

Praying and Anointing the Sick

James 5:13-16

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The Q and A Series

December 2010

As a pastor, I frequently am asked questions pertaining to certain passages or principles in the scriptures. In an effort to faithfully shepherd God's people, I believe it is important that I diligently answer these questions to the best of my ability. The following is what I believe James 5:13-16 means and how it should be applied today in our church. I acknowledge that there are many differing views on this passage yet I must come to an understanding myself if I am to lead God's people.

The Bible was written and has been preserved so that we might understand it and thereby, know God in a greater way. Difficult passages in the scriptures frustrate us and can even bring about factions and arguments. With this in mind, I approach this subject delicately, yet with confidence, knowing God, through His Spirit will guide unto truth. It is my belief that James 5:13-16 is speaking of a practice that should indeed be continued today as an extension of the fellowship of the believers and the testimony of the power of prayer. James 5:14 is usually the verse that is most often questioned but, as with any Bible study, the context must be involved. Let's begin.

The context of James 5:14 brings great clarity to the subject at hand. Verse thirteen asks the believers two questions. "Is any among you afflicted?" "Is any merry?" These questions are naming two identifiable conditions of their fellow believers. James' admonition is as follows. If you are suffering, then you should be praying. If you have reason to be cheerful and happy, then you should be singing praises to God. These verbs all are present tense meaning they are to be something done on a continual basis.

Verse fourteen then continues with another question, "Is any sick among you?". There is some question as to whom this is referring. Is it the physically sick or one who is weak in their faith? The Greek word used here can be found speaking of both concepts throughout the New Testament. The context seems to lean more towards the sickness being primarily physical although one cannot rule out spiritual weakness also being involved. Notice the mention of Job in verse 11. What a tremendous illustration of the power of physical loss in a person's life and the subsequent deliverance once their God-centered perspective is restored. Now many times, physical challenges have a way of tearing down spiritual foundations which can lead to more than just despair. Sometimes sin is involved. This explains why James so sternly confronts sin. Sin is a something man, namely a believer, self imposes. There is no reason for sin to be found abiding in a believer. These sins may be a lack of doing what is right instead of doing what is wrong but nevertheless, "to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (4:17). It should not surprise us how this passage deals with the confession and forgiveness of sin as a part of this practice. One should not, however, assume all sickness is a result of unconfessed sin (John 9:2-3).

Now back to the question, "Is any sick among you?". It appears as if James is seeking to get the attention of people who are not well physically. People who are so afflicted that they are having a hard time even praying any more; people who are obviously not merry in heart. James wants them to know that they need the fellowship of the church to help them. It is for this reason that James gives the admonition, "let him [who is sick] call for the elders of the church".

Notice the initiation is by the one who is sick. Why is this important? Because James has talked about faith already in this letter (1:5-8; 2:18) and he is giving this broken and afflicted person an opportunity to show faith. They are asking for help from the church because they believe God is working in and through that assembly. They are opening themselves up to the work of God through the faithful leadership of the church.

Now to the elders, James writes "let them pray over him [who is sick], anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord". This action taken by the elders is what has been so hard for us 21st century believers to grasp. What is James saying here? The elders, being the spiritual leaders of the church, have been summoned by someone who is so afflicted that they are losing hope and finding it difficult to even pray.

Physical illness, as most people who have seen it, can pay a heavy toll on a person's morale and spirit. It is especially important that the Body of Christ be sensitive to those who are physically hurting for this very reason. They may need a push up or a nudge of encouragement to continue trusting God.

The elders come and do two specific things. They pray and they anoint with oil and in these two physical actions, communicate afresh the presence of God and the fellowship of the saints.

