

Do any of you have a list of things that you would like to do when you get to heaven? I have talked with people who have such a list. Your arrival in heaven list could include seeing a person you have long admired, catching up with a friend you lost to cancer, hugging your grandparents, spouse, or parent. There is a certain woman that I would like to talk to. The Bible contains warnings for the rich, such as Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:24.

*“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* But the Scriptures also give examples of wealthy people who were not imprisoned by a “love of money.” For instance, Abraham, Joseph of Arimathea, and the Shunammite woman in today’s story, who I would like to meet.

In 2 Kings 4:8 we learn that Elisha became friends with a “*well-to-do*” woman in Shunem, a city of Issachar. Whenever Elisha would come to town, she would persuade him to come eat at her home. This became a regular event. This woman talked to her husband and made a request. She told him that she knew Elisha was a man of God. She would like to be able to provide him his own room in their house, so that when in town he could stay with them. Her husband embraced her idea, because that’s exactly what they did. They made a place for Elisha and his servant, Gehazi.

After some time of this going on, Elisha decided he wanted to do something to show his gratitude to this woman who had the heart of a servant. He asked her what he could do for her. He offered to make her known to people in positions of power, but she modestly declined.

Because he had no success in getting any ideas from her, Elisha and Gehazi discuss the matter. Gehazi observes that she has no son and that her husband is old. I suppose that Gehazi is realizing that she would be alone in the not-too-distant future, as much as to say, that she had no hope of having any children at this point in her life.

Elisha latches onto this idea and calls the woman to see him. He tells her that next year she will have a son. The woman cannot believe what she has been told! In due time, Elisha's promise comes true and about a year later the woman gives birth to a son, as the prophet told her. When the boy had grown enough to work in the fields with his father, he began to have terrible pains in his head. His father had servants carry him back to the house to his mother. She held him until noon and then he died in her arms.

In the course of events, Elisha does restore her son's life. In no way do I want to diminish that miracle, but there is something else in today's Scripture. Such as: How quickly she acted, her simple faith, Elisha not knowing what had happened, and Elisha needing several attempts to revive the boy. All of which point us to "God's Mercy and Care" coming from both the Shunammite woman and from Elisha.

Let's consider what this Shunammite woman did for Elisha. She is well known, and highly thought of, I would expect from the description. She does not fear bringing a man of God into her home. She begins simply by serving Elisha a meal every time she sees him in her town. This progresses to a regular occurrence, so that whenever Elisha and Gehazi are in town.

But the woman wants to do more. I think she wants to make things better for Elisha. She wants to provide comfort to him. I get the impression that she wants to make his work a little easier, at least while he remains in her city. So, she asks for and receives from her husband a small room on the roof of the house especially for Elisha's use when he visits. This too becomes a routine. Elisha knows the room is his and he readily uses it.

She freely gives that which is hers to offer. Nothing in her providing these things takes away from anyone else doing something for Elisha if they are so inclined. She had the means and the opportunity to do with it what she could. Not everyone's opportunities are going to be the same. Someone with more room to spare in their home is free to offer space to someone

else. Someone with every room already filled is not in that position. The person without the space should not feel slighted or embarrassed because they do not have the room.

Remember Jesus' story about the widow who gave two mites, or one cent, to the treasury? Jesus said she gave more than all the rich people, because she gave *all that she had*. She made a genuine sacrifice. The rich people had given to the Lord, but they had not given to the degree that she had. His point was to teach his followers to value the heart of the giver over the monetary value of the gift. What did she have to do without in order for her to give what she gave? He didn't demand that the rich people needed to give all that they had. He was instead making a distinction between the size of the gift and the size of every giver's heart.

Scripture teaches us to be ready to do what we can. This is why we give on the first day of the week; so that there is already something prepared for those in the community of faith who have need (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). What is given is to be as each of us "purposes" in our own heart. What I give is not meant to be compared to what someone else gives.

This woman at Shunem gave with all her heart, just as the widow gave her two mites in the gospel story. Let's not look at this woman and say, "I can't wait until I have a house big enough to designate a room for when a pastor or missionary visits." Be glad of what you can do with what you have for any guest who visits in your home.

If you have the space to create a room—that's great! By all means, do that. Extend hospitality to whomever you can, as often as you can. But do not see the setting aside of a room as the goal. The goal is to give freely of whatever we have, whoever we are, however financially blessed we are.

In the United States we are accustomed to "graduating" to larger homes. People the world over make do with smaller homes, and they manage to be generous with the space that they call home. But in the USA, we also

practice what I would call “strangulation by covetousness.” We say, “If I had what she had, I would do more of...” “They have so much money they should be helping with...” “Look how much I’ve done for others. Why don’t people with more money contribute more?”

We spend too much time worrying about what others do or don’t do with the means they have been given. We need to stop. Each one of us would do well to be like the woman in 2 Kings 4. Let me point out that each one of us in this country, and in this room, by comparison to the rest of the world, are just as the Bible describes the Shunammite woman: “*Well-to-do.*”

Each of us has something more that another person does not have. You may have the gift of serving while someone else has the financial means to provide for what is needed to accomplish that service. You may be the one who has more *mercy* to share than others do (Romans 12:3-8).

Whatever is yours, share it with gladness. See what you have that can make someone’s life better and give it. It can be your neighbor, your mother-in-law, your friend, or the homeless man on the corner. Today it may be saying a prayer with them or for them. Tomorrow it may be preparing a meal or taking them to an appointment.

These are not small things. Because whatever you are doing for them, it’s because they have a need—which makes it a big thing for them. Be content with what you have. Ask someone Elisha’s question to the Shunammite woman: “*Now what can be done for you?*” (2 Kings 4:13).

In our own contentment, we must grow in ways that we can serve others. Christian friends, take on the heart of a servant! Then *God’s mercy and care* will flow through us to others.

As our Lord Jesus said, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45). Amen.