

“Getting Your Fair Share” II Kings 5:19b-27; Acts 5:1-11

Some of you will remember the television evangelists, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. In 1989, Jim was convicted of mail and wire fraud through his PTL (Praise the Lord) ministry and sentenced to forty-five years in prison. At the time, Jim and Tammy Faye had become clichés of American religious culture. Tammy Faye’s heavy makeup and on call tears served comedians well for many years. Even when Jim was eventually released from prison, he still struggled to have people take him seriously.

Consequently, it is easy to forget that in 1987, Bakker’s ministry was raising one million dollars every two days. Broadcast far and wide, he was enormously successful. The money flowed into his PTL Club as he began constructing a religious Disney World at his Fort Mill, South Carolina headquarters. Only later was it discovered that Jim had sold a whole lot more of those \$1300 lodging and lifetime memberships than he had rooms.

The Bakkers’ lavish lifestyle was widely documented. One Christmas, they exchanged Jaguars and fur coats. Limousines chauffeured them around their Heritage USA complex. Enormous houses were built for the family. All of this was financed by God fearing, well intentioned people who thought they were helping build the Kingdom of God.

I remember this because my grandmother, saintly and hearing all the right words for her evangelical tradition, would regularly dig into her little preacher’s wife pension and send money to teary eyed Jim. In fact, she was so moved by Jim’s fervor and faithfulness in doing God’s work she was going to send her only heirloom, a gold watch, to promote Jim and Tammy Faye’s ministry. Thankfully, she died before she witnessed where her money was really going.

Now, I mention Jim and Tammy Faye because they remind us of the freshness of our Biblical passage. Using religion to manipulate people and their money is as old as the Bible and as recent as today’s newspaper. Our passage’s Jim Bakker was named Gehazi. But before we get to him we must briefly recount the story of Naaman and the prophet Elisha.

Naaman is the commander of the Aramean, or Syrian, army. A man of great ability and prestige, he is the king’s right hand man. But he has leprosy. Now, in the Old Testament, the word “leprosy” is used to designate a number of skin diseases. He obviously did not possess what we call leprosy today. With that disease, he would have been ostracized from human contact. But he must have contracted a nagging skin ailment, severe enough that he really wants rid of it.

Well, a Hebrew house servant who was captured on a raid into Israel tells Naaman’s wife there is a prophet in Israel who could cure him. Learning this news, Naaman receives permission from the Syrian king to journey to Israel. And he packs up to take with him 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothing. For that price you’d think you would get a house call.

The Syrian king sends a letter to the King of Israel saying: “Cure my man, Naaman, of his leprosy.” Well, the Israeli king goes ballistic. And this section is to be

read humorously. The Israelite king is running around tearing his clothes, wailing, “What am I going to do? I can’t cure anyone of anything, much less leprosy. Where does he think I went to medical school? He’s trying to pick a fight with me.”

Then, the prophet Elisha hears about this and sends a message to the king. “What’s wrong with you? Send him over here so he may see there is a prophet in Israel.”

So, Naaman gathers his entourage – he must have looked like Elvis leaving Graceland – gold, silver, horses, chariots, etc. and stops in front of Elisha’s house. But Elisha doesn’t even come out. He just calls in a prescription. He sends a messenger out who tells Naaman to go wash in the Jordan River seven times and he will be well.

Naaman becomes enraged. “This preacher doesn’t even come out to see me, me the great general. And he doesn’t even do any preacher stuff. No robes, or stoles, no fine words, no hocus pocus. Just go wash in that little creek they call a river. I could have stayed home and washed in one of our great rivers!”

But cooler heads prevail. His servants calm him down and he washes in the Jordan, and he is healed. He returns to Elisha professing his belief in the God of Israel. He urges Elisha to accept this fortune he has brought for him. But Elisha will take nothing.

Naaman asks for two mule loads of Israelite dirt to build an altar to God at home. Elisha consents and even gives permission for Naaman to enter the Temple of the Syrian god and bow down before him when he must do so with the Syrian king.