The praying is not too difficult to understand. It is petitioning God on behalf of the afflicted for physical healing, for spiritual stamina, and emotional refreshment. There is no reason to think this passage is referring to the spiritual gift of healing for the following reasons:

1. There is no guarantee of physical wholeness being restored.
2. Every elder of the church would have the gift of healing which does not seem to be true in the scriptures.
3. There would not be any sick people in the church for they would all be healed (Notice the apostle Paul's experiences, 2 Timothy 4:20; Philippians 2:25-27; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

The challenging part about this passage is the anointing with oil. To fully understand this, it is imperative that we know how a first century person would view this teaching. In the first century and especially with the Jews, "aleipho" anointing was used to speak of their use of oil for the welcoming of guests (Luke 7:38-50), and for physical refreshment to make one presentable (Matthew 6:17; 2 Samuel 14:2; Psalm 104:15; Isaiah 61:3). The disciples anointed ("aleipho") with oil after being sent out by Jesus to preach and to work miracles throughout Israel. Mark 6:13 explains they "cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them." Notice it is not the anointing or the oil that heals but the spiritually commissioned disciple who was a channel of God's healing power. The anointing was the physical refreshment for those who had been sick and symbolically marked them as one in whom God was going to work.

This also makes sense when one notices who was anointed in the Old Testament. It was people who were marked out for a specific service for God, the oil symbolizing that God was going to work in and through that individual. Notice the instructions given to Moses pertaining to his brother Aaron who was to become the High Priest. "Then shalt thou take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him." (Exodus 29:7; Leviticus 8:12). Notice also the anointing of God's chosen kings of Israel, Saul (1 Samuel 10:1), David (1 Samuel 16:13), Solomon (1 Kings 1:39), Jehu (2 Kings 9:1-6). Notice the anointing of Elisha the prophet (1 Kings 19:16). There is significance in the fact that it is God's chosen prophets, priests, and kings that were anointed.

To further clarify, the New Testament uses another word for anointing when speaking of God spiritually empowering an individual. The Greek word is "chrio" and is used in a remarkably different way than "aleipho". In Acts 4:27, we see it used by Peter and John in a prayer of praise to God. "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together". Here it is speaking of how God both chose and set apart His Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die upon the cross. Oil was not involved in this anointing but rather God's empowerment for service. This is also seen in Acts 10:38, "...How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him." Notice the anointing of Christ is referring to that day that the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove, symbolically empowering Him for service. (See also Luke 4:18; Hebrews 1:9; and 2 Corinthians 1:21 for other appearances of this word "chrio").

Now back to James 5:14, this "aleipho" anointing is done "in the name of the Lord". This phrase carries much weight and should be understood in this manner. This anointing is to be done under the authority of or in accordance with the standards of righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Colossians 3:17 says "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him". The most obvious and clear meaning is this anointing be done for God's glory, in submission to His authority, and in accordance with His righteousness.

James follows with this provoking result, "and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up". When one first reads this, they may think it is speaking of 1) spiritual salvation and future resurrection or 2) the consistent result of complete physical healing. Let's consider a third option which might better fit the context.

The sick person is physically ill and already is a believer (otherwise, why would he call for the elders of the church). James also is very specific that the prayer of faith is what does the “saving” or “restoring”. Notice also the end of verse 15 where there is the conditional phrase, “and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him”. This makes sense only if this is a believer for he is supposed to be seeking to live in holiness. If this were an unbeliever, there would be no question about the presence of unconfessed sin.

The argument against this phrase always being complete physical healing is the reality of physically sick people in the early church (as already discussed earlier). And God’s designed use of trials in a person’s life as already exposed by James in the first chapter. It seems as if James throughout this epistle, is giving instructions on how to have a healthy church assembly and healthy personal lives more than healthy physical bodies. So then what does this mean?

The word “save” is the Greek word “sozo”. This word is most commonly used for the deliverance of one from certain harm or destruction. Many times it is used to speak of a believer’s spiritual salvation. The truth is though, that there are a few other uses in the New Testament that allow for this word to mean the spiritual and emotional restoration or deliverance of a believer from mental darkness and discouragement. Paul exhorts Timothy to continue in sound doctrine for it will “sozo” himself and others from erroneous teachings and their results (1 Timothy 4:16). James uses “sozo” again in verse 20 of this same chapter in reference to the brethren. The believers could “sozo” their erring brother by seeking to help him change from his sinful behavior. It is this “saving” that is also taking place in James 5:15. The believer is dealing with great hardships and possibly some sin issues and we see James again reminding the believers that the prayer of faith works. It will minister the grace of God and the love of the church upon the sick individual, thus opening the door for tremendous “healing” to take place. Prayer works as illustrated by Elijah (see James 5:17-18, cf. 1 Kings 17:1-2,8,14,16; 18:1,41-42,45; Deuteronomy 11:13-17). Faith works as already described in chapters one and two of James’ epistle. Put prayer and faith together and you find the “prayer of faith” is enveloped in the sufficiency of God to do good, to always keep His promises, and to hear our plea for mercy. The truth in this passage is that the prayer of faith find’s its hope and confidence in the promise “the Lord shall raise him up”.

