

CONFRONTING THE GREEDY

ELISHA: PROPHET OF COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

By Ron R. Ritchie

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store **my** crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And I’ll say to **myself**, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-21.)

We all face the temptation to gather material goods as if this were what life is all about. If only we have enough possessions, it seems to us, then we can “eat, drink, and be merry.” I am very much aware of this problem, having spent four hours yesterday cleaning out my garage! And I know that after my garage sale, the temptation will be to come over to your garage sale and buy more things to put in my empty garage, as a hedge against the future.

Temptation is not sin. It is that arena where one is given time to choose between doing good or doing evil (see James 1:13-15). The story we are going to look at in this message is about the temptation of Elisha’s servant Gehazi to covet the wealth of General Naaman. It reminds me of the time when Cain was having a problem with the fact that God looked more favorably on his brother Abel’s offering than on his. And finally God came and said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Gen. 4:6-7.) Unfortunately, Cain did not master sin. And neither did Gehazi.

Coveting raises its ugly head

After Naaman had traveled some distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, “My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.” (2 Kings 5:19-20)

Let’s review the preceding events in 2 Kings 5:1-19, in which God used Elisha, his instrument of compassion, to bring healing of leprosy to Naaman, a Gentile general from the nation of Aram. Naaman had heard from a Jewish slave girl in his household that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal him. So when he received a letter from his king to give to King Joram of Israel, he gathered up a million dollars in silver and gold as well as ten new suits, and headed south from Damascus to the city of Samaria. Eventually he arrived at the prophet Elisha’s home, only to be met by a servant who told him to go down to the Jordan river and dip himself seven times, and he would be

healed. Naaman's status and rank got the best of him, and he became angry that only a servant would meet him and that he was asked to dip himself in a mud hole. But finally his servants convinced him that it was worth his time to do it. Setting his pride aside, he humbly waded into the muddy Jordan and began dipping himself seven times.

When Naaman came out of the waters the seventh time, he found himself completely healed of leprosy. "His flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy." With a heart overwhelmed by joy, he went back to Elisha's home and said two things: (1) "Now I know there is no God in all the world except in Israel." Not only was Naaman physically cleansed, but he was also spiritually cleansed; and by rejecting Rimmon the god of Aram, he was beginning his path into spiritual maturity. (2) "Please accept now a gift from your servant." Now this was no small gift, as you will recall; the silver, gold, and ten suits of clothing added up to almost a million dollars. Yet Elisha responded, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." Salvation and healing are gifts from the one and only living and gracious God; they cannot be purchased, only received when we place our faith in him. Naaman kept asking him to accept his gift, but Elisha refused.

Naaman had come to Samaria possessing rank, gold, silver, clothing, and servants, but he was spiritually bankrupt and leprous. When he finally left to return home, he possessed rank, gold, silver, clothing, servants, and four bags of dirt from Israel; and he was spiritually rich because of his new relationship with the one and only living God Jehovah. He had a new heart and new skin like that of a young boy.

We first met Gehazi in 2 Kings 4:8-36 when Elisha was visiting the home of the Shunammite couple. When Elisha was trying to think of some way to repay their hospitality, it was Gehazi who pointed out that the wife was childless and her husband was old. Elisha then prophesied that within the year she would be with child. (This same child also died and was raised from the dead by the prophet.)

The tenth commandment says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey [his car or truck], or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Ex. 20:17.) Coveting is a desire to possess someone or something that is not yours, to long for with envy, to be greedy. Gehazi the willing servant of Elisha had food, shelter, and clothing as well as a good job. He was doing all right—until the moment he met General Naaman. Perhaps he had never seen so much money or such beautiful clothes. And then when the general offered it all to Elisha, his heart started to pound. He thought, "We are finally going to be rich! We are going to get a good house, some respectability, some new servants...we are going to get a chariot and some fine horses for the trips to Mount Carmel...we are finally going to get...."

