Thanksgiving 2

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Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0:00] Listen to these words from Scripture. Now Naaman was a commander of the army of the king of Aram.

He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.
Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, if only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy.
Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. By all means go, the king of Aram replied. I will send a letter to the king of Israel.
So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read, With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you that you may cure him of his leprosy.
[1:13] As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and he said, Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?

See how he's trying to pick a quarrel with me. When Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message.
Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.
Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed. But Naaman went away angry and said, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God.
Wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. And are not Abana and Favah, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?
[2:18] And so he turned and he went off in rage. Naaman's servants went to him and said, My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?

How much more then when he tells you, wash and be cleansed? So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times as the man of God had told him. And his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.
Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and he said, Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.
So please accept 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.
This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study. My gracious King, we have so much to be thankful for that we've already spoken about.
[3:22] One of the greatest gifts we have is your word. The privilege we have of being able to hear you, our creator God, speak to us in the pages of scripture.

May we never forget this great privilege and may we never fail to take these opportunities to drink deeply from this gift. So that we might be changed. So that we might see your majesty and we might see your love to us in Jesus.
Meet with us now. Feed us now, Lord, we pray for Christ's sake. By your spirit. Amen. So last week and this week we've been looking at the subject of thanksgiving.
In light of the thanksgiving, last week we started off and we looked at the source of thanksgiving. What should our ultimate source of thanksgiving be? And we said you'll only ever really live a life of thanksgiving in all circumstances.

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And that's something that the New Testament often says to us. Hey, give thanks in all circumstances. It's a life posture, a life disposition. And you'll only have this life disposition, this life posture, if you come to realize the enormity of the gift that you have.
[4:34] The gift of relationship with your heavenly Father earned for you by Jesus Christ. Now if that is the true, like the deepest bedrock, the true source of our thanksgiving, then today what I want to do is I want to speak about a particular idol in our lives that probably more than any other idol tries to trick us and seduce us into finding our source of thanksgiving somewhere else.

Looking elsewhere for that bedrock of thanksgiving. And so I want to talk about the idol of success and achievement. I think this idol, more than any other idol, particularly in our context here in the city, in the context of our congregation, gets in the way of us finding our true source of thanksgiving in God and in His gospel.
If you've been around the Union Chapel for any length of time, you've probably heard us speak about idolatry and heart idols, use that kind of language. The simplest definition I can give to you of what idolatry is, because maybe some of you are thinking, well, I don't have little carved images at home that I bow down and worship, and you're thinking of that when you think of idols.
But I think idolatry can be much broader than that. And the simplest definition I can give you of an idol is having any God, small case g, in the place of God, capital G.
Having any small case g God in the place of capital G God. Anything that you substitute in the place of God as your highest worship is really an idol.
[6:09] So I want us to think about the idol of success and achievement. Now you, I think I shared this particular story with the folk who were at the, not the Uncovering Jesus, but the Why I'm Still a Christian event that we did a couple of months ago in the hall next door there.

But you might remember, if you're my age or older, you might remember an advertisement that was in the, I think it was the late 90s, maybe early 2000s, with a class full of children.
And I have no idea what they were actually advertising, so obviously that didn't make an effect upon me. But there's this whole bunch of kids, and the teacher says to the kids, what do you want to be when you grow up?
And one boy stands up and he says, when I grow up, I want to be a pirate. And the teacher interjects and says, sorry, Timmy, or whatever his name is, don't you mean a pilot?
And then the boy responds all defensively, that's what I said. And then the class goes, that's what he said. Does anybody remember that advert? Now we were primed at a really early age to set our sights on achievement, to become something.
[7:19] And the world was your oyster. The opportunities were endless, although for small kids, pilots and firemen were really a monopoly on all the options out there. But success for us, I think, has always meant moving up a ladder.

Moving up a ladder of some sort. So an education ladder, a career ladder, a social status ladder. Movement down those ladders then is sort of cast as failure. Now certainly there is nothing, nothing at all inherently wrong with describing success in that way.
If it's one of several measures of success. But what happens when that sort of success becomes an idol? When it becomes a thing that you are looking to as your deepest source of thanksgiving? The deepest sense of contentment in life? And so that's what we're going to think about together this morning. And we're going to look at an extremely successful man named Naaman, here in 2 Kings 5, and his interaction with the prophet Elisha.
Now, a caveat at the beginning, nothing of mine is very original. A lot of what I'm going to talk about today is very much inspired by a chapter in the book, Counterfeit Gods, by Tim Keller.
[8:28] If you've never read that book, Counterfeit Gods, if you want to understand the concept of idolatry, I say go and buy that book and spend your Sunday afternoon reading that book. It's a fantastic book. But there's not a lot of originality in what I'm going to say next.