The saving and the raising is the work of God. The “prayer of faith”, which is referring primarily to the prayers of the spiritual leaders, brings about true deliverance for the sick person. They are saved by their perspective being refocused upon the Lord and not their trial. By this change in perspective, the sick person will again desire to trust in the Lord resulting in them being lifted up by the greatness and hope found in God. This is how faith works. It is only as strong as its object.

The raising up by the Lord is a term used in the New Testament to describe both the physical getting up or arising from a prostrate position to the raising up of the dead. With such a broad usage, this term needs to be more strictly defined according to its context. The immediate subject of verse 15 is that of spiritual things within the sick person. This would point to the Lord's raising being one of lifting up one from despair and hopelessness to trust and joy in Christ. What is so meaningful about such a phrase? The Lord alone has the power to raise people up. He has proven this by His own resurrection. As the afflicted saint is reminded of the Lord and what He has done for them, they will again see His power and absolute faithfulness.

So what James is describing is the renewing of the inner man through prayer and the fellowship of the saints. He now turns his attention to refining the inner man. The believer must be pure before God.

It is very interesting how the Bible gives specific things for the church to do (i.e. The Lord’s supper, Believer’s Baptism, Prayer for the sick) and they all lead believers to examine themselves. Here in this context, the sick person is confronted with the grace and mercy of God which ultimately leads to the exposure of sin. Literally, this is speaking of sins that have been committed in the past but have continuing results (Perfect tense verb). James wants it to be known that these sins shall be forgiven and the sick person can walk on spiritually and emotionally whole and, if the Lord wills it, physically whole.

James 5:16 brings about some instructional commands for not only the sick person but the church as a whole. Confession of sins to those who have been the object of those sins is commanded along with the admonition to pray for each other. Notice the restoring of fellowship in this church assembly and in the life of this sick person. The healing takes place as a result of the obeying of these commands which, in context, means that this church assembly is spiritually restored to a righteous fellowship. This healing means that the

once sin-ridden heart is spiritually made whole and all this is accomplished in an environment of confession and prayer. Truly, the ever working and effective prayer of a righteous man is continually accomplishing much with strength and power. The closing verses of this epistle illustrate this point clearly.

In conclusion, this passage in James is vital for the health and well being of not only our physically sick but also for our church as a whole. As believers find themselves suffering physically, they may experience great discouragement and hopelessness. They may even find themselves spiritually dry and lacking in faith. This is especially prevalent but not limited to those who are bed-ridden or confined to a home. The church must stand ready to respond when a call for help is made.

If such a call is made, the spiritual leaders of this church (namely, the Deacons and the Pastor), are to go this person's home. Some instruction is to be given, especially to assure the proper understanding of this text. These instructions should include:

1. There is no special measure of grace or healing in the church leaders or in the oil. This is not the manifestation of the gift of healing.
2. Physical healing is certainly a desired result but it is never promised by God until heaven. (James 1:2-4; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
3. Spiritual and emotional restoration will certainly be accomplished as the leaders pray in faith, confident in the power of God and the fellowship of the saints.
4. The purpose of the oil is to signify the refreshment that comes from fellowship and prayer. It also should remind the sick individual that they are someone who has been a chosen instrument of God through the saving grace of God. (Ephesians 2:8-10)
5. This is also a time to confront any unconfessed sin that may be present in the sick person's life. Sin is not primarily the cause of sickness and disease but it can be at times. (1 Corinthians 11:30)
Seeking and receiving forgiveness is a wonderful way of relieving stress and burdens.
6. The ultimate purpose in the time together (the prayers of the "elders" and the anointing) is that the sick person be refreshed in their body, renewed in their spirit, and reminded of the fellowship of the saints.