

Voluntary, No Manipulation

By Bob Vincent

Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9; 2 Kings 5

Preached on: Sunday, October 21, 2007

Grace Presbyterian Church

4900 Jackson Street

Alexandria, LA 71303-2509

Website: <http://www.rbvincent.com>

Online Sermons: <http://www.sermonaudio.com/rbvincent>

As we think about this principle of giving that is mentioned here in 2 Corinthians chapter eight, I want you to notice the very last sentence found in verse three, where he begins there in verse three, where he says, “Entirely on their own.”¹ That’s a fundamental truth about giving: “Entirely on their own.” What does that mean? That means a freewill offering. What is a freewill offering? It doesn’t mean that God doesn’t have anything to do with moving your will. Of course God moves our will. And without God’s Spirit working in our hearts, we never do choose to do what we ought to do. So we are not thinking of freewill in that sense. We are not thinking about freewill in the sense that human beings are not impacted radically by sin. But what we mean by freewill here is that no human being manipulates us or pressures us to give.

And I think that is a profound principle, and it has some real implications. He says:

Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.²

If you turn over to the next page and see 2 Corinthians chapter eight verse 12, you see this again: “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.”³ What is he saying? He is saying that if you are poor, and you can only afford to put a dollar in the collection plate, that is as important and valued by God as the \$10,000 gift from someone who can afford to give it. And, of course, we have seen that principle already when Jesus comments on the widow who put in her mite. And he said, “She has given more than all of these people because those people out of their wealth put in, but she, out of her poverty, all that she gave.”⁴

This is an important truth, and I believe it is very important for the Church of Jesus Christ to stress this truth that you are of value, whomever you are, when you give to God.

Sadly, the world values people on the basis of what they can do for other people. The world values you on the basis of what you can do for the world. God forbid that the

¹ 2 Corinthians 8:3 (All Scripture references are from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise indicated).

² 2 Corinthians 8:3-4

³ 2 Corinthians 8:12

⁴ See Mark 12:43-44; Luke 21:3-4

Church gets into that position. God wants the Church to value you the way God values you.

Never forget that a little boy who had five barley loaves and two fish gave it to Jesus, five barley loaves and two fish. I mean that is not much. And yet in the hands of Jesus, those five barley loaves and two fish ended up feeding 5000 men, plus women, plus children. And so the important thing is not how much you give, but, again, it is that you give voluntarily, that you give it to the Lord. In God's hands a relatively trivial amount can have a profound impact and can change the world. Who would have ever thought that a little boy's lunch, freely given to Jesus, would end up feeding so many thousands of people. And the amazing truth is this: through the feeding of those 5000 men, plus women, plus children, thousands of people were impacted. Through that miracle, not only did people have a physical need met, but through that miracle many people came to Jesus and put their trust in him. So never look at yourself and say, "I don't have anything to give." You give of your heart. You give freely, and God accepts what you give, not based on the fact that you may be wealthy or poor, but on the fact that it is given freely to God.

"If the willingness is there," verse 12, "the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have."⁵

And that principle is spelled out, I think, by Jesus slightly differently over in the gospel of Matthew, if you would turn there with me for a moment; Matthew chapter six. Here is a biblical truth, Matthew chapter six, starting at verse one—page 1503. If giving is going to be voluntary, then it has to follow this principle—Matthew chapter six, verse one.

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.⁶

You know, I have said before, I will say it again. I make it my practice not to know who gives what in this church. I don't want to know what you give. Why do I not want to know that? Because, see, I am a crook at heart, and I am going to elaborate on the fact that I am a crook at heart in a few minutes. Hold on.

It's not totally tongue in cheek, though. But the fact of the matter is that money can turn my eye. Money can turn my head. I am susceptible to the pull of money. I don't want to know what you give. I want to treat each of you the same. I want to treat each of you as Christ would treat you, and that means I want to treat the widow who throws in the two

⁵ 2 Corinthians 8:12

⁶ Matthew 6:1-4

mites, and it is all she has got, I want to treat her the way Christ spoke of her, as a person who goes down in history as an incredibly great giver.

