

“Prayer – Proactive Patience”

James 5:13-20

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(Prayer, Healing)

Many years ago a woman of our church called and asked if some of the other elders and I would come and pray for her healing.

Cancer had racked her body.

The treatments were done, nothing but a miracle could change the course of her life.

As two other elders and I drove to her home, some questions plagued me:

- When we pray, what if she isn't healed?
- Maybe she will assume her faith, or ours, isn't strong enough?
- Maybe she or her family members will now question God?
- Is it worth the risk?

The closer I got to that home the more skeptical I became about what could happen as a result of our prayers.

Oh, I **wanted** God to heal her, I believed that God **could** heal her but I realized that I didn't expect that God **would** heal her.

In the text before us today, it is probably this issue of healing that is of most interest to people.

Soon we will read again the following words from James 5:

“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up...”

Oh, how we'd love to believe that, when a loved one or we are very sick and death threatens.

When our computer doesn't work, we pull up the help menu to find the formula to follow to fix the problem.

We push the right buttons in the right order and it works.

When we get sick we go to the doctor to get the medicine to correct the problem.

We take the prescribed number of pills for the correct number of days and we get well.

When we think of this verse, we'd love to call the elders, anoint with oil and say the right words and voila, healing occurs.

As good as that would be, most of us have been around long enough to know it doesn't work that way.

In fact most of us have been around long enough to conclude it simply doesn't work at all.

And the result is that we just dismiss these verses as maybe nothing more than quaint relics of another era.

But instead of dismissing them, I'd like us to see these ideas as James presents them.

I'd like to show you that the primary issue here is not healing but an active daily dependence on God as manifested in prayer.

It's probably time to read the text:

James 5:13-17 "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.¹⁷ Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

These words were not written in a vacuum.

James has written to Christians who were living under severe circumstances.

James began his letter calling his readers to perseverance, to patient endurance of hardship: James 1:2-3 "Consider it pure joy, my

brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

He returned to that theme near the end of his letter by giving them **reason** to be patient in the midst of suffering and trials: 5:7-11 “Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming... You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near... As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered...”

Perseverance, patience, endurance – James doesn’t want them to give up or to abandon the faith.

Throughout the letter James calls them to genuine Christianity evidenced by changed speech, changed conduct, changed hearts, compassion for those who have even less, consideration for each other, and mercy toward all.

And all of that **even while they** are being mistreated.

Is that all they can do; are they just to be patient, waiting for Jesus to return?

No, James says, you can be **proactively patient**; you can pray!

You can pray for yourselves (verse 13), you can ask the elders to pray for you (verses 14-15) and you can pray for each other (verse 16).

Why, because as summarized at the end of verse 16, God acts in response to the prayers of his people.

And this is illustrated by Elijah’s experience in verses 17-18).

Let’s start where James does in verse 13 “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.”

Life is constantly changing.

Are you sad? Are you happy?

The verse covers both ends of the circumstantial and emotional spectrum and all that is between – whether troubled or contented – the bad and the good.

“Is any of you in trouble?” The word “trouble” (from two Greek words meaning “to suffer evil”) is a term that probably includes all kinds of difficulties.

This includes the natural, physical, emotional, and spiritual and in James, it includes even the hostility of the world against Christians.

What are we to do? Pray, talk to God.

“Is anyone happy?” The word “happy” means cheerful, peace of mind, or contented.

It speaks of those times in life when all seems well.

What are we to do? Sing to God. Pray in praise of him.

The point is that in every circumstance of life, bad or good, our first reaction is to appeal to God.

The Psalmist is a great example of that kind of prayer life.

He praised, he complained, he grieved, he reveled, he asked, he pleaded, he rejoiced – it was the full range of emotions depending on the situation.

Most of all, he knew God was part of all that was happening and he intentionally went to God with it all.

The Apostle Paul said it this way in Philippians 4:6-7 “Do not be anxious about anything, but **in everything**, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I know people whose first response to every situation of life is to think of God and to go to him.

