

Prayer for the Sick

- James 5:14-16
- Again James prompts the discussion of an important biblical principle with a question. Last week we attempted to unpack his first two questions and answers: Is anyone suffering? What's the answer? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? What's the answer? Let him sing praise. Today we will start to unpack this very difficult section in James, and hopefully we will be able to complete our examination of it in two weeks, as it seems good to wait until all the women are back from retreat to complete this section. The final question is a simple one: Is anyone among you sick? The answer is much more complicated. Let's look at verse 14 today, and it's constituent parts, and then Lord willing, we will address verses 15-16 in two weeks. If you are taking notes, you can organize them under these two main points: the initiative of the sick, and the action of the elders.
- **The initiative of the sick**
- "Is anyone among you sick?" Before we address the "anyone among you" part of that question, let's talk about the last word, "sick." By the way, young people, this is a serious word that means there's something wrong. I understand that some of you use the word as a synonym for awesome, as in, "Man, that dude on the guitar was sick." I can assure you that James is not asking for the awesome people to call for the elders. No, these were people who were ill. Infirm. Not well. And based on the text, probably not ambulatory. They were most likely at home, in their beds, unable to get up. Now, some have argued down through the years that James was talking about spiritual sickness. And that's why he addresses confession of sins in verse 16. But although the word that James uses here can refer to spiritual sickness, whenever it is, a qualifier is added. When Paul refers to someone as being "Weak in conscience" or "weak in faith," the word he uses is *astheneo*, which is translated sick in James 5. But notice he qualifies it. This man's conscience is weak, or infirm, this woman's faith is weak, or sick. When spiritual sickness or weakness is the reference, there is a qualifier. No qualifier here in James 5:14. The universal opinion is that James refers here to physical sickness. Here's a second reason: the only other time there's a reference to spiritual leaders anointing with oil in the New Testament is found in Mark 6:13. Jesus had sent out the apostles two by two, and Mark writes, "And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." More about the oil later, but the plain sense of this text is that James is calling those who are physically sick to do something. What should they do?
- **Call for the elders of the church.** All right, let's take that phrase apart and look at it. He says, "Call for the elders of the church," but what church? Well, the one they are in, the one they are committed to! That's why he asks, "Is anyone among you sick?" Remember, James' letter is addressed to churches, which are populated with followers of Jesus. So, here he instructs believers who are gathered in the church to call for the elders of the church. That's the significance of the "among you" phrase. Peter uses it when he says to the elders in 1 Peter 5, "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you." These verses, I believe, as do the elders here, make a strong case for church membership. To be committed to a local fellowship, under the authority of God who works through elders. It also makes a strong case for a plurality of elders. Notice James doesn't instruct the sick person to call for the pastor, but for the elders. Plural. Now, can the elders of a church go to the home of a sick person who is not a member of the church and pray for them? Of course they can, as can any other follower of Jesus Christ! In fact, that lends itself to a wonderful opportunity to bring the Gospel message that has the power to deliver that person from the real sickness, the one caused by sin that has eternal consequences. But the plain truth of this passage, again, is that it is the responsibility of the sick to call for the elders. They are to take the initiative. They are to call for the elders also, not on a whim, like, "oh good grief, I've tried everything else, maybe I'll give the elders a go at this!" No. Why should they call them?
- They call for the elders because of the spiritual authority these men have been given. Hebrews 13:17 says to obey and submit to the leaders, "for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those

who have to give an account.” Elders are supposed to be godly men, mature men, and that’s why Paul said not to appoint a novice, a new believer, to the position of elder. They should be men of prayer, men who have their spirit attuned to the Spirit of God. We will see next time how important that is. So, the sick call for the elders to come and pray, not on a whim, or as a last resort, but because they are directed by the Holy Spirit to do so. This is important: there is faith even in taking the initiative. It takes faith to call for the elders.

