doing what he did.

If Gehazi had been totally honest with Naaman and had told him that he was just a servant and was acting on this own initiative and that he would like to have some silver and clothing, would that have been acceptable? Why do you think he did not do that? The most obvious reason is likely that he did not think that would work. Another reason is likely related to what we saw in John's letter about the way of the world. There were three actions that John warned about and these were the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Gehazi was likely too proud to admit the truth of what he was doing.

The response of Naaman was that of generosity. He doubled what he was asked to give. This generosity speaks well of the character of Naaman and may explain why the circumstances developed the way they did in his life. He came to realize that Jehovah was the only God and we see evidence of his faith and commitment to worship Jehovah. If Naaman had not had the skin disease, then he might not have had the opportunity to learn of the saving power of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If the young girl had not been captured and enslaved, then Naaman would not have come to trust in God. We can never know the effects of what happens to us or of the influence we can have in whatever situation in which we find ourselves. The caring attitude of the young girl and the attitude of being willing to ask for and receive help on the part of Naaman resulted in good things happening.

No Good from Greed - 5:24-27

²⁴ When he came to the hill, he took them from their hand and deposited them in the house, and he sent the men away, and they departed. ²⁵ But he went in and stood before his master. And Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" And he said, "Your servant went nowhere." ²⁶ Then he said to him, "Did not my heart go *with you*, when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Is it a time to receive money and to receive clothes and olive groves and vineyards and sheep and oxen and male and female servants?" ²⁷ "Therefore, the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever." So he went out from his presence a leper *as white as snow*. 2 Kings 5:24-27 (NASB95)

The actions Gehazi took in hiding the silver and the clothing show that he was not ignorant of what was expected of him. He knew what he was doing was wrong, but he either believed that the benefits of committing the wrong actions were greater than the consequences of disobedience and/or believed that no one would ever discover what he had done. He was wrong in either case. We keep seeing evidence in life today that it is difficult to hide anything from anyone. We also know that even if we were to be successful in hiding something in this life that all things will be revealed at the Judgment. In this case, God had revealed to Elisha what had happened.

Notice the question that Elisha posed. He asked if this was the time to receive material things. The question was not about chronological time but was about the circumstances of this event. It was not appropriate to be rewarded or compensated for what God had done. There would be times in which people would bring gifts that would be supportive of the ministry and work of the prophets associated with Elisha. These gifts would not be related to a specific miracle but would just be free-will offerings. There are times when it is appropriate to receive a gift and there are times that gifts must be refused.

The consequences or penalty of sin will always outweigh any perceived benefit of disobedience. Even if Gehazi had received all the gold, silver, and clothing from Naaman, it would not have been worth the loss of his health and the suffering he would endure as a result of his having leprosy.