

# KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE (MK 1:40-45; 2 Kings 5:1-14, 1 Cor 9:24-27)

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Sun., February 15, 2009, St. John of the Cross, Bristol

- I. Life of Isolation
  - A. Preparing to visit patient with skin disease in hospital, having to gown up
  - B. Understand this practice but have never liked it = barrier btwn people
  - C. Lepers who lived before & during Jesus' time on earth knew such isolation
    1. Skin diseases which claimed them unclean/cast out by society until they were considered purified by the priest (no longer contagious)
    2. Had to wear torn clothes
    3. Had to call out "Unclean! Unclean!" warning to others
    4. Such practices must have been humiliating and resulted in lonely life
    5. In our readings today we meet two lepers
  
- II. Naaman
  - A. Great man—military fighter, winner with God's blessing, powerful, well-regarded by king, but he's got this skin disease making him impure/untouchable
    1. Receives advice on how to be healed by going to prophet in Samaria
    2. Makes trip to king with all kinds of payment (silver, gold, clothing)
    3. Then to prophet Elisha with horses and chariots
    4. Long trip/must have seemed like a wild goose chase esp. when told to wash in Jordan seven times
      - a. Naaman is mad—after all this, Elisha does not even come out to meet him; he expected immediate & personal attention
      - b. After all he is well-regarded=pride
      - c. Request to wash in Jordan seems ridiculous
        1. Jordan was muddy and seemed unclean
        2. Rivers of Damascus at home much more sanitary and convenient
        3. Naaman self-prescribes his treatment; he knows better
      - d. Naaman is at the end of his rope & storms off mad & resentful, refusing to take a dip
    5. Servants save the day by convincing him to give it a try = healing
    6. Conversion—belief in one God of Israel (physical & spiritual healing)
  
- III. Nameless leper in gospel reading
  - A. None of the claim to fame of Naaman—no war record, prestige, power
  - B. Title of a lonely, cast out, isolated leper
  - C. Great faith
    1. Seeks Jesus out and without calling out any warning, he asks to be healed

2. Violated the rules in order to get close and make his appeal
3. Result = Jesus is moved and touches him, breaking rules himself, and heals the man
4. Man was already a believer, but this act confirms/strengthens his faith, so much so he proclaims it to others

- IV. Our reading from Paul in 1 Cor bridges the gap between these two stories; Using athletic metaphors, Paul gives four clear instructions on how to live:
- A. Run in such a way that you may win--Don't give up in the final stretch—keep going
    1. How many races, football games, competitions have been won in the closing moments/at the wire?
    2. Naaman was willing to give up, even when he was so close to being healed. All he had to do was dip in the water, but it was one thing too many. Left to his own devices, would not have
    3. And us—times we come close to drawing near to God, start saying the Daily Office, grace before meals, feeling God in our daily lives, then we give up and fall back into everyday routines. Give up on leading holier lives with God and chose to go off on our own
  - B. Training requires self-control—keep emotions in check
    1. Like the story I shared a couple weeks ago. We need to remember why we are here
    2. Naaman let his anger get best of him and this steered him off track (keep selves in check)
  - C. If we work this hard for earthly rewards which fade, die, decease and are temporary, how much harder we should work for rewards in heaven which are eternal
    1. Naaman would do anything to win all kinds of battles for earthly gain, yet what was he willing to do for God and spiritual well-being?
    2. How much energy and effort do we place on gaining material things here and now? How does this compare to what we invest in our spiritual wholeness/our relationship with God which lasts forever?
  - D. Do not run aimlessly without goal, focus and purpose—keep eye on prize
    1. Perhaps this is what distinguished Naaman most from the leper in gospel who had faith and was going to make sure nothing got in the way of his healing
    2. We too need to be focused and have that much clarity and belief that Jesus can help us and make a difference in our lives. Our prize is closeness to God, that oneness that we catch glimpses of now and will experience more fully in life eternal

- V. If you were to approach Jesus, what would you ask him for? Where do you need some healing?
  - A. Perhaps you are at a place in your life where you identify with Naaman.
    - 1. You need God to show you how and where you need to go to believe?
    - 2. Beware—God may ask you to do things and follow a path that is very different from what you might imagine. Conversion may come in unexpected ways.
  - B. Or perhaps you relate to the nameless leper—your faith is in need of strengthening and restoration. You believe, but long for God’s touch in your life
  
- VI. These weeks preceding Lent are the perfect time to ask ourselves such questions.
  - A. Beginning with Ash Wed., Lent will be 40 days of soul-searching on our own, but also prayer in community Stations & Taize; discipline, but also spiritual growth, and perhaps like Naaman, conversion.
  - B. Lent is not an easy journey, but we will go through it together, not in isolation.
  - C. And by remembering Paul’s words of encouragement we will make it through: Don’t give up! Exercise self-control and keep your eye on the heavenly, holy prize.