

Catching Golden Apples

Elisha: Living the Impossible Life – Part V

II Kings 5:15-27

Introduction

I have always been fascinated with Greek fables. I am sure that everyone has read some of *Aesop's Fables*.

Aesop was a Greek writer who supposedly lived six hundred years before Christ. He acquired a great reputation as a teller of fables or legends.

Aristotle even described the brilliance of Aesop's stories as he recounted how Aesop had defended a corrupt politician in a court of law. His defense was simply the telling of a fable about a fox.

"A certain fox," Aesop said, "was troubled by fleas, and other animals asked if they could help remove them."

The fox replied, "No, these fleas are full and can no longer take my blood. If you killed them, new, hungry fleas will come."

"So, gentlemen of the jury," Aesop concluded, "if you put my wealthy client to death, others will only come along who are not yet rich, and will rob you completely."

Aesop's client went free.

The fact that I told this fable at the same time the primary elections are underway is just an amazing coincidence!

There is also the interesting legend of a beautiful woman named Atlanta, and her hopeful suitor named Hippomenes. Atlanta was the fastest runner in her Greek city state. She decided to challenge all suitors to a race, but with one condition. She would marry

the man who won a footrace against her, but all who lost would be put to death. A number of men accepted the challenge and, one after another, lost the race and their lives.

Then, along came a crafty man named Hippomenes, who accepted the challenge. Before entering the footrace against Atlanta, however, he hid three apples made of solid gold, inside his pockets. When the race began, Atlanta began to outdistance him fairly easily. He took out a golden apple and tossed it in front of her. The glitter of the gold caught her eye and, as she stopped to pick it up, he shot past her. She quickly recovered and again, outdistanced him. Another golden apple rolled off the track ahead of her. She stopped to pick it up, allowing Hippomenes again to sweep past her. The goal was near and he was ahead, but once more she overtook him. Sensing that this was his last chance, he rolled the third apple in front of her and, while she wavered between the goal and greed, Hippomenes swept past her and won the race.

The legend says that they were married and lived happily ever after. I seriously doubt that, however!

Atlanta was caught off guard. She stepped off the track and lost the race because of the glitter of the gold.

A New Testament Caution

Some of the strongest warnings in the New Testament occur in a letter written by Paul to his young disciple Timothy. I want to begin today, with

those warnings. Turn to I Timothy, chapter 6, and I will start with verse 6.

But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment.

Now, understand that contentment is not passive acceptance, it is active independence. The Greek word literally means, “independent of circumstances”.

Continue to verse 7.

For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.

One man said, “You have never seen a hearse pulling a U-haul.”

Continue to verse 8.

If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

By the way, the Bible speaks to the modern day in these verses. It identifies, even to this day, the two leading causes of discontentment – what you have hanging in your closet and how big you wish your closet was. This is a little too convicting, so let us move on! Look at verse 9a.

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare . . .

Stop here and notice that Paul did not write, “But some people who want to get rich . . .” or “But I heard of one man who wanted to get rich and he fell into temptation . . .”. No! He wrote,

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare . . .

By the way, he also did not say, “Those who *are* rich . . .”, but rather, “Those who *want to* get rich . . .”. The Greek word for “want to” is the word “boulomia,” which means “to purpose or to will”. In other words, “Those who set the council of their mind and heart on becoming rich, every one of them fall into temptation and a trap . . .”. Continue to verse 9b.

. . . and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

The word “plunge” means “to drag to the bottom; to submerge; to drown”. The idea is of someone who is drowning in the sea of their own desires. Look at verse 10a.

For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, . . .

Paul did not say, “money is the root of evil,” but rather, “the love of money . . .”. Continue to verse 10b.

. . . and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

They were running the race, but then ahead of them, just a little off the path of godly endurance, a golden apple rolled into view. It was just a little detour; just one greedy decision; one dishonest compromise, and things seemed to be alright; it did not seem to be so bad. In reality, however, you have been caught in the snare; in the trap.

The trap is in forgetting that you did not bring anything into this world, and you are not taking anything out. So, instead of setting your mind and heart on righteousness and godliness and faith and love and perseverance and gentleness, you have lost sight of the goal and are now just chasing after every glittering apple that attracts your fancy.

I want to read a direct quote from Cyprian, who was an early church leader. He wrote these words just two hundred years after Jesus Christ ascended to heaven. Cyprian wrote with frustration, these words describing the Christians of his generation,

Their possessions hold them in chains . . . chains which shackle their courage and choke their faith and hamper their judgment and throttle their souls. They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned; enslaved as they are to their own things; they are not the master of their money, but its slaves.