Things are going badly for them or someone else and their first response is to pray.

Something special happens in their day and their first response is “praise God” and say “thank you Jesus.”

Oh, to live that way!

At times it seems kind of maddenly simplistic; they're praying when we'd be calling for an ambulance.

But I have to respect the priority that is being expressed – they understand that God is more central and important in the everyday affairs of life than anyone or anything else.

The best response is to pray while you call for the ambulance.

In every circumstance of life, we are to pray.

We are called on to pray for ourselves.

Now that is great overview of how we should handle life, but in the next verses James will be even more specific.

James 5:14 “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

What about medicals doctors and medicine?

The Bible doesn't often mention physicians but it does assume them.

- Matthew 9:12 “Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.
- The author of the Acts of the Apostles, the gospel writer Luke was himself a physician, who attended the Apostle Paul.
- In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul urged Timothy to use a little wine, medicinally, for his stomach and frequent illnesses.

In the Bible it isn't prayer or physicians, prayer or medicine but it is God working through it all.

Every era seems to have people who run to one extreme or the other.

Even today we have people who refuse to go to doctors, believing it is a contradiction of their faith

But most Evangelicals don't go to that extreme, we go to the other.

We don't really expect **God** to do much when we are sick – our faith is in medicine and physicians, not in God.

We rightly dismiss the miracle healers that appear from time to time because some of them have been shown to be charlatans and the others have no higher success rate of healing than when people are unattended.

These “healers” present themselves as following the practice of Jesus and the Apostles but their “healings” are seldom instantaneous and almost always unverifiable.

The result is that we end up dismissing it all; dismissing any real expectation of God intervening in any way.

Remember the woman, I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, who asked the other elders and me to come and pray for her?

I had more confidence that a spontaneous remission might take place, or that some new medicine might yet be discovered than expectation that God might heal her.

Our theology says God can heal miraculously, but our skepticism says he probably won't.

What has brought us to such a sorry state of skepticism?

In 2 Chronicles 16:12 there is a description of a man who sounds like some of us:

It says, “In the 39th year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians... and he died”.

I'm not going to argue that if Asa had sought the Lord he necessarily would have been healed - the text doesn't tell us that.

My point in showing you that text is that Asa, like us, apparently had more confidence in the doctors than he did in the Lord.

In the last couple of centuries there has been much more information about our world and our bodies than ever before.

As the amount of information grew we became less dependent upon God.

The more we understood about the “natural” process of healing the less we saw God involved.

People formerly had to pray that God would cure infections - now they just take penicillin.

We have seen new medical discoveries such as vaccines, antibiotics, and medical procedures, and have a growing understanding of the cause and effect of clean water, sterilization of surgical instruments, and vitamins.

Instead of praising God for any and all of the means that he uses to heal us, many of us believe that God is not really necessary for these things.

God may have been important in healing in a pre-scientific time but not now.

And he may still be necessary for the spiritual but not the physical.

But that is unbiblical thinking.

My Bible says in Hebrews 1:3 that the Lord Jesus is “sustaining all things by His powerful word. It also says the same in Colossians 1:17 “in Him all things hold together”

God is involved in the “normal” or ‘regular affairs of life.

He is actively involved in our everyday lives in every detail – “sustaining all things.”

Penicillin, antibiotics, and sanitation, etc. are all part of God’s involvement in our world.

He is as much involved in the things that we would call normal as He is in the miraculous.

So what does James say?

James 5:14 “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Notice the sick person calls for the elders.

Maybe the sick person was too sick to go to the elders and needed the elders to come to him or her.

Praying “over him” suggests that the sick person is incapacitated and even lying down.

These words suggest that the situation is serious and not merely temporary.

We don't call for the elders when we have a cold or the flu.

That doesn't mean we don't pray for ourselves, and each other, when we have lesser illnesses but calling for the elders seems to be for particularly serious situations.

