

2 KINGS 5:14–27. (EHV)

So he went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. Then his flesh was restored like the flesh of a small child, and he was clean. Then he and his whole escort went back to the man of God. He stood in front of Elisha and said, “To be sure, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Now accept a gift from your servant.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives, in whose presence I stand, I will not take anything.” Even though Na'aman urged him to accept something, he refused. Then Na'aman said, “If you do not want anything, please give me, your servant, as much dirt as two donkeys can carry, for your servant will never again burn incense or sacrifice to other gods, but only to the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant this one thing: When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to bow down there and he supports himself on my arm, then I too have to bow down in the house of Rimmon. When I bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant this one thing.” Then Elisha said to him, “Go in peace.” When Na'aman had gone some distance from him, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, “My master was too easy on this Aramean, Na'aman, when he did not accept anything that he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.” So Gehazi chased after Na'aman. When Na'aman saw him running after him, he got down from his chariot to meet him. He said, “Is everything all right?” Then Gehazi said, “Yes, everything is all right. My master sent me to say, ‘Look, just now two young men from the hill country of Ephraim, from the sons of the prophets, have come to me. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’” Na'aman said, “Certainly! Take two talents!” He urged Gehazi and tied up the two talents of silver in two bags with the two sets of clothing. Then Na'aman gave them to his two servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. When he came to the hill, he took the gifts from them. Then he hid them in the house and sent the men back, so they left. Then he went in and attended his master. Elisha said to him, “Where were you, Gehazi?” Gehazi said, “Your servant didn't go anywhere.” Then Elisha said to him, “Didn't my heart go along when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take silver, or to accept clothing or olive groves or vineyards or sheep or cattle or male and female servants? Na'aman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went out from his presence, leprous like snow.

We are a nation perhaps more blessed with material possessions than any before it, so much so that a certain amount of material possessions—more than just food, clothing, and shelter—is almost considered our right. Imagine if universities across our country said that students could no longer have televisions in their dorm rooms. There would be shock and outrage. Our synod's own college of ministry, Martin Luther College (MLC) in New Ulm, Minnesota, built a field house a few years ago at considerable expense. One of the reasons they spent that money is because there were some high school graduates interested in attending MLC...until they visited MLC. Some students weren't even willing to enroll at our college, and thus were not willing to consider studying for the public ministry of the gospel, unless our college had certain facilities

and amenities that they considered standard on a college campus—another sign of our nation’s wealth. Such material wealth is certainly a blessing from God. But we humans are always taking God’s blessings and perverting them for our own selfish purposes and uses, and his blessing of material possessions is no exception.

This morning, by looking at the account of Na'aman, Elisha, and Gehazi, we want to see the right attitude and the wrong attitude to have toward material possessions.

1. Right Attitude

If you’re not familiar with the story of Na'aman, it takes place in the 840s BC. Na'aman was the commander of the army of the king of Aram, Israel’s neighbor to the northeast. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. This may not have been what we call leprosy today, but it was some serious, and probably contagious, skin disease. His wife had an Israelite servant girl whom Na'aman had captured during one of his previous campaigns, and she told Na'aman’s wife that there was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel who could cure Na'aman of his leprosy.

Eventually Na'aman found out that the prophet was Elisha, the successor of Elijah, and he found out where Elisha lived. When he paid Elisha a visit, Elisha sent a messenger to Na'aman to tell him to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River and his flesh would be restored. Initially Na'aman was disgusted by the simplicity of Elisha’s instructions. He was expecting something fancier than that, some waving of the hands and some abracadabra. At the very least, he thought the rivers of Damascus in his home country were far superior to the Jordan River. So he turned and went off in a rage.

But his servants went to him and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he says to you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!” So Na'aman relented and went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, and sure enough, his flesh was restored to youthful health.

That’s where our text picks up. Na'aman is now grateful and returns to Elisha’s house and wants to express his gratitude with some gifts. Now Elisha was certainly entitled to a gift. Under other circumstances, it might have even been advisable to receive a gift. Centuries later, the apostle Paul himself did not take any pay for his missionary work; he worked as a tentmaker on the side. But he was the first to emphasize that it wasn’t because he didn’t have the right to it. More than once he told the congregations he served that those who preach the gospel should be able to make their living from the gospel. Certainly that was true of Elisha too. And the fact that Elisha later mentions silver, clothing, olive groves, vineyards, sheep, cattle, and male and female servants suggests that he had received these as compensation for his work in the past.

