

James 5:14-18

Confessing Struggles and Sin: Shepherding & Accountability

James 5:14-18

Pastor/Elder Phil Layton, GCBC, July 25, 2021

Please turn to James 5 and as you do I want to read a prayer of confession

Almighty merciful Father. We confess we have followed the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us spiritually. But O Lord, have mercy on us sinners! Forgive us, O God, as we confess their faults. Restore your people by repentance; According to your promises in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. We pray, for Christ's sake; That we may live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of your holy Name we pray, Amen. (adapted from Book of Common Prayer)

Quote 5:16. If that prayer resonates with you, let's say it together on screen

5:13 *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.* 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.* ¹⁶ **Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working [KJV 'effectual fervent prayer ... availeth much'].**

Note: prayer / prayer is used in every verse, and twice in v. 16. This is about prayer and specifically in suffering (v. 13), or struggling physically (v. 14).

Or prayers for spiritual health as sins are confessed and forgiven (v. 15-16).

Prayer can heal bodies and can also heal relationships in the body of Christ.

There's power in prayer but sometimes we're weak and need others to uplift

We all need leaders and believers in our lives, praying over us at low times

This isn't just about the physical, it's about being vulnerable, accountable.

Beyond the medical, there's spiritual weakness to confess, call for prayer.

Prayer is like a wartime walkie-talkie, and we need others on the channel. v. 14 is about our need for shepherding and confessing sin, reaching out for help in prayer from elders – and I'd add your elders need your prayer, too.

BIG IDEA: CONFESS YOUR STRUGGLES AND 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

OUTLINE:

1. Call for shepherding and prayer in your struggles (v. 14-15)
2. Confess your sins to others for prayer (v. 16)

First: Call for shepherding care and prayer in struggles (v. 14-15)

This is language for serious struggling – not normal suffering in **v. 13** where you're told to pray. In general, if you suffer, pray to God, v. 13. But in **v. 14** there's a deeper or debilitating struggle where you call for elders to pray for and over you. When you read *elders*, don't think of a boardroom, think of shepherds called to a bedroom. Think of pastors at a hospital sickbed, or a couch at home. It could also just be someone down and out (**v. 15** says he needs to be raised up). He can't get back up on his own, much less get to church. Physically immobilized or demoralized emotionally or spiritually by sin or sickness, it says call for elders, i.e., shepherding care and prayer.

There may be sin to confess and v. 16 says pray for each other for healing.

She may be too weak to even pray, needing others to pray for her

But what if they're not healed? Many follow James 5 but aren't.

Discussion Guide #1: What scriptural truths could you share with someone who's prayed for healing, or asked others to pray, but hasn't been healed? What if they've heard James 5:15 promises healing if they have enough faith? There's an excellent video "American Gospel" that gives a fuller answer.

There's an important phrase in the end of v. 14: "*in the name of the Lord.*"

That means what honors His name and is consistent with what the Lord wants based on His word. "*Hallowed be your name...your will be done.*"

We know in scripture it's not always His will to heal or dependent on faith.

Job—man with most faith in his day was struck with terrible skin diseases by God's will, but he blessed the name of the Lord (pray/praise in His name).

Paul—greatest faith in NT he had a thorn in his flesh that God didn't remove

If you take v. 15 as a promise, it's not for immediate physical healing while the men are praying – it's future tense and it doesn't say when in the future.

The language is vague in v. 15: "*the prayer of faith will save the one...*" (ultimately those with faith will be saved, but when and what kind is this?). v. 15 goes on "*the Lord will raise him up*" – normal term for resurrection of Jesus or believers. Ultimately on the last day that will happen for believers who have been saved by faith, no sickness in glory, but there is in this life.

So in that sense all saved people will experience v. 15 in the future

We've prayed for healing for people who died and went to heaven, but they were healed in a real sense – fully eternally delivered from bodily sickness.

Those who are saved by faith will be raised up in the end, if not in this life.

The words "saved" and "raised up" can mean restored to health or healed.

But James 5 isn't a blank check bill of health guarantee if you just do this.

And don't think of oil in v. 14 like rubbing a bottle of oil for a healing genie

What's oil got to do with it? End of v. 14 says "*anointing him with oil...*"

Oil doesn't heal, v. 15 says it's the prayer of faith (v. 16 pray to be healed).

v. 14 isn't the word for sacred anointing or ceremonial anointing of priests, this is the everyday word for pouring or even rubbing oil on dry skin in that part of the world. It was a customary

way to refresh weary travelers in your home, and v. 14 is a weary person in need of refreshment. In their culture it showed honor and care, so Jesus in Lk 7 rebuked a religious leader for not anointing Him in his home but this woman anointed His feet with ointment. In that sense, James 5 is telling the elders to show practical care and honor

1 John tells all Christians don't just love in word but in deeds

It's a similar idea to washing the feet, like Jesus did in the upper room, and told His followers *'you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you'* (Jn 13:14-15). That can be applied literally – some Christians make that part of their church services – but it can also be applied by the principle of lowly love for others like a slave, practical love in a humble counter-cultural way. Taking off your guest's shoes under the table today may not convey love.