James says to “anoint him with oil.”

Was the oil a form of medicine?

It appears that the ancient world considered oil to have curative powers.

But I don't think the oil was medicine; I think it was a visual aid.

It was a physical symbol.

In the OT, anointing with oil was used that way.

It meant the special setting-someone-apart for God.

Here the anointing symbolizes in a physical way, the special prayer being offered for this person.

The oil is not magic; like the water of baptism and the bread of the Lord's Supper, it simply aids both the elder and the sick person in understanding the special nature of this prayer.

The text says you are to call for the elders, they are to pray and they are to anoint the sick person with oil “in the name of the Lord”

Now, it doesn't say the elders must say those exact words.

This is not Christian “abracadabra.”

In John 14:13 Jesus said “I will do whatever you ask in my name.”

We have turned that into a perfunctory conclusion to every prayer; “In Jesus' name, amen.”

But the point is not formula; it is recognition that the power and authority behind any answer to prayer is our God – we are dependent on him alone.

Then James gives the conclusion of such prayers:

James 5:15 “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

This raises several questions from us:

- What does a prayer “offered in faith” mean?
- Will this prayer always result in healing?
- What does sin have to do with this?

James seems to have added a qualification to the kind of prayer that will make a sick person well.

It is a prayer “offered in faith.”

Let me tell you of a startling experience I had several years ago.

A middle-aged man of our church died at work and a co-worker of his called me.

I rushed to the hospital where the body was taken so I could be with his wife and family.

After spending time praying with her, we waited until the man’s mother and siblings arrived from Fort Collins.

The mother saw me first and asked in a demanding voice, “Where is he?” Not where is the body, but where is he?

For the next hour she and her other adult children gathered around the body of the dead man and demanded that Satan release him and demanded that God raise him up.

At one point a sister asked what Scripture she should read and the mother said, “Read anything!”

The worst moment came when after an hour of no results, the mother turned to the dead man’s wife, the woman I had gone to console, and said to her, “He’s still dead because you don’t have enough faith.”

At that point I called a halt to the whole thing and got the nurses to eject them from the room.

James is not saying the elders had to have a certain amount of faith as if they had to conjure up greater faith or greater passion.

He's not saying you can't have any doubts or that your faith must be perfect.

He's simply saying their faith must be in God.

These are people who have made up their minds about God.

They recognize and believe in the providence of God – they know he is in control and they are looking to him to provide.

The issue isn't the amount of faith but the object of their faith – God.

Some teach that the “prayer offered in faith” is a special kind of faith that God provides in some situations.

Their idea is that sometimes God gives special insight to his servants in some situations; the insight is that in this particular situation, God does in fact plan to heal the person.

Knowing the mind of the Lord, the ones who pray must believe that God will do it.

A pastor I worked with in Minneapolis believed this.

I remember one occasion when the infant daughter of my good friend was near death.

The pastor told me that he was convinced by the Spirit that God would heal the little girl and when we gathered to pray, he prayed that way.

The little girl survives to this day.

I offer that as one possible explanation for what “in faith” means.

But I am troubled when others whom I know have had equal certainty about God's will and have prayed that way only to have the sick person die.

British evangelist, David Watson, believed wholeheartedly that God said he would heal him and David prayed “in faith.”

But David Watson died.

I find it hard to believe that we know with certainty the mind of God in such matters.

So what are we to think when this verse makes it sound as if the result we desire is guaranteed? “The Lord will raise him up.”

Will God heal every time if we pray correctly?

Some will argue that God always heals, whether in this life or by taking us to heaven; but that seems to be an attempt to avoid the plain words of the verse.

I will readily acknowledge that I don't fully understand what James means here.

This much I do know from James and the rest of the Bible – we must pray and pray with faith.

The elders pray, we pray and we pray with an expectancy that God will do the very best for us in his way.