- I think that’s in part why Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda, “Do you want to be healed?” The man had been a cripple for 38 years. Of course he wanted to be healed! But wait, if that seems so obvious to us, why did Jesus ask the question? We know that Jesus never asked a foolish question, or an unimportant question, so we have to admit that Jesus asked because He knew some people do NOT want to be healed! Ray Stedman wrote, “I know many people today who do not want to be healed. They do not want to receive divine help in their problems. They do not want to be helped out of their weakness. They love their weakness, their helplessness. They are always craving the attention of others through their helplessness. They sometimes flee assuming responsibility for their own lives. I have even seen people turn their backs on a way of deliverance they knew would work because they did not want to be healed.” The initiative of the sick is essential. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church. Calling for the elders is a way of saying to the Lord, “I want to be healed.”
- **The action of the elders**
- “Let them pray over him.” Now, we can’t be dogmatic about this, but even the way that is worded gives us a picture of a sick person who is in a bed, and the elders are standing over him and stretching out their hands to anoint him and pray over him. What we can be sure of is that the emphasis in this verse and in this whole passage is on prayer. The elders come to the person’s house who has called them and they come to pray. To look to God. Prayer is the essential element, because God is the healer. A.J. Gordon said, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.” John Wesley said, “God does nothing except in response to believing prayer.”
- Now, why do we call for the elders to pray? Because we understand that healing always and only can come from God. Does that mean that we don’t need medicine or doctors or hospitals? No! You may have read about the church in Pennsylvania in the paper last week, Faith Tabernacle Congregation. The pastor of the church and his son and daughter-in-law are facing criminal charges because the son’s two-year-old daughter died with pneumonia last November after receiving no medical treatment. The article says the grandfather and pastor of the church “anointed her with oil in a failed attempt to heal her.” That’s a tragedy and a misunderstanding of Scripture that led to a needless death. This passage does not prohibit the means of grace God has given us through medicine or doctors. At the same time, it is a tragedy that more believers don’t follow this plain principle of Scripture laid out for us in James. We are called here to give God an opportunity to work through this means of grace. It is an act of obedience working with faith: both on the part of the sick and on the part of the elders.
- I thought about the story of Naaman the Syrian commander in the Old Testament, who the Scriptures say, “was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.” A captured Jewish girl who had been carried to Syria after a raid, worked as a servant to Naaman’s wife. She told her mistress that she knew a prophet of God in Israel who could heal Naaman. So Naaman sent a message to the king of Israel, and Elisha the prophet found out about it. You remember what happened? Elisha, the prophet, sent a message to Naaman telling him to go dip in the Jordan seven times and he would be healed. Naaman got angry. This made no sense. He sent back a message that he thought the healer would come to him and wave his hands over the leprosy, and call out to the Lord, and he would be healed. Interesting that Naaman somehow understood that healing comes from God. But he didn’t want to accept the means of grace that God was offering him through Elisha. Dip in

the Jordan! He scoffed, we have cleaner water here in Syria! He went away in a rage. But his servants pleaded with him to listen to the prophet. Naaman humbled himself, which is the first step to a changed life, did what Elisha told him to do, and was immediately healed. The Bible says, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child," and I would submit that his soul was as well. He praised the name of the God of Israel. But it started with him asking God, through God's servant, for healing. That's what James is calling us to do here. Call for the elders to pray over you. What will the elders do before they pray?

- **They will anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord.**
- Now it starts to get a little more controversial and hard to understand. The elders are to anoint the sick person with oil. What is that? What is going on, here? It depends on whom you ask. Some believe the oil is medicinal. They say that the Good Samaritan poured in the oil and the wine to the man's wounds, and we know that oil and wine were used for medicinal purposes. But that would beg the question, "Why would the elders be called to administer medicine?" Others could certainly do that, and doctors are more qualified to know what type of medicine is most needed.
- Others say the oil is sacramental. This comes from the Catholic church's practice of having the priest come to the house or hospital and administer the sacrament of extreme unction, or "last rites," by anointing the person who is about to die with oil. They liken this to the woman in Bethany who poured oil on Jesus' head and Jesus said she was preparing Him for burial. But seeing the oil in James 5:14 as sacramental doesn't make sense. You see this, right? The elders are called to anoint with oil and pray for healing, not to anoint with oil to prepare the person for burial!
- A third interpretation of the anointing with oil, and the one that I believe is correct, is that it is symbolic. It is a physical action with spiritual significance. You remember that many people and even things in the Old Testament were anointed with oil to set them apart, to consecrate them to God's use and God's service. We see this in Exodus 28 with the priests, and throughout the Old Testament with prophets, priests, kings, and even the implements used in worship. If James has this in mind here, then he is suggesting that the anointing with oil is a way to show that the person is being set apart for God's special attention in prayer. There is nothing special about the oil. Any more than there was something special about the particular piece of dirt Jesus chose to spit on, make mud and apply to a blind man's eyes. There are a lot of ways for us to get twisted in knots over this, but here is the main thing. The power of healing is not found in oil, but in God, and that's why prayer is the key. We anoint the person in the name of the Lord. With His name, and under His authority, for He alone can heal. Not the elders. Not the doctors. He may use these people as instruments for healing, but all healing comes from God.
- When we return to this passage in two weeks, Lord willing, we will take up the next few verses where we are told that the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. It is critical that we understand what that means, and we don't build a doctrine on what it does not mean.
- Prayer