

Coveting Has Consequences
2 Kings 5:15-16,19b-27

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

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."

The prophet answered, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

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."

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 his house. He sent the men away and they left. 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 manservants or 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 5:15-16,19b-27)

In the name of our all-knowing Lord, dear friends in Christ,

When you turn on the TV these days, you can't avoid all the campaign commercials. Many of those commercials keep telling us how bad we have it economically. On one side, commercials bemoan how families just can't make ends meet, can't pay for food and gas anymore because of high inflation. On the other side, the ads picture the rich getting richer through tax cuts while the middle class and poor aren't getting their fair share.

What all these commercials are doing is stoking covetous thoughts. Coveting is having sinful desires, wanting what others have but God hasn't given us. We know that God has two commandments telling us not to covet, but it's easy for us to think, "Coveting's not as bad as other sins like murder, adultery, and stealing." But our text today warns us that **Coveting Has Consequences**.

Our text contrasts the prophet Elisha with his servant Gehazi. The Aramean general, Naaman, had just been healed by God from his leprosy when he was told by Elisha to dip seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman was so overjoyed that he promised to worship the LORD God alone, and urged the prophet to accept a large gift. But Elisha refused. He didn't want to leave any impression that he was doing the work of the Lord in order to get paid. False prophets had that kind of motivation. Elisha served the Lord as his prophet, and not "for profit."

But Gehazi, Elisha's servant, thought his master blew a big opportunity. "What are you thinking, Elisha?" Gehazi thought. "We could have made some big bucks—Naaman's rich!" After Naaman had traveled a distance, Gehazi ran up to his chariot to see if he could get something. Gehazi

made up a story about two poor students who needed some money and clothes. It was a lie, but generous Naaman gave him double what Gehazi asked for. Then on the way back Gehazi thought he could hide his actions from Elisha, sending the servants back before they got spotted, and stowing the gifts away in his home. Getting back to Elisha, he pretended like he hadn't gone anywhere—yet another lie he told.

Do you see what Gehazi's coveting led to? More sin. One consequence of coveting is that it leads to more sin. In the epistle of James, we read, "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" (Jas. 1:14,15a). That's exactly what happened with Gehazi: His coveting led to lies, greed, and deception.

That's what happens to us if we continue to covet. How easily we get discontent with our income and the amount of our possessions, and so we may bend the rules a bit, or cheat others to get what we want. Or our envy of another person's popularity and achievements might lead us to gossip about that person, ruin their reputation, and we have a perverse joy in their downfall. Sinful desires beget sinful thoughts and sinful actions. As Jesus also put it, "Out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly" (Mark 7:21,22). The sinful, coveting heart leads to more and more sin.

But it gets worse. James went on to write, "Sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (Jas. 1:15b). Coveting is a fatal condition. The consequence of coveting is eternal punishment.

We see that in the case of Gehazi. How foolish he was to think he could hide his actions from Elisha and from God. After Gehazi insisted, "Your servant didn't go anywhere," Elisha replied, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you?" The Lord led Elisha to see exactly what Gehazi was up to. After pointing out how this was not the time to set hearts on material goods, Elisha issued this judgment: "Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Even as Gehazi left the room, he found his body covered with white blotches on his skin, the disfigurement of leprosy.

We too are reminded in today's epistle reading, Hebrews 4:13, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Coveting is one of those sins we think we can keep hidden from others. But we can't hide it from God who knows and searches our hearts. God will punish us forever if we don't turn from our coveting. We need to repent, have a change of heart, before it's too late and we die eternally for our sins.

We have to admit to God that we are so often more like Gehazi and not Elisha in our text, with hearts that envy, covet, get greedy, and get filled with evil. Like the disciples in the gospel reading, we too exclaim, "Who then can be saved?" (Mark 10:26), because coveting comes so naturally to us. But our Lord Jesus has this answer: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27).

How are we saved from coveting? In Christ alone! Only Jesus had a pure, undivided heart; only Jesus always put his Lord first above his own needs. Consider when the devil tried to get Jesus to covet all the treasures of the world; Jesus didn't bite, but answered, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Matt. 4:8-10). Christ alone forsook all, even his life, and succumbed to death on a cross to bear our sins, including our covetous thoughts. In Christ alone our hearts are cleansed, our sins atoned for, and our lives saved. In Christ alone we shall not die, but live forever.

Let us then "hold firmly to the faith that we profess," in the words of Hebrews 4:14, and serve our Lord as Elisha did, not with coveting, but with contentment and confidence, knowing that our Lord will provide for all our needs. Amen.