

## **Hearing the Word**

Bethesda Presbyterian Church – July 3, 2016

### **2 Kings 5:1-14**

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.

He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

### **Galatians 6:1-12**

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

### **Fortune Cookie Faith**

By Edmund Haralson

Galatians 6:1-10 is one of those fortune cookie passages. You can almost expect each verse to be printed on a little slip of paper baked into a fortune cookie. Each verse is good advice. The problem with fortune cookies – and with this passage – is that we generally only get one fortune at a time. A proverb a day. A scripture a day. A bit of advice a day. Not too much. Just enough to remind us that there is this book out there that serves as a guide for our lives. But not so much as to make a big difference. And that's the problem with a fortune cookie approach to scripture.

Let's take a peek at these various "fortunes" found in Galatians. Permit me to paraphrase.

Cookie number one. If you know someone is caught up in sin, you need to help them become free of that wrongfulness. But be careful. You have to be gentle. You have to be respectful. You can't be judgmental. Be careful that you don't fall into sin. And I don't mean falling into the same sin as that person, even though that certainly could be a possibility and you must guard yourself against it. But I also mean don't fall into the sin of "holier than thou-ness" or of "I told you so-itis" or "you made your bed, now lie in it-ness." Remember you're like a nurse drawing blood; don't stick yourself with that needle.

Cookie number two. Share each other's problems. When you do this, you obey the law of Christ. And what is that law? Jesus said, "Love one another, as I have loved you." This is an easy cookie to swallow – when it's someone else's problem being shared with you. You get to be the helper. You get to be the hero. You get to show how strong you are. Your wisdom gets to percolate to the top for all to see. You get to shine. But sharing is a two-way street. Certainly you have the wisdom to help others, but do you have the humility to be helped? Do you have the strength to say, "I'm weak?" Do you have the courage to say, "I'm afraid?"

The third cookie. If you think you are important, you're just fooling yourself. You don't get to go through life saying, "Not my job." Wrong. It is your job. It's your job to care. If you see someone fall, help them up. If you see someone burdened with care, share the load with them. How someone has fallen will vary from circumstance to circumstance, from person to person. Your burdens are not my burdens, nor are my burdens yours. And our capacity to help will also vary. How I am able to help will be different from how you are able to help. But we are all obligated to help one another. When you do this, you fulfill the law of Christ.

Number four. Do your best. Don't compare yourself to others. We are all different from one another, each with our own capabilities. Just because I'm not able to do all that you are able to do, doesn't mean I don't do my best. And even if all things were equal and we both had the same capabilities, this doesn't

mean what I do will be the same as you. We all have our own individual passions. Would you expect Picasso to paint like Grandma Moses? Would you expect Chopin to compose like Rachmaninov? Would your high school math teacher have the same approach to a lesson as your English teacher? Do your best, and let your own work stand by its own merit.

Why? Cookie number five. You are responsible for your own actions. If you spend your gas money on a Big Mac, don't be surprised when your car stops running. Don't blame the mileage rating. If you turn on the oven but then don't put the pizza in, don't be surprised 30 minutes later that your pizza's cold. Personal experience taught me that. Don't blame the oven. But wait a minute. Cookie number two said, share one another's burdens. But this cookie says, bear your own burden. Is cookie master Saint Paul contradicting himself? I don't think so. The earlier cookie's fortune is about your responsibility. This cookie's fortune is about my responsibility. When I ask you for gas money, I should probably mention the fact that I goofed up. I need to be responsible for my own actions.

This next cookie tastes a little weird to me. The almond extract might have been sitting on the shelf too long. The student should share the benefits of learning with the teacher. I think this fortune is a little odd because I tend to think of benefit as money. Is Paul saying that if I get a raise because of what my mentor or my professor or my parent or my pastor taught me, then I should share part of that financial gain with my teacher? Possibly. There's at least one interpretive translation that outright says so. Personally I think Paul is saying, don't forget where you came from and remember those who helped you along the way. Having been a teacher, when I see the boys I taught grow into outstanding young men – and some of those boys into very outstanding young women – that's when I receive my reward. One of my boys once told me that he received his full scholarship to university because of the thinking skills I taught him in our reading and writing classes. And now that he's travelled the world, studied beyond the borders of Thailand, and become an international man of letters, that's the benefit I get to share in. Riches greater than gold.

Cookie number seven. You reap what you sow. If you plant tomatoes, you're going to get tomatoes. Don't expect corn. And don't go off blaming God that you didn't get any corn when all you planted was tomatoes. In your spiritual life, if you plant of the flesh, that is, corruption, sinfulness, evil, wickedness, guess what you're going to get? Death and decay. But if you plant of the Spirit, that is, good things, guess what you're going to get? Everlasting life. Later in this letter, Paul writes that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. What do you plant – what do you do – to grow those fruits? Care about others. Smile a little. Be nice. Take your time. Help others. Do good stuff. Be dependable. Walk softly. Control yourself. Then you will reap a harvest of eternal life.