But that that worldly aspect of money, I would be lying if I said that it doesn't have any effect on me. In other words, I, too, have to deal with the love of money which the Bible says is the root of all kinds of evil.⁷ Not money, but the love of money. Do I have to deal with the love of money? You bet your life I do. And we all do.

So Jesus gives a principle here, and it is this. "Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."⁸ Why? Because the world goes after the big givers. The world goes after the people who are able to do something for it. So Jesus says, "Let it be in secret."

Now, that brings us to a fundamental principle. If giving is to be voluntary, then those who receive money in the name of the Lord have to exhibit exemplary honesty. Turn with me, if you will, back to 2 Corinthians chapter eight, 2 Corinthians chapter eight, and we see this principle; 2 Corinthians eight. If giving is to be strictly a voluntary thing, it is going to have to be secretive, but we see this other principle here that is so important; 2 Corinthians chapter eight, and let's start there at verse 18—page 1802. And there Paul is talking about the fact that the Church in Corinth has raised money, as they had committed themselves to do the year before, to help the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And now he is laying out some principles about how that money was to be handled. Look at it. He says in verse 18.

And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.⁹

Now, you see what he is talking about here. He is saying that he, Paul, along with Titus and others are taking this gift that was generously given by the churches in Macedonia and now the churches in Achaia, or what we would call Greece, and so he is sensitive that no one would look and say, "Hmm. Paul is not honest."

And so notice one of the principles, a principle of accountability. Notice verse 19, "What is more, he was chosen by the churches."¹⁰ Those churches looked out among their members and selected someone that they, of their own number, that they trusted to be honest and intelligent with money.

You know, there are a lot of people who are honest with money, but not intelligent. And I am often sensitive to that and try to make myself more intelligent about money, as I have severed on various boards over the years because I have served on boards that are not church boards, and what happens is that if you serve on a board of a charitable or-

⁷ See 1 Timothy 6:10

⁸ See Matthew 6:3

⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:18-19

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 8:19

ganization, you generally will get a financial statement at your monthly board meeting, and you start looking over it. And for years I really wasn't interested. But I realized if I am a board member, I need to make myself interested, and I need to make myself learn what those numbers mean. Why? Because people depend on the board of organizations to look over the numbers and to make sure somebody is not embezzling funds.

Now, I realize people who are very clever can hide that effectively, but still it is an important thing. And what I want you to see is, in verse 19, this principle that the churches themselves elected one of their own, one of their own people, to go with Paul and Titus. Why? Now notice the next principle.

He says in verse 20, "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift."¹¹ Verse 21, "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men."¹² Scandals arise because men are not careful in how they conduct themselves. Not everything is scandalous. Not everything that is scandalous is due to human sin. Sometimes what is scandalous is due to human carelessness.

Think about it for a moment. When my wife was a little girl in that post World War II church boom that went across America, her family were members of a very fast growing church in Jacksonville, Florida. And part of the means of that church's growth involved visiting people. Whenever you visited that church, you were going to get a visit. In fact, many people would get turned off with that.

By the way, here, if you want a visit, you need to let us know. We are not going to try to harass you, and I realize that comes across as different, but it is just some people, just are nervous, you know, they... "What does he want?" So if you want a visit, let us know. We will come.

But anyhow in that church they visited folks, and this is what happened. On visitation night the members of the church returned to the church to find their pastor slumped over the wheel of his car. He had been shot dead. Why was he shot dead? He was shot dead because a husband believed that this man was messing with his wife. Was he messing with his wife? Well, the people who were loyal to that pastor were adamant in saying, "No," that it was a man jumping to a false conclusion. But not everybody in the church felt that way. In fact, Sandy's daddy believed that he probably was messing with the guy's wife, and Sandy's momma believed that he wasn't.

The point is what? The point is not whether that preacher was messing with somebody's wife or not. The point is that that preacher, perhaps, was careless and not being sensitive to his reputation. And you see what Paul is concerned about here in verse 20. He says, "We want to avoid any criticism."¹³ And then he says in verse 21, "We are taking pains to do what is right not only in the eyes of the Lord, but in the eyes of men."