But in the middle of Gehazi's dreams came the shocking words of his master's voice: "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." Gehazi must have thought, "Oh, no! Elisha! Listen, General Naaman created emotional stress when he got angry at you. Then when he took your time and your advice, he was physically and spiritually healed of leprosy. Surely that all adds up to a million dollars and ten suits! Take the money! It's no big deal to him, but it would be a change in lifestyle for you and me." The error produced by a mind clouded with greed was forgetting that Elisha was only an instrument of God's compassion and grace. The general was healed of his leprosy by the power of God because he placed his faith in the words of God spoken through the prophet of God. And Elisha's services were offered freely because God's services were offered freely. (Also, Elisha appears to have come from a rich family [see 1 Kings 19:19-21], so his view of money and fine clothes may have been different from his servant's.)

Showing some contempt for Elisha, Gehazi decided, "My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. He should have taken the gifts; after all, it was no skin off Naaman's nose; he certainly has more where that came from. And he is so happy with his healing that, as surely as the LORD lives, I will go after him and get him to give me some of his wealth." Gehazi used the same phrase Elisha had used when

he refused the gift—as surely as the LORD lives—but in an ungodly context, thus breaking the third commandment: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” (Ex. 20:7).

A week ago a friend who is a builder of expensive houses dropped by our home to say hello. I was in the middle of remodeling our bathroom. The first thing he wanted to know was why was I doing the work myself, because after all, if you’re going to remodel a bathroom, it’s better to get a real craftsman to do it. (I wasn’t very encouraged at that moment: What did he see that I couldn’t see?) Then during our conversation he just happened to mention that some relatives of his had recently inherited several million dollars.

Before he had arrived I was happy with our little home and even happier with my remodeling job, especially when my wife stood on the sidelines and cheered me on. But after our friend left I began to think of how I could use several million dollars on our home. First I would have it bulldozed. Then I would start all over and have an experienced contractor and his experts do all the work on a new home located on a private golf course overlooking the ocean, etc., etc. The sin of coveting was crouching at my door, and its desire was to consume me, but I needed to master it. And the sin of coveting is mastered by going to the Lord Jesus and asking him to restore to our hearts a spirit of contentment (see 1 Tim. 6:6-8) and thankfulness for the blessings he has already given us (see 1 Thess. 5:18), and then by thanking him for the way he blesses others around us.

Now Gehazi’s evil plot thickened...

Coveting is joined by deceit

So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Everything is all right,” Gehazi answered. “My master sent me to say, ‘Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’”

“By all means, take two talents,” said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left. (2 Kings 5:21-24)

First the seed of coveting is planted, then it is watered with a plan to acquire, and then comes the time to harvest the fruit. So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. Naaman was riding eastward in his chariot, his heart filled with the joy of his healing and the plans he was making for a banquet to celebrate his blessing and perhaps quietly share his new faith in Jehovah. He saw Gehazi running after him on the main road out of town. He stopped his chariot, stepped off, and waited until the man he gradually recognized as the servant of Elisha the man of God reached him. He asked, “Is everything all right?”

Deceit is the act of representing as true what is known to be false; a dishonest action or trick; a fraud or lie. Gehazi’s first lie was, “My master sent me to you...” His second lie was, “Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim.” He continued, “Please give them a talent of silver [\$6,300] and two sets of clothing.” That is, he was saying, “Naaman, this request is not for my master or for me, but for two unknown prophets who have a need for money and clothing. But these prophets are servants of the living God of Israel, the God you now serve, who healed you. So on second thought, my master won’t take your

money for the healing, but perhaps you could help us by contributing a little to the “Prophet and Loss Need Fund.” My master doesn’t want all the silver and gold and all the suits you brought to him as a gift, but how about one talent of silver and just two suits out of the ten?”

Talk about striking when the iron is hot! For the general standing before the servant of the man of God had been healed of his deadly leprosy. His heart was filled with the Spirit of the one and only living God as a new convert, and his body was like that of a young boy, cleansed of leprosy. And up to this moment he had been frustrated because he could not give a gift to the prophet, and now here was a chance to respond in a practical way.

