

Non-Series Sermon

Praying for Healing

James 5:14-15

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Praying for Healing

Scripture

Shortly before I left South Africa to come and study in the United States I attended a “healing service.” It was held in a very large tent in winter. There were perhaps 1,000 people in attendance. My friend and I sat behind a little 10-year old girl who had the worst case of eczema I have ever seen. Before the service she kept saying to her mother, in Afrikaans, “Miskien vanaand, Mammie! Miskien vanaand!” which means, “Maybe tonight, Mommy! Maybe tonight!” Apparently, she had been to several of these healing services and still had not been healed. The service went on for several hours but as far as I know that little girl did not get healed. Nor did any of the other people who were there that night.

I found out that a few years later a medical doctor challenged that “healer” to show proof of his being able to heal people. The “healer” agreed, with the only condition being that he was only able to heal if the Holy Spirit showed up. Apparently, it was nationally televised event, with tremendous public interest. However, after 5 hours the Holy Spirit had not yet showed up, and so no healings took place!

So, what are we to think about this? Or, better, does the Scripture give us a procedure about praying for someone who is sick? Yes, it most certainly does. The following passage in James gives us biblical guidelines about how to pray for someone who is sick. Let us read James 5:14-15:

¹⁴ Is anyone 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. (James 5:14-15)

Introduction

In James 5:13-16, James, the brother of our Lord, teaches us how Christians ought to respond in times of trouble, happiness, sickness, and sin. Our focus will be on verses 14-15, which teaches us how to respond when facing sickness.

Lesson

Let me remind you again of what is written. James asks, **“Is anyone among you sick?”** He answers: **“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. 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”** (5:14-15).

Now, what are we to make of these verses? This instruction has been variously interpreted throughout the history of the Church.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The False Interpretations of James 5:14-15
2. The Right Interpretation of James 5:14-15

I. The False Interpretations of James 5:14-15

Let me begin by clearing the ground of false interpretations.

A. Interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church uses this passage to establish their sacrament of “The Anointing of the Sick,” also known as “Extreme Unction.”

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to indeed by Mark, but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of our Lord.”¹

This anointing, in practice today, is usually given to people in imminent danger of death in order to prepare them for eternity. But this is not what James is describing.

James does not tell us what kind of illness is involved here, whether life-threatening or not. His words are completely general. In any sickness, the individual is at liberty to call for the elders.

Furthermore, James does not tell us that the person’s death is imminent; in fact, quite the reverse. The sick person, rather than die, is, if anything, expected to recover.

B. Interpretation of John Calvin and Other Reformers

Another false interpretation is given by none other than the great John Calvin² and some other Reformed commentators (such as Thomas Manton³).

They contend that the ministry of healing was exercised

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1994), 378.

² John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume 22, James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 355-356.

³ Thomas Manton, *A Commentary on James* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 448-451.

either by the apostles or confined to apostolic times, but which has now ceased to be available to the Church.

However, James clearly says that the sick person is to call **the elders of the church** and not the apostles (who exercised the miraculous gift of healing). James associates this ministry to the sick, not with the unique and irreplaceable apostles, nor with the long-passed apostolic age, but with the continuing leadership in the local church, namely, **the elders**.

C. Interpretation of Charismatics and Pentecostals

A third false interpretation is given by the charismatics and Pentecostals who find support here for their “miracle healing services.”

Clearly what James describes is a far cry from the modern-day healing services. In a healing service, the venue is a church or some such meeting place; James implies that the venue is the home. In a healing service, the “healer” invites the sick; James says that the sick is to call for the elders. In a healing service, the “healer” is often a visiting preacher/healer; James says that the ones who pray must be the elders of the church of which the sick person is a member.

So, my opening illustration of the healing service I attended shows that it is contrary to the biblical prescription of how one is to pray for someone who is sick.

II. The Right Interpretation of James 5:14-15

The three false interpretations have begun to clear the ground for what I believe to be the right interpretation of James 5:14-15. Notice the following five points in particular.

A. *Call the Elders (5:14a)*

First, call the elders.

James says that the sick person should “**call for the elders of the church...**” (5:14a).

Notice that it is the responsibility of the sick person to **call for the elders** and *not* the responsibility of the elders (and particularly the pastor) to find out who is sick! There are some people who get upset when the pastor doesn’t visit them when they are sick. Most often the reason is that he doesn’t know that they are sick, and they don’t know that it is their responsibility to contact him!

But more than that, James indicates that it is the *duty* of the sick person to **call for the elders of the church**. The verb “**call**” is in the imperative in the Greek; in other words, it is a command.

Let me make an application at this point. When you are sick, **call for the elders of the church** to pray for you. James does not define the nature of the sickness. Ordinarily, I think the sickness will be something more than a sniffle or cold. James simply says that if you are **sick**, if you have some ailment, if you have a need, you are to **call for the elders of the church**.

In my fifteen years here as Pastor at Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church, hardly anyone has called specifically for the elders of the church to come and pray for an ailment. Beloved, that ought not be.

I can think of only two reasons why our members have not called for the elders of the church to pray.

One reason is *ignorance*: members do not know that they are supposed to for call the elders. Having just explained this to you, you are now no longer ignorant!

And the second reason is *pride*: members do not want to call for the elders to pray because of an unwillingness to be served. Pride keeps them from receiving ministry.

Let me urge you as strongly as I can: if you are sick, **call for the elders of the church** to pray for you.

B. The Elders Must Pray (5:14b)

Second, the elders must pray.

Just as it is the *duty* of the sick person to call for the elders of the church, so it is the *duty* of the elders of the church **to pray over him** (5:14b). The word **“pray”** is also in the imperative in the Greek. The elders are commanded to pray for the sick.