This is when our story begins. Naaman heads for home and Gehazi, one of Elisha’s servants thinks: “My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something out of him.”

Well Naaman sees Gehazi running after him, stops the chariot, jumps down, and asks, “Is everything all right?”

“Oh yeah,” Gehazi replies, “but Elisha sent me to tell you that two prophets unexpectedly showed up, so he needs seventy-five pounds of silver and two changes of clothing to help them out.”

“Say no more!” exclaims Naaman. “Please, I insist, take 150 pounds of silver with the clothes. In fact, two of my servants will carry this back for you.”

Undoubtedly, Gehazi graciously and humbly accepted the loot. But as they neared Elisha’s house, he sent the servants away and stored the valuables at his own place.

Returning to Elisha’s house, Elisha inquires, “Where have you been Gehazi?”

Answering like a teenager late for curfew, Gehazi replies, “No where.”

“Ah,” says Elisha, “did I not go with you in spirit? So what if that money will allow you to buy big houses, fine clothes, farms and slaves? It won’t do you any good because the leprosy of Naaman will cling to you and your descendants forever.”

And verse twenty-seven says, Gehazi left Elisha’s presence “leprous, as white as snow.”

There is a true story that won the 1999’s Criminal Darwin Award.

A Charlotte, NC man, having purchased a box of very rare, very expensive cigars, insured them against fire among other things. Within a month, having smoked his entire stockpile of cigars and without having made even his first premium payment on the

policy, the man filed a claim against the insurance company. In his claim, the man stated the cigars were lost “in a series of small fires.” The insurance company refused to pay, citing the obvious reason, that the man had consumed the cigars in the normal fashion.

The man sued...and won! In delivering the ruling, the judge agreed that the claim was frivolous. He stated nevertheless that the man held a policy from the company in which it had warranted that the cigars were insurable and also guaranteed that it would insure against fire, without defining what is considered to be “unacceptable fire,” and was obligated to pay the claim.

Rather than endure a lengthy and costly appeal process, the insurance company accepted the ruling and paid the man \$15,000.00 for the rare cigars he had lost in the “fires.”

But, after the man cashed the check, the insurance company had him arrested on twenty-four counts of arson. With his own insurance claim and testimony from the previous case being used against him, the man was convicted of intentionally burning his insured property and sentenced to twenty-four months in jail and a \$24,000.00 fine.

Whether it's leprosy, jail, or a damaged self-image, greed and dishonesty always take their toll.

Now, what does the story say to us?

The sin of greed stands at the center of the saga. In fact, the Jew reading this passage was immediately alerted to its intent. In Hebrew, the name Gehazi means avarice.

Using greed as the context, I want us to examine two of the story's more subtle points. The first is found in Elisha's words to Gehazi in verse twenty-six. I think the Jerusalem Bible makes the passage clearer: “Now you have taken the money, you can buy gardens with it, and olive groves, sheep and oxen, male and female slaves. But Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and your descendants forever.”

Notice that Elisha does not demand that Gehazi return the money. He gets to keep it. He's immediately upper middle class. “But here,” says Elisha, referring to leprosy, “is the price you pay for taking it.” Otherwise, what good is the money when leprosy comes with it?

It is so easy, so tempting, to charge full steam ahead, all out forward, after certain elements of life without considering the baggage that comes with them. Typically, we are not confronted with a major moral decision. Rather, we sell our souls one piece at a time.

For instance, we are essentially honest and trustworthy, but we need, have to have, a good grade on this test. Colleges will be looking at this semester. So, just this once we tell ourselves, just this once. Not realizing that next time dishonesty will be easier. Not realizing the worst thing is not getting caught, but knowing in our hearts that we cheated, lied.

Likewise, the devastating consequence of an inappropriate relationship is not pregnancy or disease, but the sense of cheapness in which it enshrouds our relationships and self image.

Or, like Gehazi, the greedy pursuit of money is inconsequential next to the leprosy of missed family time, stretched ethics, destroyed adversaries, broken relationships.