But I want you to see two things. Number one, I want you to see the initial illusion of success. And then number two, the surprising secret of true success. The illusion of success and the surprising secret of true success.
So here's the illusion. Have a look at verse one. Now, Naaman was a commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram.

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He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel. And she served Naaman's wife. And she said to her mistress, If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of all his leprosy. Naaman had it all. He commanded the armies of Aram. That's kind of like modern day Syria. He appears to basically be number two to the king.
[9:38] So sort of like the prime minister to the king in a monarchy. And it's pretty clear from verse one that the author is trying to butter him up for us. He's trying to elevate him in our eyes. So he was a great man.

He was highly regarded. He was valiant. He had character. He had depth. He was by all accounts incredibly successful. And he had all the achievements. He could actually show you, These are all my achievements. This is not just someone saying nice things about me.
These are all my achievements. But he had leprosy. Now in the ancient world, leprosy was basically like terminal cancer.
Not only does it mean you're on the path to slow decline of life, but you also tend to be ostracized and outcast, put on the margins of society.
So from one point of view, he has absolutely everything. But from another part, from another point of view, his life is literally falling apart. So the beginning of this story, as you open it up, it functions like a parable about the delicate and I think the superficial nature of earthly success.
[10:50] You see, one of the biggest problems with putting success and achievement in the place of God as your deepest source of thanksgiving is that it's incredibly fragile. incredibly delicate.

Emily S. Fahani Smith is a writer and a specialist in positive psychology. I don't think she's a Christian, but she says this. She says, contemporary society has some very wrong-headed ideas about what constitutes success.
Popular thinking holds that a person who went to Harvard is smarter and better than someone who attended Ohio State. You can swap out South African universities for that. That a parent who stays at home with their kids is contributing less to society than a person who works for a Fortune 500 company.
That a woman with 200 Instagram followers must be less valuable than a woman with 2 million. The notion of success isn't just elitist and misguided. It actively hurts those who believe it.
I spoke to many people who defined their identity and self-worth by their educational and career achievements. When they succeeded, their lives felt meaningful and they were happy. But when they failed or struggled, the only thing that gave their lives value was gone.
[12:02] And so they fell into despair and became convinced they were worthless. So there's a popular psychologist who's able to point out and say, well, look how fragile, fragile, the idol of success is.

Now the problem is that as fragile as it is, it's actually really good at making you feel like it's achieving your purposes as your God. Small case G.
When you're achieving your education and your career and your relationships, you begin in that moment to feel really, really good about life. And to some extent, rightly so. You give thanks for those things. You're feeling good. But it's precisely at that point that it's so easy then to start to subconsciously look at success as the place from which you are now drawing your primary meaning and identity and purpose.
And you start to think, well, maybe, maybe, just maybe, this success tells me who I really am in life. How much I'm worth. What I'm designed to do and to be.
If I have this, then I'll be a thankful person. There's a euphoria there, even. And that feeling, that sense of success, can almost take on drug-like qualities that lure you into something akin to an addiction.
[13:21] Mary Bell is a counselor who works with high-level executives, and she's quoted an article in the magazine Fast Company. She says this, achievement is the alcohol of our time.

These days, the best people don't abuse alcohol. They abuse their lives. You're successful, so good things happen. You complete a project, and you feel dynamite. The feeling doesn't last forever, and you slide back to normal.
You think, I've got to start a new project, which is still normal, but you love the feeling of euphoria, so you've got to have it again. The problem is, you can't stay on that high.

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Say you're working on a deal, and it doesn't get approved. Your self-esteem is on the line, because you've been gathering your self-worth externally. Eventually, in this cycle, you drop to the pain level more and more often.
The highs don't seem quite so high. You may win a deal that's even bigger than the one that got away, but somehow, that deal doesn't take you to euphoria. Next time, you don't even get back to normal, because you're so desperate about clinching the next deal.
[14:25] An achievement addict is no different from any other kind of addict. Friends, success is wonderful. Achievement is wonderful.

