

Messy Church; Clean Salvation

2 Kings 5:14-27 • 2021-10-17



I can remember as a child my parents would take an occasional trip to the big wholesale store in our area. It was a little different. You had to pay a membership fee. I can recall entering the store, then having somebody greet us and check for a membership card. At a very young age I wondered what they would do to you if you tried getting in without paying for a membership. An expensive country club would kick you out and probably fine you for trespassing. What would those store card-verifiers do? They looked so imposing, like guards at a castle door. Even at a young age I understood that you have to pay your membership dues. What does it mean to be a member of God's kingdom? Maybe some even perceive there must be some sort of membership fee. This morning we consider Elisha's dealings with two different men. One man received all free membership, the other man didn't value his membership. One makes a mess, the other leaves clean.

Picture Naaman after he had washed seven times in the Jordan River. He had almost left in disgust at the suggestion that the simple act of washing in the dirty river would really make him clean. He had burst out in anger at Elisha. Naaman had wanted something more significant. He least expected Elisha to ask him to accomplish some great feat. Naaman nearly left in a rage. But then at his attendant's urging Naaman took Elisha at his word. He got down in what he considered the filthy Jordan river. He repeated the washing until the seventh time. Such a simple thing. He probably felt ridiculous trying to get clean in those waters. He had, after all, a terrible incurable skin disease. Then it happened. Just as the man of God told him. Naaman's leprous flesh became like that of a young boy! He wasn't just healed that day. Naaman had learned something! This Lord, the God of Israel, was one whose Word you could always trust! No matter how contrary to reason it may be, the Word of the Lord, spoken by his prophet, was good. Naaman returned back to Elisha and shared his new faith. "There is no other god, except the God of Israel," he said.

I'm sure that Naaman's newfound faith and his confession made Elisha glad. Elisha lived in a land of wavering Israelites. He had to deal with Baal worship and the wicked king Ahab and Jezebel. But now Naaman, this foreigner, the military commander of an enemy nation, gives an expression of faith that the Lord alone is God!

But Naaman had another lesson to learn. All along Naaman had planned to pay a great price for his healing. Now that he was healed, Naaman made ready all the gifts he had brought. He was ready to pay his fair share. After all, he was a successful commander of the Syrian forces. King Ben-Hadad had sent him with great riches. So Naaman presented Elisha with what was the equivalent of almost 1000 pounds of precious metals as well as ten sets of garments! Naaman knew how things worked. You go to the witch doctor, and you pay him, and he heals you. If you don't pay him, he'd probably get mad at you and you'd get cursed. This is the way everything works, right? You go to the hospital. They do their best and provide excellent care. Then the bill comes.

But how does the prophet Elisha respond to Naaman's offer? He makes an oath, "As surely as the Lord lives, I will not take anything." Even when Naaman urged Elisha to take at least something, Elisha still refused.

It's not that Elisha didn't ever accept outside support. Some people had welcomed him into their homes. And God did ask his Old Testament people to give a tithe offering. The apostle Paul pointed out that we ought to support workers in the church. Jesus said it was worthwhile to honor God with your wealth. So why does Elisha make a big fuss? Why does he refuse the offer of any gift from Naaman? This was not the right time for accepting gifts. Naaman needed to learn about God's grace. Naaman needed to give God all the glory for his healing. Naaman needed to grow in his faith and understand he couldn't ever pay-back the Lord. And when Naaman left for home, this was the thought that filled his heart! The Lord has healed me out of his grace! The Lord gives healing as a gift! Now not only did Naaman confess there was no other god but the God of Israel, but he now understood there is no other god like the God of Israel: the God of free and faithful grace.

The Lutheran church has a history of fighting for this same view of God's grace. God's grace is the reason why the early Lutheran reformers were so excited. God's grace is the reason they had to question and challenge the selling of forgiveness by the church. It's the reason why the Lutheran mantra has always been "by grace alone." It's the reason why we don't seek fundraising from the community. It's the reason why you will never hear someone say to the straying sheep, "you owe God money." God doesn't charge us for his acts of rescue. He gives them as gifts. We work hard to make that truth clear in all we do—especially to those needing to hear the gospel of free forgiveness.

Naaman couldn't pay the Lord back. He had to learn this truth. So do today's new converts to Christianity. If anyone ever came to this church with the impression that they were actually able to pay for services rendered, they would have to think again. When the believer approaches God, he always approaches empty handed. Can you pay back the creator for the gift of life? Can you give him anything which he hasn't given you first? Can you pay God for forgiveness of your sins? Can you really ever reimburse God for the gift of water and the Word in which he promises to give you the gift of the Holy Spirit? Can you open your wallet to cover the cost of the blood of Christ shed for you? What price could you ever dare to put on such wonderful gifts? Want to know God's price? Absolutely free.

