

Sermon for Sunday, October 16, 2011
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Healing
James 5:13-20

13 Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again and heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.

1. Healing today

Years ago, when I first studied healing in earnest, a friend suffered a viral infection of the heart. While it was not a heart attack, it mimicked many of the symptoms. My friend was listless, gray and lifeless. One day, I told him that James 5 instructs elders to lay hands on the sick and pray for healing. Might he want to call the elders for that purpose? Two weeks later, he told me "Yes." No one in our church had done this before, so we did something very Presbyterian: we studied the matter another six weeks and hoped he didn't die in the meantime.

At last, the elders gathered to pray. I was a professor; our pastor gently urged us not to expect a dramatic physical healing, since God heals in many ways. I appreciated his motive, but my doubting heart was already skeptical enough.

My friend knelt down in the middle of a circle of elders. We anointed him with oil, laid hands on him, and began to pray. Since I had started the process, I was appointed to offer the closing prayer.

As soon as we began to pray, I had an overwhelming sense that God was, at that moment, healing my friend. My arms felt what I can only describe as bolts of pulsing fire. As I grasped my friend's shoulder, heat and energy burned in my hand. It felt that my one hand could lift him – more than 230 pounds – to the ceiling or push him through the floor if I wished.

I felt certain God was healing him. I wanted to shout, "We must stop praying that God will heal John and start praising God that he has healed him." But I was too astonished, too uncertain, to tell anyone. I kept my experience to myself.

Four days later, after church, my friend beckoned to me with a wild grin, "Dan, watch this." At once, he dashed up a flight of steps. I dashed after him and met him at the top. He smiled, "And I'm not even breathing hard." "I knew it," I exclaimed, and told him what I had felt a few nights earlier. He replied, "I knew it, too."

In this church, pastors and elder join to lay hands on the sick and pray for them a number of times each year. I've never felt "fire" again, but it's often a warm or emotional time. A few experience immediate healing. Others recover gradually, and under the care of physicians. Many find spiritual healing – peace and spiritual renewal in times of crisis and suffering, whether they recover physically or not.

Healing in James

The topic of healing fits perfectly in James 4-5. James promises grace to those who embrace gospel humility, those who "Humble themselves before the Lord" (4:10). Prayer for healing is part of gospel humility – taking our needs to God. He tells the church to pray in every setting of life, to take every concern to the Lord: "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise" (5:13). Believers pray in all circumstances (Jas 5:13, Eph 6:18).

- If anyone suffers hardship, let him pray.
- If anyone is in good spirits, let him praise.
- If anyone is sick, let him call elders.
- If someone calls the elders, let them pray.

Individuals pray for joys and sorrows (5:13-14). Elders pray over sickness (5:14-15). Friends pray over sins they committed (5:16). Prophets pray in time of need (5:17-18). Whatever our condition or circumstance, we take it to the Lord in prayer.

Prayer in James

Believers pray. If we face illness or loss, we pray for help. If we succeed, we thank God. Through prayer, we hallow every pleasure and sanctify every pain. In good times, when anyone is happy, we "sing songs of praise." We should learn Christian songs, new and old, songs that speak to the heart and express its joys and yearnings. We should give thanks for the life he gives, his gifts, his daily providence, as an element of daily life.

Praise God for every blessing, for food and shelter, for work and for play. In a Christian home, if one child stars in a school musical, if another excels in a soccer match, if father gets a promotion at work, if mother completes a commissioned painting, they must take their joys to the Lord. So we sanctify pleasures and consecrate pains. If happy, we praise. If troubled, we pray. If suffering and weak, we pray with the church elders (5:13-14).

Sickness, healing, and the elders

We have lingered over James' interest in joy. We could also linger over his command to pray when we suffer, when we need strength to persevere. We endure trials, we suffer oppression, illness, disasters, even persecution (5:1-10).

James begins, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him..." (5:14). This prayer is for physical needs – for the sick (literally "weak"). This can include spiritual or mental weakness (Rom 5:6, 6:19, cf. 4:19), even a troubled conscience (1 Cor 8:7-10, Rom 14:1-2). Chronic illness can afflict the spirit. James chiefly refers to people who need physical healing (5:16).