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 8:20

¹² 2 Corinthians 8:21

¹³ 2 Corinthians 8:20

Pray for me to have more paranoia. And, see, I already confessed that I am a thief at heart. Now I am asking you to pray for me to have more paranoia? What do I mean?

I will explain the thief thing in a moment. By praying for more paranoia, what I mean is this: paranoia, in a certain sense, is simply an awareness of what people think, carried to a bizarre extreme. Paranoia is an awareness of what people think, carried to a bizarre extreme.

In other words, I am not asking you to pray that I become aware of what other people think and carry that to a bizarre extreme like....there is a camera back here. Oh, there isn't camera back there, but you get the idea.

I think of the old Simon and Garfunkel song, we have "All gone to look for America"—"Be careful, his bowtie is really a camera." I am not talking about that. But what I am talking about is a sensitivity to how our actions look to other people. And let me tell you two areas that will take a pastor down really fast: one is sex and one is money. And I will tell you about sex and money. And I will tell you about sex and money in preachers. A preacher doesn't have to be a crook to be taken down by money and a preacher does not have to be immoral to be taken down by sex. All that has to happen is this: that the reputation gets out there that the guy is a skirt chaser. Once that reputation is out there, that the minister is a skirt chaser, his reputation is ruined. And once the reputation is out there, that the pastor is a crook, that he is dishonest in dealing with people's money, his reputation is ruined.

And I am going to say this. As a pastor I can say this. The only thing that a pastor really has to commend himself is his own integrity. Now, I am not talking about how I get to heaven. I don't get to heaven by my integrity. I get to heaven based on what Jesus has done for me on the cross. There is no other hope that I have got but Jesus' blood and righteousness. You know, "all other ground is sinking sand." "On Christ the solid Rock, I stand."

But in terms of the work of the ministry, a minister has got to be above reproach. He has got to be above suspicion. And in order to be above suspicion, let me suggest that a minister has to have a suspicious mind about himself and how other people look at him. I need to think carefully. It has been a long time, but I am very sensitive about visiting ladies in their homes by myself. I can remember many years ago calling on a lady and invited in and sitting down, and her husband arrived a little after I got there. I felt awkward. Why did I feel awkward? Do you know why I felt awkward? I picked up immediately that that husband was uncomfortable with the fact that I was in his home sitting there talking to his wife. There is nothing wrong. I didn't do anything wrong, but that husband was uncomfortable with the fact that I was sitting there talking to his wife when he got home. That was years ago.

I try to make it my practice that I always take my wife or another officer with me in the church, when I call on people whom I know are ladies going to be home by themselves. And if I happen to be by myself and calling, I am very careful. Have I lived up to this

idea 100%? No, I have not. But it is my ideal. Sometimes it is raining, and you have got to drop something off or something, but my pattern is: knock on the door. If the husband is not at home, talk on the doorstep, don't go in.

And, again, it is what? It is a sensitivity. It is a sensitivity in terms of how other people are going to look, how they are going to think. I don't want people to drive up to the parking lot of Grace Presbyterian Church one night and discover me slumped over the car because a husband misunderstood my intentions.

And so Saint Paul is saying this is important for the Church. Verse 20. "We want to avoid any criticism."¹⁴ He says, "We are taking pains to do what is right."¹⁵

And let me say this about giving. You have the right to know how your money is used. At this church, you can come here on Monday morning, and you can see Miss Robertson, and you can ask her and say, "I would like to see the record of the receipts and disbursements." And she will give that to you. That is your right to see that.

Now, if you ask to see the record of who is giving what, she won't give that to you. That is none of your business, who gives what. We want to follow that Matthew six thing, "Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."¹⁶

But it is your right to know how much money is received and where it goes. That is your right. And so, again, it is this sensitivity. He says, "We want to avoid any criticism."¹⁷ And part of that is accountability. People who are walking in integrity and honesty have nothing to fear with accountability.

Again, verse 19: "What is more, he was chosen by the churches."¹⁸ Well, let me say the problem is that there are con artists in the world, and centuries, indeed, millennia ago some con artists discovered that religion was the best con in town.