But there was a reason that Paul chose not to receive what he had a right to as he did his missionary work, and there was a reason that Elisha refused any gift from Na'aman on this occasion, even though Na'aman insisted. This was Na'aman’s first real encounter with the true God, his first real encounter with the gospel. If Elisha took a gift from Na'aman in the form of material possessions, he would have been doing the same thing the false prophets and priests of Aram would have done, whose primary purpose was to make a living and get as many material possessions as possible. That’s evident from the fact that we later find out that Na'aman had brought all sorts of material possessions along to give away as a “gift” if the Israelite prophet healed him. He figured prophets were tradesmen just like everyone else.

But Elisha recognized that material possessions were not an end in themselves, but were a means to the end of glorifying the one true God. And in this case, that meant distinguishing himself from any other so-called holy men Na'aman might have met before. The one true God gives his gifts freely, out of grace, for the sake of the Messiah, and so Elisha wanted to impress that upon Na'aman by not receiving anything for his ministry to him.

And Elisha's actions did impress the uniqueness of Israel's God upon Na'aman. Before he left, Na'aman told Elisha that he would never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any god but the LORD, the one true God.

Elisha had the right attitude toward material possessions. They were not the be-all and end-all of life for him. They were yet another avenue for glorifying God, and for bearing witness to him and his grace to others.

2. Wrong Attitude

Elisha's servant Gehazi, however, did not have that same attitude. After Na'aman had traveled some distance, Gehazi said to himself, "My master has been too easy on this foreigner. As surely as the Lord lives, I'll at least get something from him myself."

But Na'aman had already seen Elisha's character, so Gehazi had to figure out how to convince Na'aman to hand over the gift he had intended to give. He came up with a pretty clever plan. First, he made sure that when Na'aman saw him coming after him, he would see him running, huffing and puffing. That would give the impression of an urgent or emergency situation. Second, he had a plausible yarn to tell:

"Is everything all right?" Naaman asked.

"Everything is all right," Gehazi answered, no doubt panting. "My master sent me to say, 'Look, just now two young men from the hill country of Ephraim, from the sons of the prophets, have come to me. Please give them a talent of silver'—about seventy-five pounds—"and two sets of clothing."

Gehazi's scheme worked. "Certainly! Take two talents!"—about one hundred and fifty pounds—Na'aman replied. Na'aman even had to send two of his servants along to help carry everything he had given Gehazi. When they got to Elisha's house, Gehazi took the things inside and set them somewhere safe. He also sent the men back to Na'aman.

Gehazi had the opposite attitude toward material possessions that Elisha had. Gehazi had the wrong attitude toward materials possessions. His attitude was: Get as much as you can while you can. If you have an opportunity to get more, seize it without any questions or having any scruples about how you're getting it. Even it means bending God's laws of morality a bit, as long as you can justify it to yourself, go for it.

What God thinks about that attitude toward materials possessions is clear from how the story ends. When Gehazi went back in to stand before his master Elisha and to wait on him, Elisha asked where he had been. "Your servant didn't go anywhere," Gehazi answered.

But Elisha said to him, "Didn't my heart go along when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take silver, or to accept clothing or olive groves or vineyards or sheep or cattle or male and female servants? Na'aman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." And Gehazi went out from Elisha's presence with his skin leprous like snow.

God's temporal and eternal judgment meets with those who view material possessions greedily, as the ultimate source of happiness, as their god.

If you recognize that your heart has too often been more like Gehazi's rather than like Elisha's, it is not too late. Repent of your sin and turn to the God who does give and forgive freely, out of grace, for the sake of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, just as he did for Na'aman. And in the peace of that full and free forgiveness, take a fresh look at how you've been accumulating and using your material possessions. Consider how, as a redeemed and elect child of God, you can glorify God and bear witness to his salvation in Christ to those around you using the material possessions he has given you.

God grant us hearts that are fully devoted only to him in love, for Jesus's sake. Amen.