Naaman left for his homeland determined to only worship the Lord for the rest of his life. But Elisha had a servant named Gehazi. When Naaman left without giving even the smallest gift, Gehazi was troubled. He reasoned out in his mind “Elisha should have taken something from this foreigner.” And he saw an opportunity. He ran off to catch up with Naaman’s convoy. When he reached him, he explained, “My master sent me to tell you that he just had two visitors come, and he’d like to give them a talent of silver and a set of clothes each.” Naaman was very quick to pay out. He gave Gehazi more than he asked or could ever carry and sent two of his servants to help Gehazi get it back to Elisha, or so he thought. Gehazi’s plan was working great! He sent the two servants off when he reached his home by the hill. He hid the gifts in his house and acted like nothing happened. Notice the progression in Gehazi’s actions. It all started with a little reasoning. After he could justify his actions to himself, he made a quick plot: 1) Come up with a lie for a cover story. 2) Scheme to get as much as possible. 3) Smear Elisha’s reputation. 4) And he found a perfect way to carry it out without ever having to bother Elisha. And 5) When Elisha confronted him he had a plan for that too. This helps show us how clever the guy was! “Where did you go, Gehazi?” He answered, “I didn’t go anywhere.” (Brilliant!)

Gehazi had done more than let his tongue spout lies. Gehazi’s heart had turned from the Lord! Elisha was trying to help Naaman learn about God’s grace. Gehazi’s heart led him to not only deceive, defame, and steal what was not rightfully his. It led him to lie to the new convert, to his master, and to God. When he took the gifts he took glory from the Lord, the God of free grace. For Gehazi, chasing after his heart’s desire for wealth was more important than sharing the God of grace. For Gehazi, God’s glory, Naaman’s soul, and his own soul were now expendable.

You and I are not seeking to get money from new converts, we are not setting up a toll both to charge people as they walk into worship or Bible Study. The bottom line at a Christian congregation is not getting wealth. It is sharing the grace of God. But might something else ever take over as a greater priority? I’m sure it’s not every day that Gehazi saw someone trying to give Elisha 1000 pounds of gold and silver. What about when a congregation has a well-off member who greatly might help to cover expenses and that member is in danger of straying? Is it more important to do whatever it takes to teach them about God’s grace, or is the goal to just do what it takes to make sure he keeps contributing to the congregation’s financial program? What is the priority? Is it the soul in danger or the wallet carried around by that same soul? When you see someone new to the faith do you see a potential pew filler or a potential person to rejoice with you in knowing God’s grace? Elisha saw a man with great wealth and ability to further the office of the ministry with his wealth. But he saw first a soul that first needed to learn the grace of God. Recall what we read earlier in Mark’s gospel. Jesus saw a man who had great wealth. But he wasn’t concerned about anything other than the man’s heart. The rich man, like Naaman, thought he could earn God’s favor. Jesus had to expose his sin and make room for the heart to understand God’s gift of free salvation.

Gehazi did more than jeopardize Naaman’s faith. He jeopardized his own faith. You might not be chasing down Naaman’s chariot for wealth but what does your heart chase after? Is it your child’s education? Your perfect vacation? Your career growth? Could you ever end up with your heart so fixated on these things that your child’s spiritual education suffers, and your perfect home in heaven isn’t your heart’s goal? Why is it so important that your heart be set on sharing the grace of God above all other things? If your number one priority is not sharing the grace of God, it will become something else. For Gehazi it became chasing after his dream of personal wealth. Perhaps he could finally buy that apple gadget he’s always wanted. He could get that dream cabin or boat. What about your priority?

Elisha showed the seriousness of tossing aside the grace of God for personal gain: the leprosy of Naaman would cling to Gehazi forever. It’s no small thing to spurn the grace of God. It’s no small thing to rob it from others. No small thing to let our hearts put the gift of membership in God’s in the trash. God’s grace is too great a treasure to compromise.

Like Naaman we are born with a false theology absent of grace. But God has taught us to know his grace. Naaman couldn’t pay a thing for his healing. Nor can we pay a thing to reimburse God for our cleansing and washing in the waters of baptism. With a single pouring of water and the name of our Triune God, we were washed. The promise is that we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. He has taken our sins away. He has made us members of his kingdom.

God has put faith in our hearts to declare “there is no other God, but the Lord.” And the Lord showed us his great grace as he paid the price for our sins. He poured out his life on the cross to cover our greed. It was a bloody mess. But it covered ours. His blood atoned for every wrong and every evil deed. We are absolutely clean through faith in him.

All this without asking anything in return. Jesus does demand his people meet a certain level of holiness. He let the thief on the cross go free. He lets us go free. He does it all for free. He tells us that far greater than gold or jewels we have an eternal inheritance that will never fade –kept in heaven for us! The price of admission? Already covered by Jesus. He paid for it all on the cross. In fact, we can’t pay anything for this gift. It is absolutely free.

God’s church can be messy. It can get muddled up by the times money becomes the goal instead of sharing the free gift of salvation. Thank God his gifts are free. It’s a messy church, but we have a clean salvation. Share the boundless riches of the love of Christ Jesus –the God whose rescue is absolutely free. Amen.