Look at verses 11 and 12a.

But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith . . .

I love that word “fight”. You should write next to it, in the margin of your Bible, the word “agonize”. The word “fight” comes from the Greek word “agonizou”, which means “to agonize for; to long for”.

The point is, instead of agonizing over possessions; over a promotion; over power; over prestige, and simply wanting more, which comes naturally, we are to agonize over godliness to be revealed in us – righteousness, faith, love, gentleness – which come supernaturally! When have we agonized for them?!

An Old Testament Case

I want to point out, not a fable or legend, but the true story of a man, with great promise, who, somewhere along the line, stopped agonizing for the things of God and began agonizing for golden apples. Please take your Bible and turn to II Kings, chapter 5, where this illustration occurs.

Gehazi – His privileged position!

Let me remind you of some of the background information for this illustration.

Background:

You may remember the story of Naaman, who, after being healed of his leprosy, returned and begged Elisha to receive a gift. We discovered, in a previous discussion, that he came from Syria loaded down with about 1.2 million dollars worth of gold, silver, and clothing. Elisha, however, refused the gift, even though Naaman was urging him to receive it. Eventually, Naaman and his splendid entourage left, with great joy over Naaman's healing, and with everything they had brought with them.

Elisha's servant

Now, as that conversation was taking place between Naaman and Elisha, and Elisha was quietly and consistently refusing the gifts, there was another man standing there. This man was silently and, from what we will discover later, evidently seething on the inside, due to a mixture of anger, frustration, and greed.

I want to re-enter that dramatic scene at II Kings, chapter 5, verses 19 and 20.

He [Elisha] said to him [Naaman], "Go in peace." So he departed from him some distance. But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, "Behold, my master has spared this Naaman the Aramean, by not receiving from his hands what he brought. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and take something from him."

Ladies and gentlemen, in this story, at this very point, we are given the moment when the golden apple rolled across Gehazi's path. He became distracted, and he is now going to reach and take.

Elisha's replacement

Before going any further, we need to understand something about Gehazi that will help. We are first introduced to Gehazi as Elisha's servant in chapter 4. As his servant, or attendant, he would travel with the great prophet. He would serve the prophet, by perhaps, fixing meals and keeping things tidy. It would be his role to represent the prophet to people who came. It was much more than a lowly servant's role; it was an honored position. In fact, do you remember who Elijah's servant was? It was Elisha.

The son of a prophet who had passion for the glory of God to be revealed in Israel, Gehazi was probably selected from the top of his class for his ability, his potential, and his heart, to perhaps, soon become Elisha's replacement. Gehazi was more than just some servant; he was perhaps, the next prophet of God, who was in training under the tutelage of his master, Elisha.

Warning signs:

However, there were some warning signs along the way. We did not think much about them, perhaps, when they happened, as we studied them together, but it is kind of like Judas' story in the New Testament. Do you remember that he complained when the costly perfume was poured on the feet of the Lord? We did not really think a whole lot about it then, but later on in the story, it became very apparent that he was a greedy man at heart, and it made sense. Well, as I reflected back on Gehazi's story, there were some warning signs all along that were easy to miss.

Powerlessness

The first warning sign will be, what we will call, powerlessness. It occurred in chapter 4, verse 31. I will quickly review that. Gehazi had been sent by Elisha, with Elisha's rod to lay across the body of a deceased boy. Elisha assumed that Gehazi, as his representative, would be able to put the rod on the boy's body and the boy would come back to life. It did not work. Elisha had to come and do it himself. We were never told why. Maybe now, it makes sense.

Faithlessness

The second sign or warning signal that appears on the horizon of Gehazi's biography is a lot more

obvious and makes it more apparent that there is something wrong in his heart and in his character. Turn to chapter 4 and look at verse 43. It happened when Elisha ordered Gehazi to put twenty loaves of bread before a hundred hungry men. The only way anything could ever happen would be for God to somehow miraculously multiply that bread for all of those hungry men, and their wives and children, to be able to eat. Gehazi responds, openly, cryptically, argumentatively with the words in verse 43,

. . . What, will I set this before a hundred men? . . .

In other words, “Do you want me to make a fool of myself by putting twenty little loaves of bread in front of more than a hundred people?”

First it was powerlessness, now it is faithlessness.

Now, in my imagination, and I could be wrong, but I can just see Gehazi, with great frustration perhaps, banging that tray of bread loaves down on the table and then, stalking off to pout. He was being made to look foolish by putting before this vast company, a little bit of bread. And, he did not like that.