Now, I am not against pastors receiving compensation. In Deuteronomy chapter 25 and verse four, Moses writes that we are not to muzzle an ox.¹⁹ And Saint Paul comments on that passage in two passages of Scripture, very quickly, because I don't want to focus on this, but it is just by way of contrast. Turn with me to page 1849—1 Timothy chapter five and look at verse 17, 1 Timothy chapter five, verse 17. "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching."²⁰ Look at verse 18; he quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4: "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'"²¹ So, what he is saying there is, it is totally legitimate to pay a

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 8:20

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 8:21

¹⁶ See Matthew 6:3

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 8:20

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:19

¹⁹ See Deuteronomy 25:4

²⁰ 1 Timothy 5:18

²¹ 1 Timothy 5:19

minister. It is totally legitimate to find someone who can spend his time studying the Scripture and teaching the Scripture in order for that person to go about doing the work of the ministry. That is legitimate.

But turn over to another passage of Scripture, 1 Corinthians chapter nine, 1 Corinthians chapter nine, and look here starting at verse seven, 1 Corinthians 9:17—page 1781—we find, again, the principle that it is totally legitimate for a pastor of a church to receive financial remuneration for what he does. But there is a zinger on the end of it. Look at verse seven. “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?”²² Page 1781.

Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses:²³

And he quotes, again, Deuteronomy 25:4.

“Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it [also]?²⁴

So now Saint Paul is saying something. He is saying, “Look. It is legitimate that you pay me money to do the work of the ministry. Notice again how he expresses it in verse 11. “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?”²⁵

But now I want you to notice in verse 12, the next sentence in verse 12, next paragraph. “But we did not use this right.”²⁶ And I think that is an important principle. Though a minister is entitled to financial remuneration, it is important that a minister understands that while that may be his right, it is not always what he ought to do. In the case of Saint Paul, he turned down receiving any money from the Church at Corinth. Why? He did not want to give people the wrong impression. And what is that impression?

Well, the fact of the matter is we often project onto other people what is in our own hearts. Corinth was the New Orleans of the ancient world in Greece. It was a seaport town, and port cities often have things going on that don't go on widespread in other places. And one of the things that goes on in a seaport is that people are defrauded of

²² 1 Corinthians 9:7

²³ 1 Corinthians 9:7-9

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:9-12

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:11

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:12

cash. And so Saint Paul, though he had the right to receive compensation from the churches in Corinth, refused any of their money. Look again, what he says, “But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.”²⁷

Now, I said a few minutes ago that I was a thief. Now, I am not a thief in the sense that I go out and steal. But what I mean by that is that the seeds of thievery are in me. And if you are honest about yourself, you will say, “Well, the seeds of thievery are in me.” In other words, none of us is 100%, absolutely, totally free from the love of money. Do I believe that I am an honest man when it comes to money? I believe that I am. I believe that I have struggled with many sins in my life, but stealing other people’s money is one that I have not struggled with.

And I remember one reason why. When I was three years old, my next door neighbors had a little girl the same age that I was, named Lucille. And Lucille and I were friends, and she would come to my house, and I would go to her house, and I was three or four. I was living in Florence, South Carolina. And one day, let’s see, the other thing I did to this family was to put their cat in the deep freeze, and people were looking and looking for that cat, and I remember this. I still remember my mother opening the lid on the deep freeze because I learned they were looking for the cat.

“Where is the cat? Where is the cat?”

And I said, “I know where the cat is.”

And they said, “Where?”

“Well, it’s in our deep freeze.”

“Well, why?”

“Well, the cat was panting. I thought he was hot.”

I think he was panting because I had him, and cats often panic when little three year old children have them in a Vulcan death grip.

And the cat was fine. It was shaking a bit, but he got over it, and he never came to the Vincent home again.

But one of the other things that I did to Lucille’s house was one day, I helped myself not to their cat, but to their pig, their piggy bank, and I took the piggy bank over to my house, and my mother found it, and she said, “Robert, where did you get this?”

²⁷ Ibid.