Praying for the needs of the sick is one of the duties God has given to the elders of the church. Let me assure you that it would be a joy for our elders to pray for you if you are sick.

C. Anoint with Oil (5:14c)

Third, anoint with oil.

James says, **“... anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”** (5:14c).

Although oil was often used as for its medicinal value in biblical times (see Psalm 55:21; Luke 10:34), that is not what James has in mind here. The fundamental significance of oil and anointing was its use as a symbol of the grace of God (e.g. Psalm 133:2; Mark 13:6). There was no magic in the oil since it was not the effectual cause of the healing; it simply pointed to the grace of God. In this respect, oil is neither effectual nor necessary.

D. *Prayer Must Be Offered in Faith (5:15a)*

Fourth, prayer must be offered in faith.

The promise of healing is connected to the prayer and not to the anointing or the oil. James says, **“And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.”** (5:15a).

This seems to be an unconditional promise. This is not unlike other statements in Scripture, such as Jesus’ statement in Mark 11:24: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

Yet, we all know that not everyone is healed for whom **prayer** is offered. What should we make of this verse?

Scripture teaches us that all of our petitions are subject to the sovereign will of God. I John 5:14 says: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us.” The key phrase, of course, is *“according to his will.”*

In other words, as commentator J. A. Motyer puts it, “In the prayer of faith, our prayer is not that the promises will be fulfilled just like that; it is the faith which rests trustfully on the will of a sovereign, gracious and loving God.”⁴

What is the effect of acknowledging that all of our petitions are subject to the will of God? “Its effect,” says Motyer, “is to take away from our prayers all the limitations of our knowledge of what our real needs are, all the limitations of our proposals for the meeting of our needs, and to place ourselves and our needs unreservedly into the hands of that infinite wisdom, love and power which is our heavenly Father’s. To say, ‘Thy will be done’ *does not impose a restriction on what we ask; it lifts*

⁴ J. A. Motyer, *The Tests of Faith* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), 118.

the restrictions.”⁵

So, we pray and ask God to restore health to the person who is sick, knowing that God will act in accordance with what he knows is best for that person. We know and believe that God is sovereign. Our duty is trust God.

Although God does not always physically heal a person who is sick, it seems that he will grant that person sustaining and helping grace to enable the person to deal with the sickness. That is the normal testimony of those who receive prayer.

E. If There Has Been Sin, it Will Be Forgiven (5:15b)

And fifth, if there has been sin, it will be forgiven.

James says, **“And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”** (5:15b).

There is a dimension of healing besides that of the body. There are three possibilities here.

One is that, while sick, the sick person realizes that his sickness is due to some specific sin. This is what happened to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:29-30).

Or second, while sick, by self-examination he becomes aware of sins that he had forgotten: they did not cause his illness, but his illness was the opportunity of remembering them. This, it seems to me, is what happened to Hezekiah (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:24-26).

Or third, while sick, he recognizes that he cannot ever be completely whole unless he is also completely reconciled to God. This is what happened to Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Daniel 4:28-37). However, the sin comes to mind, the sick person is to let this be a time of spiritual healing as well.

⁵ J.A. Motyer, *The Tests of Faith*, 118.

Conclusion

So, how should the Christian respond to sickness? The proper, godly response to sickness is to call for the elders of the church so that they can pray with and for you. The prayer is especially for grace, but also that God will heal. If it is God's will, he will do so.

Recently, one of our members, Joe Burns, asked the elders to pray for him regarding his early-onset Alzheimer's Disease. Many weeks ago, Joe and Cindy met in my study with the elders, and we went through the steps outlined above and prayed for Joe. Two weeks ago, Joe sent the elders the following email:

Dear Freddy and other Session members,

In the days before you prayed for me regarding my Alzheimer's Disease, I was wondering how I'd know if God healed me once the prayers were finished. After all, Alzheimer's symptoms are not always obvious. Then an idea came to mind.

In 2015, my neurologist ordered a 3-hour memory test to help determine the nature of my persistent memory problems. Afterwards, the doctor overseeing the test told me my scores since my last such test (2013) dropped dramatically in one particular area: math. He then wrote a 2-digit subtraction problem on a piece of paper that was simple enough for elementary kids and asked me to solve it in my head. I couldn't. Cindy was shocked and just kept saying "oh my." I was dumbfounded. Math has been a strength area for me since junior high school and the principal component of my undergraduate and graduate degrees in electrical engineering. Even so, my math abilities worsened as time went on following the 2015 memory test.

So I decided I would use math to help me discern if God answered your prayers by trying to solve several 2-digit math problems in my head. I tried, and I could, and I can! In fact, that night I did dozens of rudimentary math problems in my head. Yesterday, I did a problem in my head while riding my bike to determine the average number of years I owned four cars. It required addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. I got it right.

I've noticed other things that have improved. As you know, I've periodically written articles for our church newsletter focused on examining cultural issues from a Christian world view. I was on the verge of "retiring" from writing a bit ago because I was having so much trouble maintaining continuity of thought and theme. About a week or two after the elders prayed, I started a new article (attached) and finished it in much less time than in the recent past. It's not as complex as some I've penned, but I was able complete it whereas for several editions of the Trumpet, I wasn't.

I don't think it was a coincidence that this renewed capability coincided with the prayers by the elders. I believe God worked a miracle of some sort. If He did it only to return my ability to do simple math in my head or to heal me completely or to heal me for a time, I believe He is behind the return of those capabilities.

As you can imagine, I'm very grateful to God and wanted you and the elders to know. If I missed someone who was there for prayer, please let me know.

Thanks,
Joe⁶

May God help us to use this means of grace for our healing that he has prescribed for us in his Word. Amen.

⁶ Email to elders from Joe Burns, received on April 4, 2018 at 11:36 AM.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
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