Now, put these two clues together. First, because of his failure to resurrect the boy, there was powerlessness. Then, because of his faithlessness, he was embarrassed in the fact that God performed a great miracle and he was not able to enjoy it. I cannot help but think that he is becoming more and more open to the tempter; more vulnerable to a golden apple that might just roll across his path.

Gehazi – His disgraceful deed!

Now, the hinge in the biography of Gehazi occurs in verse 20 of chapter 5. It marks the end of potential and honor and the beginning of the loss of position and great dishonor. It marks the beginning of blatant deception and it is motivated by nothing less than crass greed. It is as if he says, “Living by the word of God is not enough. There has to be some good times here and now. And this serving God is not all it is cooked up to be; there has to be more. Maybe it is a little compromise; maybe it is a little lie, but this man, Naaman, is a pagan Syrian and we ought to clean him out, rather than let him go.”

Did you notice the implied contempt in verse 20a? Look at that verse again, as it says,

But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, “Behold, my master has spared this Naaman the Aramean, by not receiving from his hands what he brought. . . .”

The construction of the words “this Naaman” implies contempt. In other words, “He has spared, of all men, *this* man, *this* enemy of Israel, *this* Syrian warlord, *this* pagan, of all people, by not receiving from his hands what he brought. And, he is allowing 1.2 million dollars to slip through his fingers on top of it all.”

I cannot help but believe, by what happens next, that he thinks the Lord will not be too upset with his decision to deceive. Continue to the last part of verse 20.

. . . As the Lord lives, I will run after him and take something from him.

He has now twisted his deceit and greed around so that it fits his ministerial mindset, as he says, “As the Lord lives . . .”. In other words, “This can’t be all that bad. And, think of what we could give if we had it.”

He then says, “As the Lord lives, I will run . . .”. You should underline or circle that word “run,” “. . . I will *run* after him . . .”.

One author, writing nearly one hundred fifty years ago, in his commentary on this passage, said,

Greed is that passion that makes all men, like Gehazi, run. People are, everywhere, out of breath in their race for more.

From Cyprian to one hundred fifty years ago, you get the impression that our natures really have not changed that much.

Now look at verses 21 and 22.

So Gehazi pursued Naaman. . . .

There is implied trouble in this verse. He is off the track now. He is running as fast as he can for this apple.

. . . When Naaman saw one running after him, he came down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Is all well?” He said, “All is well. . . .”

That is lie number one.

“ . . . My master has sent me, . . .”

That is lie number two.

“. . . saying, ‘Behold, just now two young men of the sons of the prophets have come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothes.’”

Did you notice the carefully crafted web of lies that he is spinning here? It is not just, “I want some money,” but he has come up with prophets coming to Elisha’s house, how old they are, what part of the country they have come from, and what their hometown is. He has thought this all through, as he is racing after Naaman, and he has all of his lies all mapped out. It sounds so good that it has to be true!

Naaman, who is overwhelmed with joy at this time, says in verse 23,

. . . “Be pleased to take two talents.”

Naaman tells Gehazi to take not just one talent, but to be pleased to take two talents. “This is getting better all the time!” Gehazi thinks. And, he was probably pleased to take two talents, instead of one.

I asked my secretary to do a little detective work in this. She called the bank and found out how much a talent of silver weighs. It is about one hundred sixty five ounces. They said that two ounces, which is what Gehazi got, is worth today, around a thousand dollars.

“How much is your integrity worth, Gehazi? What is the price tag on your character?”

“A thousand dollars.”

“Is that all?”

The importance of Elisha’s refusal

I want to insert, at this point, why it was important for Elisha to refuse Naaman. It was important for two reasons.

It clearly testified to the free gift of God’s forgiveness

1. The first reason is that Elisha’s refusal clearly testified to the free gift of God’s forgiveness.

When Naaman gets back to Syria, everyone is going to be amazed and in wonder that he has been healed. One of the things they will ask is, “How much did it cost?”

They knew he left with 1.2 million in silver and gold and an entourage of servants and changes of clothing. They will ask, “How much did it cost, Naaman?”

Elisha wanted Naaman to say, “It was free!”

You see, their gods did not operate that way.

It clearly promoted gratitude to God

2. Secondly, his refusal clearly promoted gratitude to God instead of gratitude to God’s servant.

By the way, the church is muddying this today. The church is still confusing people with the message that salvation is not free. They might say, “You have to join some church,” or “You have to get wet,” or “You have to give money; sign a pledge card,” or do something or be something. I am here to tell you, by the authority of God’s word, that salvation, forgiveness is free. It is free only because it cost Jesus Christ everything, but He gives it to us free of charge.