And I finally ‘fessed up. Now, my mother should have been arrested for child abuse for this. I am telling you. My mother made me walk from our house across our yard, across their yard, and ring their doorbell, carrying the piggy bank and confess my thievery.

I will never forget it.

And I will say this. And I don’t know. This is not defending child abuse, but I have never really been tempted to steal money since then. Now, again, I didn’t say that I am not pulled by the love of money. I said that I have not really been tempted to steal money since then. That made a profound impression on me. But I am not totally free from the love of money, and if I said that I were free, totally of the love of money, I would be lying. I like money. I like that Tom T. Hall song, “More Money.”

We all would like more money, I think. And it is that awareness; it is what I am saying about the thief inside. It’s there, that potential, that potential to be careless with other people’s money, is why the apostle Paul went to great pains to do what? Well, to have accountability and to maintain integrity, but also to do what? To give it up.

I asked someone one time; I said, “How do you deal with the love of money when you begin to earn a lot of money?” And this person said to me, “The only way to do it is to give a lot of it away, very regularly.”

And I am struck with that, and I see that principle in 1 Corinthians chapter nine and in verse 12, where he says, “But on the contrary we did not use this right.”²⁸ That is a way of dealing with love of money.

Or you could turn over to 2 Corinthians again, and we are almost done, but 2 Corinthians chapter 11. And that is one of those preacher lies, by the way, “We are almost done.”

“Oh, those are white lies.”

No, they are preacher lies. They have to do with time. And preachers, all preachers...did you hear about, by the way, as you are turning to page 1805 and 2 Corinthians chapter 11, and we are going to look at verse seven. Did you hear about the two little boys? There was a boy that went with his friend to a church that was highly liturgical. And in that highly liturgical church, the one little boy is constantly asking the other little boy, said, “Well, what does that mean?” The officiant was doing this, and then people were kneeling together, and then they were doing this. And at a point a bell was rung, and this was done, and incense was lit and, “What does that mean? What does that mean?”

And he learned all what it meant. And so the next Sunday, the boy that came from highly liturgical church, went to the church that was...had a preacher sort of like me. And so things seemed to be kind of self explanatory the whole point, but midway through the service, the officiant did this: he took his watch off. And so the boy from the highly liturgical church said, “Well, what does that mean?”

²⁸ See 1 Corinthians 9:12

And the other boy said, “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

2 Corinthians chapter 11, verse seven.

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.²⁹

What’s he saying? He is saying here that it is legitimate for a person who gives himself full time to Christian ministry to receive compensation, but he is also saying that that person must always be sensitive to the impact of receiving compensation. In other words, Paul received financial support from the churches of Macedonia in order to preach the gospel freely in Corinth and not to ask those people for support.

What is the principle? I believe the principle is this. God wants your giving and my giving to be voluntary. What God really wants from you is your heart. And what the apostle Paul is keenly aware of is a principle that I mentioned in the announcements when I said that the church that we visited on Friday and Saturday in Memphis, that that church was giving its auditorium, free of charge, to five public schools, the five that accepted the offer, to hold their high school graduation there.

Why did they do that? Well, one of the reasons they did it was to say the church comes with a hand out, not asking for help, but giving help. And that is important. What Paul was trying to get across to the Christians at Corinth was, “We exist to serve you. We don’t exist for you to serve us.”

Now, the people in Achaia had grown in their faith and had grown in their sense of understanding to the point that they wanted to have part in Paul’s ministry, when he went to other cities to share Christ. And Paul accepted those gifts. But the point I want to make again is, realizing that that love of money is something that all of us have, to some degree and never are completely free from, a pastor, in particular a full time Christian worker, has got to be sensitive that most of the time, it is important to turn down money.

I’ll say that again. Realizing human nature and realizing the fact that all of us have some pull with the love of money, those in Christian work must have a sensitivity that—perhaps the word “most” is not right—but that you should refuse money, unless the Holy Spirit leads you to accept it. I can stand by that, rather than “most” or “many.” You should refuse gifts, unless the Holy Spirit leads you to accept them.