I have two kids. I want them to achieve in life. I invest of my material wealth to see them achieve in life. I want them to enjoy even something of that euphoria.
But I also, also want them to see that success and achievement can be so, so very fragile, and a so very consuming, small case, gee God.
If you look to it, to answer all those big questions in life. Who am I? What am I really worth? How do I face failure, struggle, death? How do I live a life of gratitude?
It's really interesting to me, as somebody who, over the last few years here in the city, has done a lot of what we would call apologetics, so giving a defense for the Christian faith, through things like the YM, so the Christian event, and others, we've done them.
[15:30] Before we had a building, we used to do them in coffee shops, and things like that. And doing a lot of these events, where you sit and you give a defense from God, I have found that in our present success and achievement driven, predominantly Western culture, and in Cape, even if you're from an African culture, you're kind of caught up in that here, in the Western Cape, but in the city, one of the biggest apologetic questions that gets asked, over and over and over and over again, is, how do you reconcile belief in God and the evil and suffering question?

So maybe you've heard it phrased this way, how can a good God exist when there's evil and suffering and tragedy in the world? I think we ask that question now, in this culture, with more angst and concern than other cultures have in previous centuries, and there's actually people who have written on this.
Now why is that? It's because more than ever, we are bent on moving up the ladder, and we presume that we're supposed to move up the ladder.
That's the order of life. That is the expectation that has been set in us from childhood, when we were little, to me, in the class. We're going to get educated. We're going to get a job.
We're going to progress in that job. We're going to get a family. We're going to get kids, and they're going to turn out the way we expect them to turn out to. We expect these things. We expect these trajectories in our lives, and so when tragedy strikes, we're enraged with God.
[17:02] How dare he interrupt our ladder climbing? Now, older cultures actually had less of a problem with evil and suffering in the world. Babies died more frequently in childbirth.

Careers were frequently cut short by war or famine or illness. The expectation just wasn't there that your life is basically a mountain, and you're guaranteed to get to the top of it.
The expectation was there that life is a series of rolling hills, and there's some really high points and some really deep valleys. People just knew that success and achievement couldn't answer those big questions.
They just couldn't. In fact, one of the ways that you can actually begin to tell if you're turning success into an idol is how angry you get with God when your ladder climbing gets obstructed.
How angry and frustrated you get with God. See, here's my big fear for us. My big fear is that I fear we delude ourselves today because some of our successes are so grand.
[18:10] And I think that's particularly pertinent in a congregation like this. It's a congregation that's full of young urbanites. I mean, the world is before us. You can create an app and overnight become this huge success. I've literally seen that happen to friends and people.

You can now become wealthy and famous on TikTok. It's within grasp. It looks like it's just there. I can just get it.
I'm in this big international city with these big companies around me, with their names on the tops of all the buildings here, offering me bursaries and opportunities and things to get into. I fear that we delude ourselves into thinking that achievement might just be there and might just be the answer to the big questions and give us the foundation that we need to really build our lives.

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And so then the related fear that I have to that is that if we go down that path, and perhaps maybe some of you are down that path already, or that you'll end up like Naaman.
That is, from one angle you'll have everything, but from another angle your life is literally falling apart. Idolizing success will take you to that place in the end.
[19:20] So what do we do? How do we dethrone success as our God? Well, look what happens to Naaman's life.

The surprising secret of true success. I don't want to read the whole story again, but look at a couple of snapshots here. So a young slave girl working for Naaman's wife tells him about this great prophet in Samaria.
Samaria is just kind of northern Israel. This prophet being Elisha, the guy who comes after Elijah. I know everyone gets us too confused. Elijah, Elisha, second. Naaman, powerful, successful man. What he does is he leans on to his power and his success to secure his healing. So he's got a buddy in high places, the king. And he's like, hey, can you send a letter maybe to the king of Israel? Since clearly the prophet's obviously an important guy, it would probably be better if we go through official channels and it makes me look all that important like I am if you write a formal letter from this king to that king and we set up this whole deal.
[20:20] So he's resting on his laurels. He's resting on his achievement. He's resting on his success. Here's how the king of Israel responds to getting this letter though. Verse 7. As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes.

