

Confessing Struggles and Sin for Prayer

James 5:14-16

Pastor/Elder Phil Layton, GCBC, July 11, 2021

He was born in South Central LA not long after the Watts riots in the 1960s. He lived through the height of the drug wars and gang wars. He had no dad in the home and no Christian influence, but a teenage single mother worked hard to raise him and to teach him to work hard and study hard. Poverty and racism were part of his experience, but mom didn't let that be an excuse. He tells a story of getting a C on a report card and had to tell the football coach mom wouldn't let him play till he raised his grade. He was a star, a potential NFL prospect, and coach called the mom to try to get him back on the field.

He said "Ma'am your son is smarter than most of my team." She said, "this isn't about how dumb the rest of your team is." She proceeded to give that coach an earful and by the end of the call he just kept saying "yes, ma'am."

That young athlete went on to get a Master's, a doctorate, post-doc work at Oxford in England. He majored in philosophy and in his university days he converted to Christianity. As a Christian he continued to wear Malcom X T-shirts but over time he began to notice philosophies like **Critical Race Theory (CRT)** didn't fit Christian truth. So he's spoken against racism and against social justice solutions that contradict the gospel and hurt blacks and us all

His name is **Voddie Baucham**. His book ***Fault Lines*** traces the history and ideology of the "woke movement," and his own journey that led to Africa:

'my ancestors once inhabited the continent of Africa. That was, until for one reason or another, other Africans sold them into slavery—probably after taking them as slaves themselves... I had traveled thousands of miles from the place of my ancestors' oppression [America] to the place of their betrayal [Africa]. And for the first time in my life, I forgave... I forgave the Africans who took my ancestors' freedom. I forgave the Americans who bought and exploited them. I forgave the family that replaced my identity with their ... name. I just forgave! I did not harbor any ill will. I did not feel entitled to any apologies or reparations [repayments]... it is **forgiveness** that **will heal our wounds**.

My hope is not that white Christians can feel sorry enough for their past or that ministries and organizations can dig up and grovel over enough historical dirt. That is not the powerful, life-changing, world-confounding message of **the Gospel**. That is the message of the world [crying out for "justice"]... When I hear that, I want to scream, "YES! AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST IS THAT JUSTICE!"... Who am I to tell a white brother that he cannot be reconciled to me until he has drugged up all of the racial sins of his and his ancestors' past and made proper restitution? Christ has atoned for sin! Consequently, the most powerful weapon in our arsenal is not calling for reparations: it is forgiveness... My heart is broken as I watch movements and ideologies against which I have fought and warned for decades become entrenched at the highest and most respected levels of evangelicalism... [like the CRT lie of] ethnic guilt that rests upon all white people by virtue of their whiteness... would you hold on to guilt for sins committed by or against your distant grandparents? And if you do, why only stop at slavery...? What about the other commandments broken by our distant kin? No, beloved, "***If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness***"¹

That's **1 John 1:9** and that takes us from back to what Corey preached and where we left off. It takes us to today's text in **James 5, v. 16**, another key passage on confession of sin.

James 5:16 “*if he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*” You need healing for real hurt and real wounds from the past. Voddie nailed it: **forgiveness heals our wounds**. This verse isn’t about or against legal justice, but it is for interpersonal mercy. We can forgive past sins without even an apology or monetary payback, because Jesus paid it all for past, present, and future sins. As far as the east is from the west, that’s how far He removes the sin of those who repent and believe – other verses say like the bottom of the sea. But don’t fish them back up!

You need confession for a transaction of forgiveness or full reconciliation, but even if they never confess, you need heart forgiveness (Joseph in Egypt, Jesus on cross). As I pray, any offense I have against, forgive (Mk 11:25). Eph 5 ends with putting off all bitterness and forgiving as God forgave me.

Last week I read **Col 3:13**: whoever has a complaint against another, as the Lord has forgiven us, we must forgive. **James 5:16** tells us to **confess sins to each other** and to **pray for each other to be healed**. That includes relational or emotional healing from sin’s consequences, by His wounds we’re healed.

But what about **past sin against us never confessed**, as Voddie wrestled with?