The sick call the elders. Elders are leaders of the local church. The apostles commissioned elders to watch the church. They act as shepherds and overseers. They recover wanderers, heal the wounded, nurture the young. They should know the needs of the people better than they know themselves. And they should be examples of godliness and faith (1 Pet 5, 1 Tim 3).

The sick call the elders as a group. They ask them to come and pray for healing. James says the prayers of a righteous man are effective. Since the first qualification for an elder is holiness - not social standing or theological acumen – the prayers of elders are effective. The elders pray for healing, not for miracles. It doesn't matter if a healing is quiet and gradual or sudden and dramatic. True healings garner all the attention they need.

Anointing with oil

The elders anoint the sick with oil. At that time people sometimes used oil medically (Luke 10:34), but this anointing is more than medicine. The Bible never opposes sound medical treatment - Paul urged pastor Timothy to take wine for his stomach (1 Tim 5:23). But here James tells the elders to pray for healing.

The anointing stimulated the faith of the sick person. Jesus sometimes called the sick aside for private conversation and touched them before healing them (Matt 8:3, 20:34). Oil is a sign of God's power to heal. The oil is a spiritual symbol. This is not the later custom of anointing as a sacrament to remove sin before death. This is a prayer for healing.

The anointing symbolizes the power of the Holy Spirit. It sets apart the sick person, fervently asking God to heal. This doesn't displace physicians; Luke was a physician. All healing is spiritual. Wise physicians know they do not heal anyone. Christian physicians sometimes used to say "I dress the wound, but God heals it." Anointing is a solemn ceremony, like a wedding or an ordination. The ceremony makes us pause, so we take the act seriously. The ceremony can arouse faith.

How to proceed

We may have practical questions: what are we supposed to do if we want healing and prayers for healing? How sick does one have to be? James seems to have a major malady in view. The terms for the illness suggest something serious. The sick person is, literally, "weak" (asthenei - 5:14). James uses a strong term – *kamno* in 5:15. It means to wear out. It reminds us that weariness and exhaustion often accompany illness. Sickness exhausts the spirit as well as the body. Pastorally, this means elders could lay hands and pray for Christians who are afflicted spiritually. Depression, stress, and anxiety can wear us out more than some illnesses.

The sick person takes the initiative. The sick call the elders; perhaps they cannot travel. The elders pray over him. This may signify that the sick man kneels. Or it may imply that a sick woman is bedridden.

What we seek

James has both physical and spiritual healing in mind in 5:15-16. We should seek more than a physical cure for more than physical problems. Physical healing is James' main concern, but we must look past the body. The ESV expresses it well: "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if anyone has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

The word *save* ("make well" NIV) is a Greek word that can mean to save in the sense of saving the soul or to save in the sense of physical deliverance (e.g. Matt 9:21-22, Luke 17:19). So then, in both English and Greek, one could say "The Lord saved me when I was twenty years old." But we could also say, "The lifeguard saved the life of a child today." The word (in both tongues) can mean "save eternally"

– from condemnation, or "save from illness or loss. The point: we can pray that God will heal a body or save a soul.

Still, there is no doubt that we should pray for physical healing ("healed" 5:16). We should pray for one another, for healing. Some Christians grow weary of praying about physical ailments. They want to pray for "more important things." That is understandable, but it is still good to ask God to heal the body.

Other Christians claim that everyone can be healed, if they pray with enough faith and fervor. Then, if anyone is not healed, it's because they lack faith. This teaching doubles the misery for the chronically ill. They suffer their original problem and they suffer the stigma of insufficient faith.

This kind of thinking, which mars some churches, makes crucial mistakes. First, it forgets that God numbers our days. Everyone must die. Therefore, even the most faithful disciples suffer a final illness. No amount of faith will deliver them from it. Second, some heroes of the faith were not healed of illnesses. Paul worked many miracles, but he didn't heal his friends Timothy or Epaphroditus (1 Tim 5:23, Phil 2:25). And the Lord never relieved Paul of his own "thorn in the flesh," which was apparently a physical affliction (2 Cor 12:7-10).