And he said, am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he's trying to pick a quarrel with me.
You see, no matter how powerful you are, no matter how successful you are, no matter what you have achieved, how big your pile of achievements is, you have no control over the big things in life, namely life and death.
Achievement is not an omnipotent God, as the king of Israel points out. It's an impotent God.
Nevertheless, Elisha intervenes.
And he says, I like his thing, why did you tear your robes? He's like, silly man. Have Naaman come and see me, he says. Verse 9.
[21:32] So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan. And your flesh will be restored and you'll be cleansed.

Naaman moves in style. Horses and chariots. It's like a blue light brigade coming into town. If you add up, you've got in your footnotes there, you can see how much gold and silver he's carrying with him.
It's multiple kgs worth of the stuff that he's carrying with him and all sorts of clothes. Maybe he could have given the king some clothes since the king tore his clothes. But he's coming along with this entourage, this massive entourage, expecting what?
Red carpet something. And Elisha's like, meh. And he sends his servant out to go see who's bothering him in his afternoon nap or something. He says to Naaman, just go down to the river over there, that little brackish river over there.
Go down to that river, wash seven times, and you'll be fine. Look at how Naaman responds, verse 11. Naaman went away angry and said, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.
[22:48] Are not Abana and Phapa, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed? And so he turned and he went off in a rage. It's anger.

This rage. He expects some sort of grandiose action. Elisha, come out, man of God. Say your grand prayers.
Wave your hands. Do some sort of incantation. Dance or something. Call on the gods. Do something. And then send me somewhere significant to go and get cleansed to one of the great rivers of my nation.
What you are suggesting to me is not befitting of someone of my stature and achievement. It's just too ordinary. It's too ordinary.
But that's the point. That is the point. People who are idolizing success and achievement want to deal with God on the basis of their own achievement.

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[23:55] They want God to behave towards them in a way that they feel befits their own success. Christian theology has a category for this.

It's called works righteousness. Where you think that your works, your good works, will make you right before God. Will justify you.
To use the technical language. Will justify you before God. And the Bible just keeps smacking you in the face over that conviction all the time. Page after page after page it just keeps pushing back. And saying that is not how God works. God does not work that way. No amount of success, no amount of achievement, no works can make you righteous before God. Nothing you do can give you an identity that will last on into eternity.
Instead, in the economy of the Bible, it is all by grace. It's all by grace. God's free, unmerited gift. That is what grace is.
[24:59] It's exactly what the Apostle Paul says for us. Book of Ephesians, Ephesians chapter 2. For it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Not by works so that no one can boast. You cannot come into relationship with God through your own works, your own successes, your own achievements.
Relationship with God is only ever attained by grace. In fact, when you become a Christian, one of the things you're actually doing is you are repenting of all of your works, good works and bad works. You're actually repenting all your works, your successes, your achievements. You're saying, I turn away from my successes, I turn away from my achievements, I lay them aside and I ask you, God, to look at Christ's successes, Christ's achievements on the cross in my stead.
That's what it means to become a Christian. Now maybe you think, yeah, well, Elisha was still a little bit rude. I mean, this guy's come a long way. But Naaman had to see this.
[26:04] He had to understand this. He had to see that when it comes to the God of Israel, he does not come on the back of his own successes. He does not come bringing his credentials.

That's why Elisha won't even accept money from him at the end. You cannot bring anything before God and say, because of this, you must accept me.
No credentials, no success, no achievements. God's not interested in those. They are not the basis for a relationship with him. No matter how much euphoria success brings you, no matter how much acclaim you get from people, no matter how many good things you can point to that you've achieved, none of it gets you access to God in the end equation.
None of it gets you to the divine. You see, God's not at the top of the ladder. We all climb that ladder thinking that when we get there, he'll be there, but he's not at the top.
We climb the ladder of education, we climb the ladder of career, we climb the ladder of social status, hoping that heaven, or at least our conception of heaven, is going to be at the top, but it's not.
[27:18] It's not there. In fact, more often than not, it's at the bottom. Look how Naaman finds his healing, his redemption in the end. If you read the story too quickly, you might actually miss how it is that he comes to get redeemed.