Today’s text, **James 5:16, in context** speaks to questions in today’s context:

- What do we do with **past wounds** from people not around anymore?
- If sin is confessed in private, do we bring it up again before others?
- If someone is offended, but it wasn’t sin, should I confess to them?
- Do we need to confess guilt by association or by ancestry/ethnicity?
- Should we confess our forefather’s sin, or make reparations for it?
- What kind of healing is this about (and why anointing oil in v. 14)?

I want to come back to the healing question in the 2nd part, **3-part outline**:

- 1. What this text is NOT saying**
- 2. What it IS saying about healing and prayer**
- 3. What we should be saying to one another**

1. What James 5:16 is NOT saying

Confess your sin **to a priest** – read text: *Confess your sins to each other...*

- Martin Luther said that’s a strange name for a priest: *each other*
- This isn’t about going in a booth, it’s about believers in your life
- This isn’t behind closed doors for private penance, this is a bringing your sin out in the open for accountability with a believer you see
- Jesus is the High Priest but in Him we all get priestly access to God
- In context v. 14 talks about being sick, but this isn’t calling for last rites to help you die, it’s prayer to help you live healthy spiritually!

Confess **other people’s sins** to another person (or to a group of people)

- I’ve seen great damage done when things were addressed in private but then brought up again other people’s sins in public or in a group
- Be careful talking of groups (the elders, the church, any sub-group).
- There are times after private confrontation to bring 1 or 2 to help if the person is in serious sin (Mt 18, Gal 6:2), a church intervention.
- But if you haven’t 1st 1-on-1 lovingly repeatedly tried to help, stop it.

Notice also what this text is NOT saying (vs. what many today are saying)

- Confess your guilt for what someone else felt (offense, or if not PC)
- Confess your ancestor's sins. Look again at v. 16: *Confess your sins*
- Confess what people who like you once did to people not like you
- Confess your skin color – no, this is about your sin confessed
- Confess your privilege in systems of racism – no, confess personal sin, don't make it about pigment levels, past generations or payback

Last month a **CA Committee** formed to **study payments to descendants of slaves** and perceived oppression today. CA entered the union as a free state in 1850, and CA Constitution always outlawed slaves, but apparently until 1865 there was illegal slavery in CA for 15 years to confess or compensate.

'The law says the task force will recommend how California will **issue a formal apology [to black CA]**... The task force will also determine how any potential compensation should be calculated and who would be eligible...'²

Pres. Biden has expressed support for studying U.S. reparations for ongoing effects of slavery. In April Congress voted a bill for that, now House of Rep

TALK ABOUT – practical challenges **150 years later** – which taxpayers and beneficiaries - immigrants – % of whites then and now owning slaves – facts on other slave owners since 1600s – Democrats in history 1860 / 1960

What of James 5:16: confessing sin, forgiving, prayer for healing?

Some professing Christians have **interesting takes**: 'Confession of sin is not the end of racism but is a crucial first step in becoming anti-racist. James 5:16 tells us to "confess your sins to one another..." [then she quotes 1 John 1:8-9 about not denying our sin] White people who deny that they are racist ... **ignore white history, culture and institutions** ... all U.S. institutions from banks and home sales and rental agencies to schools, businesses, churches, community groups, labor organizations, and health care facilities perpetuate white privilege. Confessing our participation in this institutional racism is the first step [CRT redefines racism as '*power and prejudice, institutions in power*. Our part, it goes on, is to pay] reparations to the black community...

After confessing our sin of inaction and eliminating personal and systematic racism comes repentance, which is intentional action to become anti-racist.³

That's a close quote and a total misquote of James 5:16

As we go verse by verse thru the Word, we need to compare and contrast it with our world. You ask what it looks like to be 'a woke Christian,' that's an example! Repentance is redefined to intentional action, like reparations. To those who consider themselves 'woke,' it's not enough to *not be* racist, you have to be *anti-racist* (i.e., an activist for the CRT ideas I just read). Is it true that repentance comes *after you confess sins of inaction and eliminate systemic sin*? That's not a biblical category or the gospel order. And James 5:16 is about confessing personal sin, not participation in privileged society. But for those drinking the 'woke' Cool Aid, confession of the sin of your forefathers isn't enough, compensation for it (reparations) is the cry today.