James is not promising universal healing in this life. Yes, 5:15 says "the Lord will raise him up." But that has two possible meanings. The Lord can raise the sick from their beds (Matt 9:6, Acts 3:7). But in the New Testament, the Lord will "raise them up" often refers to the resurrection on the last day (John 6:40-54; 1 Cor 15:15). The Lord raises up all the sick who believe in him – some in this life, some for eternal life. The Lord heals all his people sooner or later. Some rise from sickness in this life, after prayer by the elders. Others rise bodily when Jesus returns and raises the dead. He determines when he heals. So let's not blame sick believers for a lack of faith.

The role of faith (5:15)

Taken in isolation, the statement "The prayer of faith will save" (5:15) seems to say that all who believe are healed and only those who believe are healed. But Scripture's testimony is more complex. If God healed people because he saw their faith, then God should have healed Paul and his friends every time they were sick. They had faith and were not healed; therefore, we cannot ascribe lack of healing to lack of faith. Healing is a gift, not a reward. God does not owe healing to someone simply because they have strong faith.

Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your will be done." The Lord grants or denies our requests as he wills. His sovereign purposes direct his actions. He has mercy as he wills. It's a mistake to congratulate ourselves for strong faith when God grants a request and a mistake to blame ourselves when he refuses to do as we ask.

Yet when we do pray or call elders to pray, we should do so in faith. Elders should trust in God's goodness and power too. God will not heed a gathering of skeptics, who spin out a dead ritual.

James warns that the requests of doubters are ineffective (1:6). Yet the issue is not quality of faith, as if God hears prayers with "strong faith," while prayers with "weak faith" fall short of heaven. Further, God will not violate his plan for us because we ask, with misguided faith, that he do so. The Lord neither heeds wicked prayers (James 4:3) nor alters his good will because we ask him to do so. But the Lord hears prayers that confess, "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

Sin and sickness (5:15-16)

James adds, "If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." This reminds us that sickness has a spiritual dimension. Confess your sins, James says, because sin can be connected to illness. Does that sound antiquated or offensive to you? Can scientifically minded people actually believe that sin and sickness are connected?

Jesus himself said some people over-spiritualize illness. Some assumed that all tragedy and disease was a direct consequence of sin. The Bible says that is false. Job's friends said he was sick because he had done evil. But God said no (9:13-21, 29:1 ff.). Once someone asked Jesus about a man born blind: "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither" (John 9:3). So Jesus denies that all illness is the result of personal sin.

Today we de-spiritualize illness. We know: microbes and defective genes cause illness. But we recognize a link between sin and illness in some cases. Alcoholism can cause cirrhosis of the liver. Promiscuity brings sexually transmitted diseases. In Psalm 32, David said sin can wound the whole person, body and soul:

*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away....
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin and did not cover up my iniquity. I said,
"I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"
And you forgave the guilt of my sin (Ps 32:3-5).*

So maybe we need to re-spiritualize illness. Jesus healed one crippled man by the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem and said, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." (John 5:14). Deuteronomy says Israel's sins will lead to sickness. But the covenant community enjoys God's blessings when it is faithful (Deut 28:58-63).

So consider the possibility that the sick person has sinned. "If he has sinned," James says, he can be forgiven. Sin may or may not be the root of illness, but time in bed gives opportunity for self-examination. If sickness idles us, we should scan our lives. If sins come to mind, we should confess, repent, and endeavor to reform.

To some extent, then, spiritual health engenders physical health, and spiritual troubles beget physical sorrows. Again, James says, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (5:16a).

Confession of sin

It's easy to misunderstand the command to confess sins to one another. The Bible never says we should confess any and every sin to each other. This is the only statement that says, "confess to one another" so the rest of Scripture must guide our thinking. The salient principles:

First, the offender confesses to the one offended, whether to God or man.

Second, we confess secret sins to God alone, since sins like anger, envy, lust offend him, even if we never act on them. It's unlikely that we will accomplish anything good by telling someone "I secretly envied you" or "lusted after you."