Number eight. Don't give up. Continuing the previous analogy, I'm not a gardener. I'm not into digging in the dirt, watering, weeding. I don't know the difference between a dandelion and a daffodil. The only thing I've ever grown was a cactus. I named him George. George died. I killed George. Planting the fruits of the Spirit is not easy. It takes time. It takes persistence. It takes attention. As Paul says, "Do not grow weary of doing what is right." "Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all." I was on the bus and overheard a young man say he needed a new smart card. When all you do is ride the bus, getting a new smart card is not very convenient. Well, I've got five smart cards, four without any money on them. I gave him one. Saved him a couple of bucks and the time and trouble of having to buy one. Take advantage of the opportunities when they present themselves. The more good you do, the easier it becomes to do good.

There are some fortunes for you. Hooks upon which to hang your proverbial hat. Help people break free of wrongfulness. Share each other's problems. You're not as important as you think you are. Do your best. You're responsible for your own actions. Share the benefits of what you have learned with the ones who taught you. You reap what you sow. Don't give up.

Earlier in the second book of Kings we heard about people with a fortune cookie approach to life. They lived one cookie at a time, paying heed to the fortune du jour. Who are the players in this story? We have Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram. We have Naaman's wife. We have a girl held in captivity to be the servant of Naaman's wife. We have the king of Aram. We have the king of Israel. We have Elisha the prophet. We have Elisha's messenger boy. And we have the servants of Naaman.

What's the story in a nutshell? Naaman is great commander of a victorious army. He has brought honor to his king, the king of the land of Aram, and this king likes Naaman. But Naaman has leprosy, a disease that is seen as the physical manifestation of spiritual corruption and decay. The servant girl tells Naaman's wife that there is a prophet who can cure Naaman's leprosy, which would be nothing short of saving his very soul from its corruption and decay. When Naaman tells the king of Aram about this, the king says, "Go, I'll give you a letter of introduction to the king of Israel." Naaman goes to the king of Israel. Unfortunately, the letter he was given essentially says, "This is Naaman. He's got leprosy. You can cure him." When the king of Israel reads the letter, his reaction is, "What?! I can't cure leprosy. Why is the king of Aram trying to pick a fight with me?" When Elisha hears about this, he essentially says to the king of Israel, "You dummy. That's not what he meant. Send Naaman to me and I'll take care of it."

So Naaman goes to Elisha's house. And Elisha sends out his messenger boy who tells Naaman what Elisha said he has to do. But what Naaman hears is, "My boss, the prophet Elisha, who's staying in the house and doesn't have the courtesy to come out to meet you, oh great commander Naaman, said go take a bath in the Jordan. In fact, you need to take seven baths in the Jordan, that's how screwed up you are."

Well, Naaman's reaction to this is understandable. He's a bit insulted. He basically says, "What?! I'm the great commander Naaman. I came to see the prophet Elisha. He's supposed to come out here and wave his magic fingers and say his hocus pocus, but all he does is send out this messenger boy. And the message? Take seven baths in the Jordan? We've got better rivers back home. Why would I want to wash in the Anacostia when I can go back home and soak in the Shenandoah? Heck with this! I'm outta here!" So he storms off.

Now Naaman's servants are either very crazy or very confident. They go up to Naaman and they say, "What are you so upset about? If he had told you do something difficult, you would have said, 'I'm the great commander Naaman. I don't care how tough it is, I'll do it!' All he said was go take seven baths. Or is that too hard for you?" So Naaman went and took seven baths. And guess what? He was cured.

Fortune cookie faith. Bear with me while I speak very broadly, very figuratively, not at all literally. Now some will complain and say, "That's not what it says." Well, to be honest, I don't care what it says. I care what it means. That's how this ancient story makes a difference in the 21st century.

Think of the king of Aram as a teacher. Naaman shares the benefit of his learning – his victories – with his teacher, the king of Aram. Fortune cookie number six. The servant girl, taken into captivity, shares

the benefit of her knowledge with her mistress, Naaman's wife. Despite her circumstances, this girl doesn't give up on the opportunity to do good. Fortune cookie number eight. The king of Aram shares the burden of Naaman's leprosy with him. Fortune cookie number two. And given that leprosy was seen as the physical manifestation of spiritual corruption, the king of Aram also exemplifies fortune cookie number one. The king of Israel never got fortune cookie number four. He compares himself to God, and knowing that he is not God and that he cannot cure Naaman, he does not do what little he can. Instead, he becomes a big crybaby, complaining and tearing his clothes, saying, "Because I cannot do the big thing, I will do none of the little things." But Elisha knows fortune cookie number seven. "Send Naaman to me, and I will plant the fruit of the Spirit in him." Unfortunately Naaman never got fortune cookie number three. He thinks he's so important. "I came to see Elisha, and all I got was a messenger boy." Fortunately Naaman's servants tell him about cookie number five. "You don't want to wash in the Jordan? Then don't complain about your leprosy." And finally Naaman cracks open cookie number eight. He does the hard thing. He takes advantage of the opportunity presented. And he is healed.

How much easier would it be to live a full life when you live in the fullness of life? Don't live one scripture at a time. Live the scriptures. All of them. All the time. You will fall short. But you will have done your best. And having done your best, you will hear, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

Amen.