



Dr. James C. Howell
2 Kings 5:1-19 Selected Verses
June 7, 2009

What a marvelous story, a story about humility. I know I told a few of you before about the humbling experience that was my baptism. I was 8 years old. I had some neighbors who were Southern Baptists. They took me to church and I believed it when the preacher said that if I did not accept Christ, I would be in really big trouble. So I came forward at the altar call and they said to come back on Sunday night to be baptized. I didn't know what baptism was, but I followed orders and I came back. They led me to a door back there and they were wading down in water and I wondered if the building was flooded or something. I didn't know what was going on. We get down to the water and then the minister, with no warning, takes me and plunges me backward into the water, not once but three times, Father, Son, Holy Ghost. I'm kicking and I'm flailing, which I am sure is not what they had in mind, and I'm thinking to this minister, "What are you doing to me?" If somebody had said, as a Methodist, they just put a little water on your head, I would have said "I'll be a Methodist." It's symbolic though, in a lovely way, of the Christian life. We're thrown off balance here, we're surprised, it's harder than we thought it was going to be. It's humbling, you're left flailing a little. It can be embarrassing, it can be humbling. Humility.

The story of Naaman is the story of humility. Naaman is a great man of valor. He's a mighty man. He is the very assistant to the king. He is a much-decorated veteran of the war. He is a man of might and valor, but he was a leper. There's always a "but," isn't there? We get ourselves dressed up in the mornings, we have our jobs, the things that we own, and we go out in the world, and everything seems great. And you look at everyone else and they seem so wonderful, they seem so happy, they seem so successful, but there's always a "but." Sometimes we only divulge the but, perhaps, in our lawyer's office, maybe when we sit down with the doctor, maybe when we go to a therapist, and we tell about the "but." Maybe we never even admitted even to ourselves in the darkness, but there's always a "but," there's always something, some need for healing, some reason to be humble.

I was thumbing through a novel that I read back in college called *Zen And The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and an interesting page in there, *If you don't feel humble you could pretend to be humble. And then eventually, the facts will catch up to what you've been pretending to be.* I told that better earlier in the morning, and they laughed about that. You pretend to be humble and then the facts will prove it out that you have reason to be humble.

What's amazing with Naaman is that there is a cure, even for this mighty man of valor with the "but" – but he is a leper. The cure is not what he expects. He's a man of great power and he, like us, would probably prefer to be sent to the greatest physician on the planet, the greatest surgeon in that city, to go to some great resort where he can rest up and be healed, some exotic salve that would be imported from elsewhere. But instead, the cure. It begins with just a little girl, just a little servant girl. The little servant girl says *Go to Elisha*, who is a no-account prophet, and Naaman is willing to try anything because he's desperate, and he rides his chariot to the house of Elisha and he is humbled even further because Elisha will not even come out of the

house. Although you can't blame Elisha, can you? He's not being rude. I think he wants Naaman to be humble, but also, Elisha is a guy who saw his mentor, Elisha, swept up into heaven on a chariot of fire. After you've seen a chariot of fire go up in heaven, you're not impressed by steeds that show up in front of your door any longer. He's not impressed by Naaman, and Naaman is further humbled. Then he asked, What is the cure? There is no magical incantation, there's no exotic salve. He said simply *Bathe in the Jordan River seven times*. Simply, bathe in the river. I love to take people to Israel because when they see the river, they're always a little disappointed by the Jordan River. It's just a muddy creek, nothing impressive. It's not the mighty Mississippi, it's not the Nile. It's just a muddy creek, the Jordan. Naaman is offended. Bathe, simply. God's cures are always this way, by the way. It's not something that is exotic or hard to come by. It's something as obvious and omnipresent as water. Water is everywhere. Water is in your body. You're mostly water right now. The air that we're breathing has got water in it. Water is everywhere. It's something that common that God uses to heal. We come for this medicine of immortality, Holy Communion, today. It's just a little piece of bread. It's just a little wine.

I have celebrated communion all over the world, and everywhere I go, you never have a hard time finding the elements for Holy Communion. You know, it's not like the certain veal alla marsala that you can only get in Rome prepared a certain way. It's just a little bread, it's just a little wine. You can get it anywhere in the world. That's the way God is. The cure is always something simple. The cure is always something humble. It's not something cocky. It's not something highfalutin.

We need to learn about this. I saw an incident recently. It seemed odd, and, yet, I wonder if it's not indicative of something that is wrong in our culture. LeBron James – I hate sports analogies – but here's one. LeBron James is a ridiculously good basketball player, but his team, the Cleveland Cavaliers, recently were knocked out of the NBA playoffs. The last game when they lost, LeBron stormed from the court and did not do what you're supposed to do, that we taught the little boys to do in Little League when they would lose. You go to the other team and say, even if you're miserable... You show honor to the other team by saying "Congratulations." Well, LeBron stormed from the court. Huge mistake, faux pas, right? He's interviewed about it two days later. I expected LeBron to say "I feel so bad, I was so upset, I'm so sorry that I went from the court. I really want to congratulate.." No... Two days later, LeBron says, "I'm a competitor. Why should I pretend that it's a good thing that I lost?" And I thought, "There's American culture - it's all about me. Me, me, me, me. Getting ahead, getting what's for me. I'm competing. I don't care who I step on or who I don't defer to. I'm getting mine." We just have such a self-indulgent culture. We do not know humility. We do not know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.... Always humble, always deferring.