Well, Naaman, in verse 23, assigns two servants to carry all this loot home for Gehazi. It was not a lot, just a little pouch of silver and a couple of changes of clothing. Look at the last part of verse 23.

. . . he [Naaman] . . . bound two talents of silver in two bags with two changes of clothes and gave them to two of his servants; and they carried them before him.

Then, verses 24 and 25.

When he came to the hill, he took them from their hand and deposited them in the house, and he sent the men away, and they departed. But he went in and stood before his master. And Elisha said to him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” And he said, “Your servant went nowhere.”

Uh oh! Do not tell me that that question did not put Gehazi’s heart in his throat.

One man put it this way, “Gehazi was not exactly caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but crumbs were all over his face.”

I imagine the palms of his hands became sweaty. I imagine his mind immediately began to race, “Does Elisha know? Could he have seen me? Was he looking around the corner when I hid the silver and the clothing? Did he see me coming over the hill? Did someone tell him? I didn’t think he would know that I was even away.”

Then, maybe with a nervous laugh, Gehazi said, “Where have I been? Ugh, I haven’t been anywhere.”

Another lie.

As I read this, the thought came to my mind, “Has God ever asked you that question? Has your conscience ever whispered into your heart that question, ‘Where have you been? What did you do? What are you hiding?’”

Look at verse 26.

Then he said to him, “Did not my heart go with you, when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Is it a time to receive money and to receive clothes and olive groves and vineyards and sheep and oxen and male and female servants?”

In other words, “We’re at war with Syria. This isn’t the time.”

Continue to verse 27.

“Therefore, . . .”

(“. . . since you misrepresented the word of God through the prophet of God, . . .”),

“. . . the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever.” So he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.

The gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verse 27, you may remember, informed us that Elisha healed only one leper in his ministry – Naaman. This tells us that he did not ever heal Gehazi. Does that sound harsh? It did to me.

One of the authors that I read, who wrote on this passage about two hundred years ago, put it into perspective. He said, “It is possible that it would be easier for Gehazi the leper to come to repentance than Gehazi the thief.”

Application

Let me provide a couple of lessons that I have learned from this. I want to share them with you and perhaps, we can learn them together from the biography of a man who got off the path and paid the price.

Close friendships with spiritual people do not guarantee spirituality

1. The first lesson is that close friendships with spiritual people do not guarantee spirituality.

Please consider this. The fact that we go to church and hang around with people who walk with God does not, by osmosis, cause spirituality to creep into our character. By becoming part of a church; by

pursuing godly people who walk with God, spirituality does not somehow rub off. These pursuits can influence you, and God says it should as iron sharpens iron, but just by making associations with spiritual people, do not ever think that that will guarantee your spirituality.

We have a travesty occurring in our day that confronts the church like never before. I subscribe to a magazine called *Christianity Today*, and, in order to illustrate this point, I chose several brief articles to read. I want to point out that being around spiritual people does not make you a person of integrity. I apologize in advance that after hearing these, you may feel like you want to take a bath. However, maybe this will challenge us.

In one article, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal church announced that the former denominational treasurer is facing an investigation and trial in the embezzlement of thousands of dollars. According to the church, she supposedly spent denominational money on personal items; including a sixteen thousand dollar necklace from Tiffany’s.

Another article reported that for seven years, Gerald Derstine of Gospel Crusade had inspired his supporters with dramatic accounts of Muslim conversions in Israel and the West Bank. His supporters responded by donating 2.8 million dollars to his ministry in 1994 alone. Yet at this time, Derstine’s right hand man has confessed that all of the reports are fabrications. The dramatic video footage of an attempt to assassinate Derstine in the village of Halhool is one illustration. Derstine was reporting that, “The mosques are emptying in this region and they are blaming me.” However, the butcher knife wielding assassin, supposedly sent from the mosque to kill Derstine, was none other than the son of a Derstine staff member. It was another hoax in order to raise money. Derstine’s regional leader has confessed that, “All is false.”

A third article tells of a three year struggle that is continuing between two Plymouth Brethren organizations over a twenty seven million dollar fund. The funds came from the sale of five Brethren owned hospitals. Historically, the two groups, the Steward’s Foundations and the Steward’s Ministries, have had very close ties. “But now,” says attorney Jim Gaily, “this case is a terrible tragedy. This twenty seven million dollar fund has split the Plymouth Brethren movement.”