It's in the beginning, verse 2. Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel and she served Naaman's wife.
She said to her mistress, if only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. There is an insignificant, nameless slave girl.
She has no achievement. She has no prospect of achievement. She is irrelevant by modern standards of success.
In fact, she is worse than that because she is actually a victim of other people's successes. Naaman's military successes have resulted in her lot in life at this point.
[28:21] Now you would have thought then that she would be overjoyed at Naaman's leprosy. That's like a revenge. That's what you get for running around the countryside taking people like me away from their family and putting them in slavery in a foreign country.

Look what God is doing to you. He's judging you. He's making you fall apart for all the evil things you've done. You'd have thought she'd have been overjoyed. He's ruined her life.
It's not her approach at all though. In fact, her words are actually full of genuine compassion and concern. And she says, if only my master would go and see the prophet in Samaria, he'd be cured.

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God takes the one with nothing at the very bottom of the ladder and he pours life-giving compassion into her heart. He saves her from bitterness and from despair and he brings about the redemption of Naaman through this.
And in the healing itself, if you look at the healing, there's no fanfare, there's no Elisha pronouncing all his mystical incantations over Naaman, just washing, simple act of washing in an ordinary river, a pretty bottom of the ladder achievement.
[29:38] God takes the ordinary, the unnoticeable, the things that happen at the bottom of the ladder and he brings about redemption. Just like when he took an ordinary carpenter from a backwards province in the Roman Empire and he lifted him up on a cruel instrument of torture, a cross.

That was, friends, that was the antithesis of success and achievement. And there you've got the so-called Messiah dying, abandoned by his followers, mocked by his enemies, spat on by his enemies.
He does not have, he is not being weighed down with gold and silver. There's not a cent in his pocket. He's not carrying a truckload of clothes. He has nothing. He's stripped of his clothes. He's got nothing up there to show for what he's done and achieved.
That is colossal failure by anybody's standards. This guy came and he said some things and now look at him. Stuck on a cross with nothing. What a failure.
That's rock bottom of the ladder. But through that, God washed away the leprosy of sin. Washed it right away.
[30:55] Through the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ, the nobody carpenter on the edge of the world, God brought about the salvation of billions of people. That moment of abject failure means there are billions of people around the world sitting in churches right now, 2,000 years later.

I'm not against achievement. I'm not against success. I sincerely wish you all great success and achievement in your professional and your personal lives. I do. But please, please friends, do not put your hope in what you think might be at the top of the ladder.
Don't put your hope there. Because you might get so high up that ladder that you stop seeing the suffering servant who's somewhere down near the bottom. You stop noticing him.
You stop seeing your need for him. You stop seeing the significance of his death. You stop seeing the power of the love of God to us in Jesus. You lose the wonder. You lose the awe.
Because you're way up on the 55th rung, giddy on success. And so you don't see the crucified Messiah down the bottom there offering the greatest gift of all.
[32:07] That's where you find the answers to all those big questions. Who am I? Do I truly have value and worth? How do I deal with failure?

How do I deal with disappointment, pain, even death? Do I truly have something that I can build my life on that I would have a life full of gratitude and thanksgiving?
I suspect you might find true success when you're down the bottom of the ladder. Something to be truly grateful when you're down the bottom of the ladder.
Let's pray together. God, we want to find our gratitude in the right place, Lord.
And in the culture that we work in right now, there are many things that would would pretend to offer us something that could potentially feel like and seem like it could be the source of ultimate thanksgiving.
[33:18] And as we rise up in careers or things go well in our family life, our social life, romantic life, we can start to feel that euphoria and we can start to think, well, maybe this is where my happiness comes from.

Maybe this is the thing that I need to keep building and get right to truly be happy and joyful and thankful in this life. Father, won't you spare us from that lie, from that deceit?
Won't we rightly give thanks for any achievement that we do have but always keep it subject to the success and the achievement of Jesus Christ?
His work for us, not our work. That has got to be our joy. That's got to be our thanksgiving. Lord, I pray for any person here maybe who's busy climbing that ladder right now and they would verbally go, look, I trust in Jesus but really their hearts are after that career advancement or after building the perfect picture book family or finding the perfect romantic partner and thinking, if I just get that one thing, then I will have the life I need.

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Then I'll overflow thanksgiving. Lord, I pray that you would turn them back to your son, Jesus. Turn all of us back to Jesus. Have mercy on us, Lord, we pray. For Christ's sake.
[34:33] Amen. Amen.

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