Paul in Romans 12 says, *Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to but always think of others as better than yourself*. Paul in Romans 12 goes on, *Outdo one another in showing honor to each other*. I thought about the gestures that we teach in church. We teach you gestures here. We do not teach the Tiger Woods fist pump when a long putt has been made. We don't teach that at church. We don't teach the Richard Nixon, I won-the-election victory gesture. We don't teach that gesture. The gestures that we teach are all about learning humility. We teach you to bow your head, we teach you to fold your hands. If your hands are folded, you

can't fight, you can't celebrate exactly, it's kind of passive. You'll come to the altar and you'll open those hands and we'll put just a piece of bread that you can get anywhere in the world, and it's all about being humble. We teach you to kneel, and when you kneel, that's a posture of humility. You can't run. You show deference to someone else. Worship is a school in humility. Church is a school of humility.

I'll never forget when I got to Duke Divinity School, and I took Christian Theology with a great professor named Bob Cushman. One of his first lectures, he said, "Here's the definition of faith." I thought faith was when you say, "I believe there is a God, I really believe there is a God." He said that faith is the crumpling of pride. Faith is the crumpling of pride. God would have us to be humble. It's only the humble who know the mercy of God. It's only the humble who know how to be healed. It's only the humble who know how to heal.

In 1858, there was a little girl in France named Bernadette Soubirous. She lived in a place called Lourdes, and she had some visions of the Virgin Mary, and after she had those visions, there was a spring of water there and people would come and immerse themselves in that water and they would be healed. I had a friend who went to Lourdes a few years ago. She was there for about 10 days and when she got back to the States, I said, "How was your trip?" She said, "It was wonderful." I said, "Did you see any miracles?" She said, "Every day, at Lourdes I saw miracles." I said, "Tell me about it. Tell me about the miracles that you saw every day at Lourdes." She said, "Every day at Lourdes, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter what's wrong with you, you're loved. Every day at Lourdes, there's a miracle, there's healing, there's a cure."

The Lord invites us to come this day to be healed, be cured. I want to add something, this hasn't been in my sermon notes all morning and I've been flubbing around trying to say it right. I want to try it one more time and see how it goes. There's an interesting footnote at the end of the story. This guy Naaman, he finally is humbled and he's willing to be bathed in the Jordan. He is healed. It says that he comes out and his flesh is like that of a young child. He formerly had been a leper with skin that people did not want to see. He's so moved by this healing, he knows that he has to go back to his country and how hard it's going to be back in his country where they worship gods that are not the god of Israel. This is going to be difficult for him. He knows this, and he makes two requests of Elisha. One, he says, *Can I take back some dirt?* It's like he's been on Holy Ground, he's in the Holy Land, and he knows it's going to be hard back in an unholy place, so he wants to just take some of the dirt back with him. It's a tender request. And then he makes another request of Elisha. He says, *When I go back, I am a person of importance. The king is next to me at all times.* Can you imagine the king, perhaps a bit frail in old age, when the king, according to this text, would bow down to the false god Ramon, Naaman had to be right there beside him since the king was resting on Naaman's arm. When the king would bow, Naaman also found himself bowing down to a god that he now knows is a false god. He said, *When I go back to my country, I will inevitably find myself bowing down to a false god. Is there mercy for me?* And Elisha says, *Yes, there is mercy.*

I tell you this because you may walk out of church today and say, "I'm going to be a really holy person from now on. I'm really going to follow Jesus from now on. I'm going to give my life totally to Christ from now on." And you won't make it until 2 o'clock. You know, you

can say, "I'll be holy and not be materialistic, I'm not going to be self-indulgent, I'm not going to be in the me, me, me culture. No, no, no, I'm always going to defer to other people." You won't make it until 2 o'clock. You're not going to do well, but there's mercy. And that's really the height of humility, isn't it? We'd get cocky if we thought we could serve God flawlessly, but you won't, but there's mercy, which is more cause to be humble, which is more reason for God's mercy.

I'll tell you this in closing, I met on Wednesday this week with our clergy, our professional staff. We'd read a book together on the Book of Jeremiah, we were looking at prophets this summer, we thought we'd talk amongst ourselves. We'd read this book, and it was good. You know, Jeremiah is this kind of fiery prophet, *You're not doing God's will*. And it's lovely to think about these things together. I was meeting with our group, and I was so moved by this discussion, I just wanted to report it to you. We have staff here, your staff, they're brilliant people. They could serve any church anywhere with great distinction, but they're here. They're brilliant people and if they did something else to make a living, they'd make a lot of money and just be fantastic, and you'd be impressed. I tell you what's impressive to me about them, because as brilliant as they are, they're so humble. Not one of them has a big head and thinks they're better than anybody else. They're all humble servants. And I tell you this, this came out of this conversation, I was moved by how much they love you. We know you don't think about us much during the week, but we think about y'all all the time. Sometimes we talk about you. We know you talk about us. We know you talk about us, so it's only fair. It was fun talking about you the other day as we had just read Jeremiah saying *The people have turned away from God. They have not done God's will*. And we were saying, "Those people out there, they've not done God's will, but we haven't either." What I loved about it was the tone. The tone wasn't, *They haven't done God's will*. I tell you, I looked in the eyes of some of my staff members and they were almost in tears. And there are people that we love that we're working with. They just don't think much about God and they do things that are hurtful to themselves, they don't live the life that God calls them to, and we don't either. We don't either. That was a moment of great humility, a moment of great tenderness, a moment of great love. I report this to you, one, to let you know that you are loved, but two, to say that being humble is a good thing, it's a good thing. It's the opening for God. We may think we're mighty men of valor but – there's always a "but" and the "but" is OK because it's when we're humble, when we bow our heads, when we fold our hands, then we can receive the mercy that God wants to give us. And it does heal. It does cure. Thanks be to God.