I want to turn, and this is my last chapter. 2 Corinthians, chapter five, I think, illustrates this principle; 2 Kings five—page 576. This is an amazing Bible story. “Now Naaman,” verse one, “was commander of the army of the king of Aram.”³⁰ That’s ancient Syria.

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:7-8

³⁰ 2 Kings 5:1

“He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.”³¹

Now, this is the background. You have to understand that in those days Syria was the great enemy of Israel. Syria was the great enemy of Israel, and you have to understand that Naaman is the equivalent of the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff. And so he is a very important person. And you have to understand that Naaman is a great enemy of the people of God, a great enemy of the Israelites. And that is a very important part of this story. And then you have to have to see that he has hurt the Israelites terribly and has even taken captive people because you read in the next verse there, verse two:

Now bands from Aram [that is from Syria] had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."³²

(Off-mic voice)

Oh, I’m sorry. I made a mistake . . . which I freely do admit . . . I do those things. 2 Kings five. I’m sorry. 2 Kings five—page 576. And thank you for calling that to my attention because I would have gone on with whatever 3 Hezekiah or something I had you all on. 2 Kings five.

And so this is the background of the story, and it is a true story; it really happened this way. So here is this man who is a great enemy of God’s people. He has leprosy. And they kidnapped this girl from Israel and she is serving as a little maid in his home serving his wife. And this man’s great shame is that he is leprous, which is the horrible disease in Old Testament times. And so she, the little Israelite girl, tells the Syrian woman, “Your husband needs to go see the prophet of God in Samaria.”

Well, naturally, he wants to get healed, and so he goes to the king and sends word to the king of Syria. The king of Syria, who is much stronger militarily than the king of Israel at this point, sends word with a delegation, along with his commander of all his forces separately, “I want you to heal this man of leprosy.”

Well, the king of Israel is just beside himself. “He is picking a fight with me. Nobody can do that. Nobody can heal somebody of leprosy.” And finally the word gets to him because Elisha sends word to the king of Israel, “Send him to me.”

So here is this very, very important man and he arrives and he comes to Elisha to be healed, and here is what we read here in verse nine, 2 Kings 5:9—page 597.

So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself

³¹ Ibid.

³² 2 Kings 5:2-3

seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?” So he turned and went off in a rage.³³

Now, you want to understand something. This man had a problem that was more serious than leprosy. What was the problem that was more serious than leprosy? It was his arrogance. It was his pride. You see, he had earned the right to be who he was by his own hard work, by his military prowess, by his military stratagems. He had risen through the ranks. He is an important man. And he is used to people bowing and scraping.

And the Holy Spirit led the prophet of God to deal with him in a way that was insulting. The prophet of God was led by the Holy Spirit to deal with Naaman in a way that was insulting to Naaman. He expected that Elisha would come out and bow and scrape and show all kinds of deference to him.

It goes back to that principle of giving, doesn’t it? The really wealthy people, often times in this world, they expect to be pandered to and catered to. “You sit here in this seat of honor.”

But to the poor man, “You sit over there on the floor.”

James warns about that. They even had trouble with that in the early Church. James said, “Don’t do that.” Don’t say to the rich man, “You sit in this place of honor,” and to the poor man, “You sit there on the floor.”³⁴ You deal with people with dignity—every one. You treat them alike.

So Naaman is there and he is thinking, “Well, he is going to come out, and he is going to bow and scrape.” And he doesn’t even stand up. He doesn’t even come out of house. He doesn’t even greet him. In other words, he is kind of rude to him, and he just sends word. He said, “Go tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan River.” And he is incensed. He is just in rage. “I can’t believe this. What in the world is this? What in the world is this?”

But one of his servants says, “My father, if he asked you to do some spectacular feat wouldn’t you do it? Why don’t you do it? Why don’t you try it?”

Do you understand that there is a message of grace here? The rich people need to hear the message of grace and poor people need to hear the message of grace. It is nothing that Naaman can do to heal himself. It is something that God sovereignly has to do. And you

³³ 2 Kings 5:9-12

³⁴ See James 2:1-7

have got to come to that point where you give up trying to fix yourself and you just submit to the Lord.

