

Demands
2 Kings 5:1-14
7/3/2016

Think back to the first day of class. You show up in class with butterflies in your stomach, wondering what you are in for. The teacher hands out a syllabus. These are the things that are required of you in order to pass this class.

Your eyes get huge when you find out what you have to do. Can you actually do what is being demanded?

Or consider the hostage situation. The hostage-takers release a list of demands: \$50 million in unmarked bills left in a brown bag in a deserted phone booth. A helicopter fueled and ready to take off. The release of 200 political prisoners.

When presented with these demands, the first question is can we meet these demands? Can we get the money that quickly? Can we get a helicopter where they want it?

I would suggest that most people have similar responses when it comes to what God demands of us. There's something huge at stake – heaven, eternal life. Can I really bite the bullet and sacrifice as much as God demands? The commandments and all those church requirements and rules of morality – can I do all that?

The reading for today suggests a different perspective on God's demands. Naaman is the commander of the army of Aram. Militarily, he's unstoppable – one of the most powerful and feared men in the entire world. But he has leprosy, a horrible wasting disease.

His wife's slave, captured from Israel, suggests a way that he can be cured. Go to the prophet of Israel. Naaman takes the message to the king of Aram, who sends it on to the king of Israel, who in a panic, kicks it over to the prophet Elisha.

Naaman understands that he's in no bargaining position. He expects the price of his cure to be steep. He comes to the prophet with a caravan of horses and chariots, carrying an enormous stash of riches, hoping that he's got enough to satisfy what will be demanded of him.

Elisha, however, surprises him. If you want to be cured, here's what you need to do: wash yourself seven times in the Jordan River.

Naaman's response to this is anger. That's it? Wash in a dirty river? Who does this prophet think he is dealing with? I am the mighty Naaman, destroyer of armies. I don't wash in dirty rivers. There has to be more to saving my life than that piddly little exercise.

Naaman's servants point out the obvious to him. Sir, you came prepared to pay an enormous price for your health. Now the prophet says you can have it for free, if you just wash in the Jordan River. You're going to turn that down? With all due respect, sir, are you out of your mind?

Once Naaman calms down, he sees they are right. He recognizes that the only thing standing between him and a new life is his pride. He washes in the Jordan and is cured. Because he does, he has a whole new life in front of him.

The story makes an important claim about God. What does the Lord require of you? Just one thing: faith. Naaman received new life because a servant girl believed God could give it to him, and she shared that belief. All Naaman had to do to complete the deal was have a little bit of that faith and he would be clean.

Naaman didn't have to pay anything, perform any heroic deeds or sacrifices. All he had to do was wash in the river, which was really nothing more than an act of faith.

So many people insist that God has strict demands. There is a long list of rules and requirements you have to follow if you want to be a Christian, demands you must satisfy before God considers you worthy.

Look again at Naaman. There is no cost for new life in God. No long list of demands. Nothing we have to do to gain access to the fountain of God's healing. All we need is faith that God will give us new life. All we have to do is believe that Jesus is a fountain of healing and that his gifts are given free of charge.

Like Naaman, we have a hard time accepting this. We think there must be a huge price we must pay in behavior, attitude, and lifestyle in exchange for this gift. Again and again, the Bible tells us, no. God gives and gives. Have faith, and healing is yours. New life is yours.

I once read the story of a named Frank Meeink. Meeink was a key player in the Aryan nation skinhead movement. He was living as warped a life as you can ever imagine, filled with violence and hatred of all minorities. Do you know what gave him new life?

Three people: an African American inmate who befriended him when he was lonely in prison; a Hispanic in that same prison who showed him incredible compassion and a Jewish employer who treated him fairly and with dignity.

Each of these people knew of his history as a skinhead. None of them said, if you shape up and change your ways, we can change your life. They simply accepted him as he was and offered God's grace to him. All Frank had to do was accept that, and it changed his life.

He is working for the kingdom now. Not in overt or confrontational ways, but he's working to live the way God wants him to live, according to Micah 6:8: "God has shown you, O people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

That is the syllabus for the kingdom of heaven: now and in the time to come. Amen.

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In today's scripture passage, the Israelites were tempted, just as we are, to forget God's love and concern for all nations. But now a foreign official comes to Elisha, a prophet of Israel, seeking a cure for his skin disease of leprosy.

II Kings 5:1-15

Common English Bible:

Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease. Now Aramean raiding parties had gone out and captured a young girl from the land of Israel. She served Naaman's wife.

She said to her mistress, "I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went and told his master what the young girl from the land of Israel had said.

Then Aram's king said, "Go ahead. I will send a letter to Israel's king."

So Naaman left. He took along ten kikkars of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. He brought the letter to Israel's king. It read, "Along with this letter I'm sending you my servant Naaman so you can cure him of his skin disease."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he ripped his clothes. He said, "What? Am I God to hand out death and life? But this king writes me, asking me to cure someone of his skin disease! You must realize that he wants to start a fight with me."

When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel's king had ripped his clothes, he sent word to the king: "Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he'll know that there's a prophet in Israel."

Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent out a messenger who said, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean."

But Naaman went away in anger. He said, "I thought for sure that he'd come out, stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. Aren't the rivers in Damascus, the Abana

and the Pharpar, better than all Israel's waters? Couldn't I wash in them and get clean?" So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger.

Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.'" So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean.

He returned to the man of God with all his attendants. He came and stood before Elisha, saying, "Now I know for certain that there's no God anywhere on earth except in Israel. Please accept a gift from your servant."

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of this holy word.