When Naaman heard Gehazi’s words, on the one hand, he may have thought, “Ah! Elisha is like any other man when it comes to money. Now he is a little more human. I held him too high in my mind...This is a great relief.” On the other hand, perhaps Naaman was disenchanted for a moment. But at the same time he may have thought, “He doesn’t want all the silver and gold and all ten of the suits, just one talent of silver and two suits. What a godly man of Jeho vah!” So he said, “Yes, yes! Not only will I give your master the silver, but because he asked for only one talent I insist that you take two talents back to him [\$12,600] as well as the two suits. And I will send two of my servants to carry the silver and clothing back to your master Elisha for you.” So they left Naaman to go on his way, and Gehazi led the two servants to the hill overlooking the city of Samaria, took the loot from them, and sent them back to join the caravan. Then he carried the loot into his own home and hid it. (The Septuagint says that he took it to a “darkness, a treasury or secret place.”)

One cannot help but think of the time when Joshua was about to take the city of Jericho, and he warned his people that everything in the city was devoted to the Lord (under the ban) so that after they defeated the enemy, they were not to take anything for themselves (see Josh. 6:18-19). God blessed them with victory at Jericho. Then Joshua led his troops to do battle with the second Canaanite city in the promised land, Ai, with the same commandment: Everything in that city was devoted to the Lord. But this battle was not like the one at Jericho: Instead of victory, many Jewish soldiers were killed; the army melted in fear (see Josh. 7:5); Joshua questioned God (see 7:7-9); and God threatened to leave them to fight in their own strength (see 7:12).

God revealed to Joshua that there was sin in the camp; someone had stolen “the devoted things.” Eventually Joshua questioned Achan, and he confessed his sin of coveting and violating the ban. For in the middle of the battle against Ai, he had found a beautiful sport jacket made in Babylon as well as some silver and gold, and he had taken them and hid them in a hole in the ground in his tent. As a result of that one act of coveting, Achan and his sons and daughters and his cattle, donkeys, and sheep were stoned to death; and all that he had was destroyed by fire (see Josh. 7:20-27). This stoning of Achan was a stern warning and reminder to all the people of Israel that God was molding them into a holy people, a people set apart from all the other nations to reflect his character of purity, not the depraved and coveting character of the Canaanite people within the land who had already been set aside by him for judgment (see Gen. 15:12-18 and fulfilled in Josh. 7:9).

Coveting and deceit are joined by the child of deceit—hypocrisy

Then he went in and stood before his master Elisha. “Where have you been, Gehazi?” Elisha asked. “Your servant didn’t go anywhere,” Gehazi answered.
(2 Kings 5:25)

In this question you can hear echoed the voice of God after Adam and Eve had sinned and were hiding from him: “Where are you, Adam? [Where are you in relationship to me?]” (See Gen. 3:8-10.) Elisha may have seen everything from the large hill that overlooked the city of Samaria, the valley, and the main road that led out of town toward Damascus. Or as a prophet of God, he may have been told directly by God what sin his servant had

committed against him and God. But Gehazi said, “Who, me? I didn’t go anywhere. Why would you even ask me such a question?”

As the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ was growing shortly after Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Dr. Luke recorded in his book of Acts that many men and women were selling all they had and giving the money to the apostles to distribute to those in need. They were not forced to do this act of mercy, but it came out of a heart of love toward God and toward their less fortunate brothers and sisters within the new body of Christ. One couple named Ananias and Sapphira sold some land but kept back some of the money for themselves, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet as though that were the full portion they had received in the sale. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land?... You have not lied to men, but to God.” And at that moment Ananias dropped dead. Then Peter confronted Sapphira with the same question, and she lied to him; and as a result of her testing the Spirit of the Lord, she also dropped dead. And great fear came upon the whole church (see Acts 5:1-11). Paul would later write to the Colossian Christians, “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality” (3:25).

Coveting, deceit, and hypocrisy bring death

But Elisha said to him, “Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money, or to accept clothes, olive groves, vineyards, flocks, herds, or menservants and maidservants? Naaman’s leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went from Elisha’s presence and he was leprous, as white as snow. (2 Kings 5:26-27)

The apostle James would warn the early church that “...each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (1:14-15). Elisha the man of God first asked his servant, “Where have you been?” The answer, was only, “Here, there...nowhere.” So then the prophet asked his servant, “Wasn’t my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Did you think God had died? Did you really think that you could sin against God and man and get away with it?”