But our faith is not in faith, it is not in a particular answer, and it is not in our fervency; our faith is in God to do his perfect benevolent will.

James adds something quite surprising to his statement about prayer and healing: **“If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”**

Is there a connection between sin and sickness?

Both the OT and the NT make this connection; some sickness is caused by sin.

And I'm not just talking about living in a fallen world – though it is true that much sickness is a result of a sin-ridden world.

I think James is talking about the sin of the individual who is sick.

That shouldn't really surprise us.

I have read that fear, sorrow, envy, anxiety, resentment and hatred are responsible for a large percentage of the illnesses people suffer.

For example, an unwillingness to forgive can create many emotional and physical ailments.

I have also read that confession and release of anger have caused the healing of many infirmities.

Having said that, the Bible also makes it clear that sickness isn't always connected directly to our sin.

Even here James says, "If" – it is by no means a given, but "**if**" it is true, then confession is called for.

It is reasonable for a believer to ask himself or herself if their sickness is the result of unconfessed sin.

**That said, James moves to the conclusion of the matter:
"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."**

Notice that James has moved from praying for yourself, to having the elders pray, now to the subject of praying for each other.

Here we have two commands and a proverb.

The first command is to confess your sins to each other.

Some have made of this "confess your sins to each other" a kind of group experience of public confession of specific sins.

Roman Catholics have used these verses to support confession to a priest.

Anglicans and others have used these verses to support the kind of corporate confession at the beginning of their services of worship.

I don't think the text demands that confession be either public or specific.

Instead as one man wrote, "The confession of sin entails humble honesty about the **fact** of having committed sin, not a public retelling of the details of the act." (Kurt Richardson, James, 236)

But James has made it clear that some sickness is the result of unconfessed sin, and therefore, it is good practice, if sick, to confess to God the sins that may be causing the sickness.

And if we have sinned against others, we confess to them.

The second command is to pray for each other.

James says it is good preventative medicine to confess our sins and to pray for each other.

The last sentence of verse 16 is a fitting conclusion to the conclusion:
 “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. “

The NASB translates it this way: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

The KJV translates it this way: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

But the word “fervent” is simply not in the Greek text and is an addition that is uncalled for.

This verse does not call for a special amount of passion to be persuasive with God or effective in results.

Even the NASB’s “effective” prayer seems to suggest another qualification of the prayer that works.

But James has already made it clear that the only qualification is faith in God – a dependence on God.

Another qualification that some want to place on this prayer is that it must be offered by a certain kind of person – a righteous person.

Then they define righteous as particularly holy.

We joke that someone’s prayers didn’t get answered because they weren’t righteous enough.

But the “righteous” person here is not one who is holier than all the others but one who is in right relationship with God.

This is not a super saint but simply a person who lives in dependence on God.

To prove his point that this promise is not only for exceptional Christians, James uses Elijah.

And in particular he points out that Elijah was a man like us.

As one man said it, “Elijah does not stride across the stage of history ten feet tall but as an ordinary man with an extraordinary God.” (Davids, 125)

Again, I think most translations mislead us when they say Elijah prayed “earnestly.”

The Greek text says he “prayed with prayer.”

It is not that Elijah prayed with greater intensity “but that praying was precisely what he did.” (James Adamson, James, NICNT, 201)

So James’ point is that every Christian has access to the same powerful, gracious God and that praying makes a difference – it is powerful and effective.

Do we believe that?

Let me return to the story with which I began the message – the woman who was dying of cancer and called us elders to pray for her.

No, she was not healed.

When that is the case more often than not, why do we elders continue to go and pray for others?

Why do we all pray for ourselves and for each other?

I could tell stories of others who were healed.

But empirical evidence doesn’t usually convince anyone.

We can explain away almost anything.

Ultimately it comes down to whether we take God at his word or not.

Will I believe him when he says that our prayers make a difference?

Will I believe him that he chooses to use our prayers as one of the means whereby he directs the course of our lives and the world around us?