James would roll over in his grave if he heard how he's taken out of context

2020 headline: 'Christianity Today calls on churches to lead on reparations: 'Repentance is not enough' ...the "church can lead the way in biblical restitution," according to the president and CEO of Christianity Today. [He wrote, quote] "repentance alone is not enough" for white evangelicals to atone for **the nation's "original sin" of racism** in an op-ed for the magazine.'⁴

Is that the gospel: repentance isn't enough, we need to pay to atone for sin?

This has affected reformed circles I identify with and ministries I respect. A former Shepherd's Conference speaker wrote the foreword to *Woke Church*. Other SC speakers now have CRT in their seminary or ministry. A keynote speaker for Together for the Gospel as it got started, a man who wrote good books for 9Marks ministries we've used, he blogs at The Gospel Coalition now articles arguing reparations are biblical for U.S. descendants of slaves.⁵

He wrote a TGC blog 'We Await Repentance for Assassinating Dr. King.' He said white people not alive in the 60s don't need to feel guilt for that but...

'My white neighbors and Christian brethren can start by at least saying their parents and grandparents and this country are complicit in murdering [MLK] Until and unless there is repentance of this...hatred, the country will remain imprisoned... Until...the Church learns to confess its particular sins [James 5:16 language], we will not overcome...'⁶ He's also said basically whites who reject reparations or systemic racism can't read their Bibles right.⁷

That doesn't stir up love. To say white loved ones alive in 60s are complicit in murder, and we or they need to repent of assassinating MLK and confess that sin? James 5:16 isn't saying to heal division, confession must go back decades or we must pay back money for slavery that goes back centuries.

That doesn't bring Christians together for the gospel. That's **not the gospel message** – 'you're in bondage and will not overcome because of past sins.'

No, the gospel says **the death of King Jesus sets free** from sin's bondage for all who confess their sin, He forgives and cleanses from all unrighteousness.

Romans 8 says all believers are more than overcomers through Him who loved us so, and there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ! The woke say there IS condemnation for those who are in white skin! The Word says *from now on we regard no one according to the flesh*, **2 Cor 5:16**

No good work done in the flesh can atone. No amount of money can make right slavery's evil. It isn't reparation that's deserved for slavery, it's eternal separation in hell that's deserved for all. That's justice, we all need mercy.

That's not to downplay the sin of racists or the self-righteous, but **let's not bark up the wrong tree of the past, let's look up to the tree Jesus died on.**

Repentance is enough because **Jesus is enough and His blood is sufficient.** There is guilt from the past and our race, the human race. The sin of Adam stains all of us and all society. Guilt can be transferred ... to Jesus at the cross. That's the death from history all our sins are involved with, and that buys back what's lost and redeems, but not with silver, gold, or any money. Turn from your sins to trust Him. And v. 16 says confess to each other, too.

2nd point / part of the text: What it IS saying about healing and prayer

2nd half of James 5:16: '*and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*' This takes us back in context to the prayer for healing in **v. 15**: '*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up*'

TALK ABOUT – view of faith healers, healing if you have enough faith.

But **v. 14** doesn't say call a healer, it says if you're sick, call for the elders. Those are pastors, shepherds – this week Corey and I prayed over Kemp. We often pray in person or over the phone for healing (others this week). But is v. 14-16 as only or primarily physical healing, and is it a promise?

v. 15 in Young's Literal Translation is "*the distressed one*" (rather than *sick*). In the Greek dictionaries, the word translated "sick" in v. 15 means

- "weariness of mind" (Zodhiates, *WSDNT*)
- *Greek-English Lexicon of NT*: ... literally 'to become tired in spirit' ... to gradually lose one's motivation to accomplish some goal—to become discouraged, to become tired of ... or give up' (LN 25.291)
- *be weary, fatigued* ... weariness of the soul ... wandering soul ... tired or weary of the continued succession of the wars ... those who are tired of living (BAGD, p. 402)
- Philo used this word for '**the wounds of the soul**' (*Migr. Abr.* 124)
- In the *Apostolic Greek Fathers* we find this word used of the needy/afflicted: **to exhort those who are sick at soul**, not to cast away those that have stumbled from the faith, but ... **to put courage into them**' (Shepherd Herm. 8:10)
- Other ancients used this word of how one feels 'on account of bad news ... besieged people whose spirits have flagged badly [who need to] take fresh courage (*TLNT*, 2:251–253)