So finally one his servants says, “Won’t you do that?”

“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 tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’?” So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, [verse 14] as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.³⁵

But I want to tell you. What the Bible doesn’t tell you explicitly here, it tells you implicitly. He got something else when he went under the water. What he got when he went under the water was not just getting cleansed of a body disease. He got a new heart. And what is implicit in the passage is this: he got a new heart because immediately he goes back to Elisha. And this time he comes as a humble man and he comes as a man of gratitude. He doesn’t come trying to buy his way. He comes to give thanks to God. He doesn’t come trying to get from God. He comes to want to give to God freely and spontaneously. He is just grateful.

And look at what he says, what it says here, verse 15, “Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant.’”³⁶

I want you to see the moment. It is so profound. Here is an enemy of God. Here is a man who has wreaked havoc on the people of God. Here is a Syrian general. Here is a brute. Here is a man who has tyrannized the people of God. Here is a tyrant. Here is a man who has kidnapped people, all these things. And God demonstrates to him his amazing grace. God takes Nazi generals like this Naaman character, I mean, I guess that is what you would call him, wouldn’t you? He was an anti-Semite. He hated the Jewish people. He kidnapped Jewish girls to make them maids in his home.

God takes this man, with all of his record of wrongdoing and sins, and he deals with him in grace, and he not only washes away his bodily disease, which had great opprobrium in the ancient world, but he gives him a new heart. And when this man comes out of the water, he confesses, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant.”³⁷

Now I want you to see Elijah’s response because it goes to the heart of what we are talking about today. The message of the gospel which is grace alone, received through faith alone, can never be compromised so that people get the wrong idea.

³⁵ 2 Kings 5:13-14

³⁶ 2 Kings 5:15

³⁷ Ibid.

Verse 16. “The prophet answered, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.’”³⁸

And even though Naaman urged him, he refused. Now this is an important truth. Elisha is sensitive to the gospel. Do you remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians nine? He said, “I have the right to receive financial remuneration from you because those who have sown spiritual seed among you have a right to reap a material harvest.” But he said, “I have not used that right and the reason I have not used that right is for the sake of the gospel.” He said, “I don’t want to get any thing in between you and the gospel of grace. I don’t want to get anything in between you and gospel of grace.”

And I want you to see it profoundly in this case with Elisha and Naaman the general. Naaman has been dealt with in grace. He is dealt with in grace, even in the rudeness of Elisha, because grace first tells you that who you are in this life—being a high mucka-muck doesn’t make you of any account in the eyes of God, that the president of the United States and the whore on the street and the dope dealer and the CEO of the largest corporation in the world, have all got to stand in the same line and take their place, one by one, to come into the door of grace.

Naaman’s standing in the world is of no account with God. What is of account with God, is faith, the response of faith, which is his gift.

So Naaman has bowed, in grace, to the God of grace, and now he is grateful. And this is Elisha’s one and only last shot to deal with this man, and he doesn’t want to lay on him that which is going to hinder him from being all he can be in the Lord. And so he said, “I am not going to accept it. I will accept nothing.”

Verse 17. “If you will not,” and this is one of the most remarkable paragraphs in all Scripture.

“If you will not,” said Naaman, “please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon [a false god] to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.” “Go in peace,” Elisha said.³⁹

I want you to see verse 19, “Go in peace. Go in peace, even though your theology isn’t right. Go in peace, even though you are going to be involved in stupid stuff that is really idolatrous. Go in peace. Go in peace.”

³⁸ 2 Kings 5:16

³⁹ 1 Kings 5:18-19

What is wrong with this guy's theology? This guy's theology is that he believes that there are regional gods and that the God of Israel is only the God of Israel. And so what he wants is two mules load of earth to take back with him to Damascus, so in his back yard he can spread it out and set up a shrine to worship the LORD. He thinks he has got to have Israelite dirt in order to worship the Israelite God.

I want you to know that Elisha doesn't even correct his bad theology. And the other thing is, because of his high position in government, he is going to be involved in some compromise. And Elisha doesn't even stop him there.