James 5:13-16 “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and

anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Other notes:

PRAYER

Prayer is rebellion against the status quo!

Jerry Nelson

“We should view prayer as another **revolutionary tactic**, *not* a passive resignation to a situation. In prayer, we enlist the aid and ear of the Lord of Hosts (recall 5:4), our God who is more than capable of righting our wrongs and helping us in our pain.” (Blomberg, 315)

HEALING AND PRAYER

For more see “Expectant and Accepting” under “Articles” “healing” at www.soundliving.org

ON CONFESSION OF SIN

“More difficult to apply is James’ command to confess our sins to one another. Catholicism elevated this procedure to a sacrament but limited it to a private encounter between church members and clergy. The Lutheran and Anglican/Episcopalian liturgies include a public confession of sins at the start of each service, followed by the pastor’s pronouncement of absolution. But still neither of these practices is quite the same thing as going to the person against whom one has sinned to acknowledge one’s failure and seek forgiveness. Matthew 18:15-18 lies in the background. When sin has estranged two parties, one of them needs to take the initiative to restore the relationship. If that fails, then other Christian helpers must be brought into the process. If at all possible, the confession should not be made any more or less public than the original sin. And “any confession should be offered in the presence of those who have been harmed by the sin or in the presence of the leaders of that community

rather than a wider context, so that wise counsel may be offered.” Community life can be powerfully strengthened by sensitive application of appropriate confession, whereas cavalier and irresponsible application can do great damage. If a person does not know that one has sinned in one’s thoughts against them, it can probably only harm them for one to confess the sin. But when people are aware of offenses, even when two parties are each partly to blame, it is almost always healthy to take the initiative in apologizing.” (Blomberg, 330,331)

Resource: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (especially chapter 5).

AN OUTLINE OF 5:12-20:

5:12 Be people of integrity
 5:13-18 Be people of prayer
 5:19-20 Be people who lovingly correct each other.

AN OUTLINE OF 5:13-20

While waiting patiently for Jesus’ return, do two things:
 5:13-18 Intercede for one another.
 5:19-20 Intervene for one another

ON INTERPRETATION OF 5:16

The translation of this verse (5:16) depends somewhat on the verb form of the word “energoumene;” is it passive or middle.

A good discussion of this is in Excursus I of James Adamson’s *The Epistle of James*, NICNT, 205ff

On ELDERS

The words “Elders” – Presbuteros (James) ; Overseer - episkopos- (1 Timothy 3:1); Pastor/shepherd – poimane (Acts 20:28) are always used in the plural meaning not one but several men in any one church. All refer to the same office in the church. They are to be spiritually mature men who are responsible under God to guide the church (I Timothy and Titus 2).

It is at least interesting that James does not tell the sick to call for those with the gift of healing but to call for those who are spiritually

mature. It is the spiritually mature who should be expected to be able to pray with discernment and a proper perspective.

Notice that the welfare of the members of the congregation is a primary concern of the elders. They are not only servants of an institution but more importantly they are servants of the people. It is not that the elders have some magical power but that the elders represent the congregation. They go to the sick person who has called them.

ELDERS PRAYING FOR THE SICK

1. Upon request, the elders assemble at the home of the sick person.
2. The sick person is asked about the nature of his/her illness; care should be taken to not encourage too much detail, but enough to pray specifically.
3. James 3:13-16 is read.
4. The sick person is gently questioned about their understanding of the passage: has confession of sin been made where appropriate; do they understand faith as faith in God, not faith in faith or faith in prayer; are they ready to accept God's will in the matter, etc.
5. The sick person is anointed with oil in the name of the Lord (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).
6. Laying hands gently on the sick person, several of the elders pray for him/her.
7. Together we sing the "Doxology" as indication of trust in God's providential care.

(Ideas guided by R. Kent Hughes, in *James, Faith that Works*, 256-7)