The point of all this is to say the original language words of **verse 15** usually or especially emphasize the spiritual or emotional part of man, rather than his physical or medical sicknesses or illnesses. The verbs *restore/save* and *raise up* usually have a spiritual aspect, though they can be applied to the physical body, the context as you keep reading **v. 15-16** speaks of sin and the blessing of forgiveness

Only other NT use of Grk word: Hebrews 12:3 (NASB) *For consider Him who has **endured** such hostility by sinners against Himself, **so that you will not grow weary** [same word translated "sick" in James 5:15] **and lose heart***

The weary lose heart, become despondent, discouraged, perhaps going from distressed to depressed? This is the only other place the NT word occurs, here clearly not physical sickness but used of a spiritual or emotional weariness. Just as a race wearies a body (v. 1) a soul can become weary.

End of Heb 12:5 says **don't ... faint when you are reproved by Him ...**

The context of that chapter and following verses is clearly spiritual discipline and spiritual faintness of heart, feebleness, despondency.

¹² **Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed** [same word for "heal" in Jas 5:15, here spiritual/emotional]

There's a different word translated "**sick**" in **James 5:14** I also looked in over a dozen reference works, articles, and read dozens more pages and traced all the times it's used in NT, LXX, Greek literature and its literal meaning is "without strength" and its primary meaning is consistently listed as "weakness ... feebleness ... powerless," etc. Tyndale NT of 1525 (first English translation from Greek): *Yf eny be **defeated** amonge you let him call for the elders of the congregacion ...*

Every other time this Greek word is used in the NT epistles, it means weak.

In the epistles it isn't physical sickness, it's spiritual weakness (weak in faith, weak in conscience, weak in general, etc.). James could've used other Greek words if he wanted to talk about diseases or illnesses to be healed, but he uses this word that the epistles almost always translate "weak." Now what about anointing oil in **v. 14**? Time is gone, we'll pick that up next time

Close with this application: What we should be saying to one another: CONFESS YOUR STRUGGLES AND CONFESS YOUR SINS

- **To elders** in **v. 14**, when you're weak, spiritual, emotional, physical
- **To each other** in **v. 16**, fellow believers, for their prayer and support

It's been said that **prayer drives away sin** – flip side: **sin drives away prayer**.

James doesn't give much specific on confessing sin, but in the context of the rest of Scripture confession of sins to people:

- could be **an individual** you have offended (**Matt. 5:23-24**), or sinned against (**Luke 17:4**). Ask "will you forgive me?" and saying "I forgive you," means I will not hold this sin against you, or keep bringing it up audibly or internally
- confession of sins may include also **making wrongs right** if needed (like Zaccheus)
- confession publicly can be part of repentance or **baptism** and/or **conversion** statement (**Matt. 3:6, Acts 19:18**)
- confession of sins may be **to a trusted and mature spiritual friend** for accountability (**James 5:16, Gal. 6:2**)

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!*

It's not just extraordinary miracles, it's also **ordinary means of prayer and pastoral and practical shepherding of the spiritually weak** who difficulty has left defeated, discouraged, depressed, etc. Call for elders for prayer in faith so you can be restored, so God will raise you up, and healed of any wounds

Now **practically**, if you're struggling physically with illness or any significant issue that would like me or more than one of us elders to pray for you or with you, ask any of us, and of course we will do so, and have done so (if you ask for oil or laying on of hands, in a home or hospital, we are here to shepherd or serve in any way). I just don't believe this passage is a physical healing promise. That doesn't mean I won't pray for healing, just know **I'll also pray for you spiritually** for strengthening or restoring, and above all, I will pray "in the name of the Lord" that His name be magnified.

God has ordained that those in spiritual weakness enlist the shepherding, care, and prayer of others with spiritual strength. That's one reason we need the body of Christ, but there's more we'll look at next time. Let's pray now

¹ Voddie Baucham, *Fault Lines*, chapter 11, "Solid Ground."

² <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-06-01/california-slavery-reparations-task-force-convenes>

³ <https://wwfor.org/confessions-of-a-racist/>

⁴ <https://www.foxnews.com/faith-values/christianity-today-churches-reparations>

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/reparations-are-biblical/>

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/await-repentance-assassinating-dr-king/>

⁷ <https://protestia.com/2020/11/12/tgcs-thabiti-anyabwile-white-folk-who-reject-systematic-racism-and-reparations-cant-read-their-bibles-right/>