In another article, a former bookkeeper accused of embezzling 239,000 dollars from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., is scheduled to go on trial October 2nd. Executive Presbyter Donald Brown says, “The money has already been spent and is not recoverable, but the church is hoping to recoup some through insurance.”

A final article reported that the president of Mississippi Christian College, the second oldest Baptist college in America, is facing trial for embezzling three million dollars of donated funds over the course of fifteen years. He fled a scheduled pre-trial hearing this past January 23rd. The following day, he was found by FBI agents in a lavish San Francisco hotel with 25,000 cash in his possession. As law enforcement officials arrested him, he collapsed in a seizure, allegedly from poison he had just swallowed. After undergoing emergency surgeries for stomach and esophagus damage, he has suffered a stroke.

Warren Wiersbe wrote in his book, *The Integrity Crisis*, a statement that still jars me every time I hear it. I even read these articles so that you will not assume that I, as a pastor, am somehow above anyone or that our church is above other churches. This statement is a challenge to us. Wiersbe said,

For centuries, the church has been telling the world to repent. In our century, the world has begun telling the church to repent. Instead of the church pointing its finger at the world, the world is pointing its finger at the church.

If you work in a Christian organization, if you hang around spiritual people, be on your guard. That world may not discourage dishonesty, it may foster it.

If you can imagine Gehazi walking with, listening to, serving Elisha, you would think he had it made, that this man would be a giant spiritually. The exact opposite occurred.

Servants of God are not automatically protected from selfish desires

2. The second lesson is that servants of God are not automatically protected from selfish desires.

Put yourself in the place of Gehazi and think of his frustration. There is famine in the land; there is struggling from hand to mouth; they are barely surviving; Syria has beaten Israel into submission.

Then, in this passage, suddenly, a Syrian warlord comes along, begging for help, and has 1.2 million dollars in hard gold and silver, ready to plunk it all down, and Elisha says, “No thanks.”

And, Gehazi says, “What?! Here’s our chance! As the Lord lives, I can’t believe you would turn it down.”

There is another insight as well. When Elisha is peeling away the mask of greed, if you go back to verse 26, you hear him talking about things that it is not time for. The very first two things in that list are money and clothing, and that is what Gehazi got. But, Elisha keeps on going and talking about groves and vineyards and what else? Male and female servants. Why did he keep going on in that list? Because he knew the heart of Gehazi. Gehazi was thinking to himself, “This is just the beginning. Eventually, this little obscure servant is going to be served. I will have male and female servants and they will tend to my possessions. I will get out of this hole and I will eventually be served as I deserve.”

Just because you serve God, especially those who serve God in obscurity, in difficult places, beware of turning the tables and being served.

Secret greed cannot remain hidden forever

3. Thirdly, secret greed cannot remain hidden forever.

The symptoms of greed will eventually become public knowledge. That is a guarantee. You might say, “Oh, no one will ever find out about what I did or how I lied.”

However, people will see you dealing dishonestly with other people. They will see you cutting corners and not fully carrying out your word. You will be viewed by associates as someone whose handshake is worthless. Or, they will see your lack of graciousness in dealing with people who do not fulfill your stated ends, needs, and desires. Or, they will hear your conversations that are laced with name brands and talk of your latest “toy” possessions. You just cannot help but talk about the latest sale and the newest deal and how you are getting ahead. Listen to yourself talk.

Greed will breed a personality that, over the years, will shrivel up. And, in the process, it will shrivel the soul that God intended to be gregarious. It will be a personality that dries up and can no longer serve. If I could show you the pictures of the people in the

articles that I read, you would realize that you can see it all over their faces. Somewhere along the line, a golden apple came rolling along their path and it did not seem that bad. It was just a little lie; a little compromise; a little dishonesty; a little selfishness; just one step up.

This would be something that you and I might struggle with, perhaps. It would be the inability to make a godly decision when there is money involved; when there is promotion involved; when there is power or prestige involved. When you have to decide between “a” and “b,” with “a” being more and “b”

being less, well, “As the Lord lives, surely He wants me to follow ‘a’. Why would He withhold that? As the Lord lives, surely this is His will!”

And then, you have veered off the path and you are in the process now, of chasing after golden apples.

How do we survive with spiritual integrity? Paul said it – agonize, pursue, long for righteousness, godliness, faith, perseverance, love, gentleness. Run the race with your eyes not on the glittering gold, but on the goal, who is Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/10/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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