As we have said many times in this series of messages on the life of Elisha, he foreshadowed the life and ministry of Christ Jesus. And in this passage one immediately thinks of the time when Jesus was in the upper room at his last supper on this earth with his disciples and especially Judas. It was at that time that Judas, who had been with the Lord for three years, had already sold out the Lord to the Sanhedrin for thirty pieces of silver; but he arrived at the Passover supper anyway. “[Jesus] said [to all of them], ‘Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.’ And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’ And He answered and said, ‘He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me.’...And Judas who was betraying Him, answered and said ‘Surely it is not I, Rabbi?’ He said to him, ‘You have said it yourself.’” (Matt. 26:20-25.)

Then Elisha asked Gehazi a third question: “Is this the time to take money, or to accept clothes, olive groves, vineyards, flocks, herds, or menservants and maidservants?” These apparently were the things Gehazi was planning on buying with his newly acquired money. There is nothing wrong with money; it is the love of money that is “a root of all sorts of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). Elisha was led not to take any money from Naaman because of the time or season within Israel. It was a time when the people had forsaken the Lord God for Baal; a time when the fleshly nature of God’s people was mocked by the surrounding nations; a time when, like most times, false prophets roamed the land as a business rather than a spiritual ministry, bringing the prophet’s office into contempt with unbelievers. So Elisha was saying, “Didn’t my example show you that it was the wrong time to take any money from a foreigner? Are we to trust man to supply all our needs, or God? And did we want to show the

general that he could buy God's healing powers the way he could buy everything else at home?"

In Galatians 6:6 Paul tells the believers that there is a right time to take money from other believers: "And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches." When Anne Marie, Ron, Jr., and I were serving on a summer internship out of Dallas Seminary in a small farming area on the south side of Houston, Texas, we experienced the application of this verse firsthand and literally. Each Sunday morning we would come to the small church and preach the word of God, then spend some time with the people on the front lawn. Finally when everyone had left, we would close up the church and head for our car. Sure enough, each week we would find on the front seat a week's worth of food, from fresh meat and eggs to fruit and vegetables. We have never forgotten the love of those dear farmers who shared their food with us as we shared the word of God with them. This same principle has been our experience at each church we have served since those early days.

But through the years, with a great list of spiritual mentors behind me, I have learned the spiritual value of not taking any money from nonbelievers or new believers to whom I have had an opportunity to minister in the name of Jesus Christ. For they need to see that their hope is that Jesus loves them, plus nothing. They need to understand that they cannot buy the love of God or the gift of salvation. That all comes freely when they place their faith in him as their Lord and Savior.

"Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.' Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and he was leprous, as white as snow." What a high price this servant of the prophet of God had to pay for his sin of coveting and greed! He was given a death sentence, and in Israel, according to Leviticus 13, he would be sent outside the community to live in the leprosy camps along with his wife and children. And if he lived a long life he would also see his grandchildren and then know that as long as his name existed in Israel, all his descendants would be stricken with leprosy. God was really serious when he told his people that a man's or woman's personal sin against him is not so personal, but literally has consequences in the future generations, even to those yet unborn. In Gehazi's case the "sins of the father" affected all of his descendants. It was not too harsh a punishment that the leprosy taken from Naaman on account of his faith in the living God should pass to Gehazi on account of his departure from God. He was being punished not only for his greed but also for his misrepresenting the prophet of God. Covetousness in the heart is already a spiritual leprosy.

Paul reminded the Roman Christians, "For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire...I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death." (Rom. 7:7-10.) The reason that this good, holy, and righteous commandment brought spiritual death to the heart of Paul was that there was no power in his old sinful nature to obey it (see Rom. 7:18).

"Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by [the power of] the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." (Rom. 8:12-14). We are free at last to live by the power of the Spirit and trust him for victory over our temptation to be greedy and over every other temptation we face.

As Ray Stedman said to us many times and in many ways, we have never been given the power to do anything, only the power as believers in Christ Jesus to choose each day to live by the power of the flesh or live by the power of the Spirit. If we choose the flesh, the flesh takes over and produces spiritual death. If we choose to live by the power of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit takes over and we experience abundant spiritual life. So choose to live out your life in the power of the Holy Spirit. And choose to live a life rich toward God.

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4th Message

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