I want to say there is a principle here, and the principle is that God doesn't put on new converts more than they can bear. God doesn't put on new converts more than they can bear. He doesn't break "bruised reeds."⁴⁰ This is a bruised reed. This is a man who has just come to faith. This is a man who is a new born Christian, if you will, speaking anachronistically. And God won't put on him more than he can bear. He doesn't sit there and give him an elaborate theological lecture and then an elaborate moral lecture. He realizes this is his one and only shot, and the only thing he wants to leave him with is this. "Yeah, you can worship the LORD in Damascus. Go in peace."

And I want to tell you there is a principle there. And if you want to know something when I say that I don't preach tithing, I am telling you the truth. It is not a gimmick that I say it. It is not in a round about way. It is that I don't want people to be given a card about giving when they come to inquire about Christ. I want you to see that the Church is about reaching out with a hand to lift up people in the time of their need, not about trying to twist their arms to get something out of them. I think that new converts need to grow and mature.

Is tithing good? Yeah. Is it an idea for which people should strive? Yeah. But God isn't interested in us laying on you an obligation to tithe. What God wants you to learn is what? Just to share with others as you are led.

I believe that laying a tithe obligation on new Christians is like saying to Naaman, "Hey, wait a minute, Man. You can't do that. Don't you know that God is God of the whole earth?" And say, "Wait a minute, Man, you can't possibly go into the temple of this false god Rimmon and bow down with your master."

That is not Elisha's response. He says, "Go with God, (שָׁלוֹם) shalom."

Shalom (שָׁלוֹם) is God's prosperity, God's peace, God's blessing, God's good will, God's harmony, and all that.

"Go on, Brother. God bless you, Brother. Go in peace. I am not going to lay more on you than you can bear."

But I want you to see one thing in closing, here in this passage, and it goes back to that

⁴⁰ See Isaiah 42:3, Matthew 12:20

giving principle. And here it is. Gehazi is the bookkeeper, and Gehazi has to write the checks and—I'm embellishing the story—Gehazi sees that Elisha at this point is being so heavenly minded that he is no earthly use.

And we read on, in verse 20: “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.’”⁴¹

You know, the sad thing is that throughout the history of Christianity, there are people in the Church who see that the Church is a tool for self-enrichment. And God help the Church, when people like that get in charge, and Gehazi, at this point, is a warning to all of us. He goes after Naaman. He shakes him down. He makes up a story in order to get the money. Naaman is glad to give him a lot. He gives him a talent of silver, in verse 22, that is, 66 pounds of silver. He asked for a talent. Naaman gives him two talents, gives him clothing and other things. Naaman hides it all away and then returns to see Elisha.

And we see there in verse 25.

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. 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?”⁴²

Look at verse 27. “‘Naaman’s leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants for ever.’ Then Gehazi went from Elisha’s presence and he was leprous, as white as snow.”⁴³

I am going to issue an imprecation:

May God curse every ministry that seeks to put money between people and God. May God send his judgment on every ministry that seeks to extract from people money at the detriment of communicating the gospel, which is a gift by grace alone. But may God bless every ministry, particularly in Central Louisiana, that seeks, first and foremost, to lift up Jesus and share the gospel of grace with people. And may God supply the need of every group of believers who want, before everything else, to lift up Jesus and to serve others with the gospel.

It is the curse of Gehazi.

⁴¹ 2 Kings 5:20

⁴² 2 Kings 5:25-26

⁴³ 2 Kings 5:27

May God deliver us from ever being “Gehazis,” from being those who see an opportunity to enrich ourselves, especially at the cost of the souls of people who are weak and frail and often bruised and when we do so, we break them. God help us not to be that way.

And so the closing word to you is:

May your giving always be voluntary, may it not be coerced, may it never be manipulated, may you give of your own free will, not merely out of duty, but because you want to. And may the doors of this church close the day that we try to twist your arm to give what God is not leading you to give.

In Jesus’ name.

Lord, bless us as we go from this place that we may be people who always lift up Jesus and the gospel that is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And may we communicate to the world that we are here to serve, to wash their feet and not to be served.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

(b)