So often we sacrifice everything to get what we want professionally, financially, or physically, only to discover that once we have our dreams in hand, there is really nothing there. We possess everything, and yet we have nothing. Gehazi finally got his money. Little did he realize leprosy came with it. When we examine our lives, do you and I understand not only what we are pursuing, but the price we will pay for its attainment?

There was a small boy sent to bed by his father. Five minutes later the father heard, “Da-ad...”

“What?”

“I’m thirsty. Can you bring me a drink of water?”

“No. You had your chance. Lights out.”

Five minutes later. “Da-aaaad...”

“What?”

“I’m thirsty....Can I have a drink of water?”

“I told you NO! If you ask again I’ll have to spank you.”

Five minutes later. “Daaaa-aaaad...”

“What??!?”

“When you come in to spank me, can you bring me a drink of water?”

In life, it is important to know what else comes with what we are seeking.

Another secondary theme of the passage concerns Gehazi’s personal comparison of himself to Naaman. Verse twenty reveals this: “My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly...” The phrase “that Aramean Naaman” illustrates Gehazi’s inferior view of Naaman. And part of the author’s intent is that the reader compare Naaman and Gehazi.

Naaman is a pagan, rich and powerful. Condescending and haughty, he reluctantly obeys Elisha. Though becoming a believer in Israel’s God, he still asks to be allowed to perform his yearly ritual of pagan worship in the presence of the Syrian king. Gehazi, on the other hand, is the servant of the great prophet Elisha. He is presented as being on the appropriate side of the religious spectrum. He goes to the church with the correct theology and liturgy. He is one of God’s people.

But as the story progresses the pagan becomes more religiously attuned. And his qualities of generosity and gratitude dominate the narrative. Gehazi, on the other hand, the proclaimer of the true faith, allows greed to motivate him. And he justifies his greed by viewing Naaman as his religious inferior – “that Aramean.”

If there is one thing history teaches us, it is the overwhelming temptation to use our faith as a justification for harming others. Some of the most wonderful acts of charity in the history of the world have been performed in the name of Jesus Christ – and so have some of the greatest atrocities. When we view another as our religious or racial or political inferior, it becomes easy to justify meanness, cruelty, or taking advantage of them. After all, they are only “that Aramean,” or “those Muslims,” or “the children of

those immigrants.” The story is a reminder that attitude will make us leprous in the sight of God.

In his book, The Greatest Generation, Tom Brokaw relates the World War II story of former US Senator Mark Hatfield.

In September 1945, Hatfield had a one-day experience that would affect his life and his political behavior forever.

“I was part of a crew of people that went into Hiroshima,” he says. “This was about a month after the bomb had been dropped. There was a smell to the city – and total silence. It was amazing to see the utter and indiscriminate devastation in every direction, and to think just one bomb had done it. We had no comprehension of the power of that bomb until then.”

Hatfield says as the American party sailed into the canals, Japanese parents and their children watched silently. “When we landed, the little kids saw we weren’t going to kill or shoot them, so they began to gather around. We realized they were very hungry, so we took our lunches and broke them up and gave them to as many kids as we could.”

In that moment, Hatfield came to realize something that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

“You learn to hate with a passion in wartime,” he says. “If you don’t kill your enemy, they’ll kill you. But sharing those sandwiches with the people who had been my enemy was sort of a therapy for me. I could almost feel my hate leaving me. It was almost a spiritual experience.”

Jesus gives us the ability to see beyond our own racial, cultural, religious, and political prejudices – to view each other as children of God. When we see people as Jesus did, it takes away the permission to hate, manipulate, or harm those who are so unlike us.

“Getting Your Fair Share”

Gehazi was worried about getting his fair share. Consequently, he demeaned another human being to justify the pursuit of his desires, not realizing with that success also came destruction.

The story is a call for us to ask ourselves what we are pursuing in life. And do we understand the consequences of its attainment?

Today, this morning, as you and I race across our personal rainbows, grasping for life’s pot of gold, are we certain that the bottom of that pot will not also harbor the leprosy of self-destruction?

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