Third, we confess public sins (which offend many), publicly. Example, if a leader propounds heresy or misuses public funds, public confession is right. But we confess private sins privately, to people we offend.¹

James's concern is confession of sins that one person commits vs. another. Once a sinner repents, and the offended party forgives, fellowship is restored.

James expects those prayers to be effective, for "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (5:16b). Elders are supposed to be righteous, but James expects the whole church to pray. Everyone who is righteous by faith prays. Still, the power of prayer lies in the grace of God, not the goodness and merit of the petitioner. God declares us righteous when we sincerely trust Jesus, by his Spirit.

Effective prayer illustrated

Elijah illustrates the effective prayer of the righteous. In the reign of wicked king Ahab, Elijah prayed "that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain" (5:17-18).

Elijah was a righteous and faithful man, yet he certainly was not a perfect man. At times, he indulged his fears. He ran away, despaired of life, and petitioned God to take him (1 Kgs 19:1-11). Still, God heard his prayers, as he hears ours.

Notice that James does not call Elijah a prophet to emphasize his special relationship with God. He calls Elijah a man "just like us". He had the same "nature" or "passions" as we do. He felt weak. He felt royal powers arrayed against him. He was prone to despair. He wasn't worthy, he was simply a righteous man who prayed for his nation.

We can pray like Elijah. We may feel weak and lonely. We may feel that powers are against us. In prayer, we may admit that we fear those powers, yet our prayers also declare that the greatest power is unseen. The power of God heals disease and changes the world.

Seeking physical healing

The Lord wants his children to seek him both when we prosper and when we falter. If sick, we should pray for healing. If seriously ill, we should seek the elders to pray for us. But we are reticent to do this. First, prayer for healing seems unscientific and naïve. If we get infections, we take antibiotics. If we have cancer, we seek chemotherapy. We think, "Microbes and bad genes cause illness, not sin."

¹ (Stott, Confess Sins, 12)

Pride also stops us. Many of us hate to ask for help. But we ought to face our needs. If we can ask God for aid, we can surely ask men and women.

We also fear disappointment. What if we ask, fervently, and nothing happens? We can't bear the thought. Functional Deism also blocks our prayers. We confess, in an abstract way, that God is powerful. We expect him to change hearts, but we can't imagine healing bodies today. So our prayers wither away.

These are common problems. Even after I had seen others healed, I had a hard time applying it in my family. While my friend's heart was healed, we had a baby who suffered a terrible rash, all over her body, for the first eleven months of her life. We had to keep her skin covered all the time, even on the hottest days, for the moment her skin was uncovered to change or get a bath, she began tearing at it. She screamed until the walls shook. No matter what we did, she tore at her skin so furiously that her fingernails made hundreds of tiny lacerations on her skin.

As concerned as we were, it was hard for me to call the elders to pray over her skin. It was just a rash. More than that, I must confess that though I taught others about prayer for healing I struggled to keep my own skepticism at bay. After all, I was praying for her, I was an elder and nothing had happened.

We did call the elders eventually, but when the hour came, I felt defeated. The elders left our home and I immersed myself in my work. Thoughts of my daughter flew from my mind. Later, I thought I heard the sound of soft weeping coming from upstairs. I left my books, walked to the stairs and called up, "Is everything all right? Is someone crying?"

Someone was crying - my wife, kneeling by the tub. Sweet tears of joy ran down her face. I climbed the steps to her and she looked from me to our baby and choked out the words, "She's playing in the bathtub. For first time in her life, she is playing in her bathtub."

In three hours, our child's skin had changed. She still had an occasional light rash until five or six, but she experienced real, substantial healing that hour.

It's a pastor's privilege to pray with immature Christians and heroes of the faith and watch the Lord calm and comfort them. God still acts, in history, in supernatural ways. How fitting that James starts to close his book with this invitation to pray over every joy and sorrow. Expectant prayers manifest the faith that is so central to James. When we make our needs known, confess our sins, endure our trials, and live in gospel humility.

So pray and let us pray with you. Call on our Lord thru Christ, by grace alone.