It's fine to literally wash feet, but you can also obey the principle of Jn 13 in other ways besides rubbing dirt off people's toes with a towel and a basin.

It's also fine to literally rub on oil when you pray, but there's a principle in the text that I think can be applied in other practical ways in other cultures.

Foot-washing and oil-anointing aren't sacraments or ceremonies, they were everyday experiences of a blessed Israelite. Eccl. 9:7 "...eat your bread with joy...Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life..." So oil on the head wasn't just for a special occasion, it was something to never be lacking in that dusty climate, like clean clothes.

v. 14 is one of those verses like *'greet one another with a holy kiss.'* In their culture, that had a certain connotation, and it was common to kiss on cheeks at church or give oil on the head at home. In our culture that may not be the only or best way to apply that, it may communicate the opposite of what it did for 1st century Jews. But the principle to obey is to greet warmly and affectionately (holy kiss) and to refresh and make glad the weary (rub oil).

How that principle applies may look differently for different contexts

It could be with actual kisses or actual oil, or it could be what it represents.

In Ps 104 a *'face glistening with oil'* is one who's been made glad (v. 15).

Oil was often symbolic in the Psalms: oil running down the beard was a symbol for how good it is when brothers dwell together in unity (Ps 133).

Precious oil on the head dripping down on the robe symbolized blessing.

Oil also symbolized gladness, like in Ps 45:7 "*God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions...*" So as a person is prayed over, the idea could be how can I bless and make this person glad in God?

If they ask for oil like v. 14, by all means, or other ways to bless, refresh.

Ps 23 says to the Lord: *you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows...*

That's a picture of blessing and other spiritual metaphors, peaceful water, contentment, restoring of soul. It may be that James has the same kind of things in mind speaking of the shepherds of a church in oil-anointing: peace-giving, soul-restoring, mercy and goodness to help them lie down.

Sickness can hurt like the rod and staff and can bring us to the valley of the shadow of death, but we fear no evil if the shepherd is with us. And the Good Shepherd calls us to be

shepherds with His sheep to represent Him. v. 14 says ‘*anointing with oil in the name of the Lord,*’ like the Lord of Ps 23.

The Lord calls all His people to love just as He loves us

A modern Greek writer says ‘metaphorically [v. 14 can mean] “to stimulate, to encourage” through the application of oil... Even to this day, you will find many people in the Middle East rubbing the sick with oil. The author’s mother used to do it to him when he was a child, but for medicinal, not religious purposes. It is very relaxing to the tired and weak body ... olive oil [with] a good massage... In my own experience, when my mother was too weak to rub me, we would call upon a church friend. And when the church friend came, he would be requested to rub me and then lead in prayer. For people who lived [in M.E.] this is the most natural thing that could happen’¹

Oil isn’t magical or mystical, but it was medicinal

James 5:14 may have to do with oil as medicine. So don’t think *miracle* oil, think *medical* oil. The common person didn’t call for a doctor to their home, but it was common to use wine and oil in the home to treat sickness or hurts that needed soothing. The rabbis would rub on oil for back pain, headaches, etc. In the Good Samaritan story, oil treated the wounds of the man who had been beaten. James may be telling the elders not to be like those religious leaders of Israel who passed by and didn’t help with oil for a hurting body.

Don’t just be “spiritual” – pray – but care for physical needs, too

Context of James chapter 2: if you just say “*Go in peace, be warm and be filled but don’t give them what is needed for their body, what use is that?*”

When someone’s in serious need, true faith doesn’t just say “I’ll pray for you” when you could actually help with that need for their physical body.

We also want to make sure people are getting medical help (that’s what oil was in Bible times). Medicine has come a long way since those days but the principle can be “pray for them and make sure they’re taking medicine and are in touch with their doctor, too.” Jesus said “the sick need a physician.”

People do need literal physical help medically or practically

Jesus is the Great Physician who cares for body and soul. When He healed people miraculously, it was usually up close and personal. He laid hands on the sick and weak as He prayed for them. From little children to sick lepers He showed compassion with a loving touch. He’s the model for care and shepherding in v. 15 when this is done “in the name of the Lord.” Let’s not underestimate the physical or the power of physical touch and our presence

Implications for medications, etc.? Jay Adams, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

End of v. 15 says if sins they will be forgiven (how? confess like v. 16).

This isn’t just physical, there’s spiritual and emotional in these words, too.

The word *heal* in v. 16 is the same word in Acts 28 where those who turn from their sins are healed of their spiritual blindness.² It’s also used of Jesus in 1 Pet 2: ‘*By His wounds you were healed*’ (NASB). Not healed of all medical issues, but healed (past tense) of our spiritual issues from our sins.

The point is don’t just think of the body, think of the soul needing care. You can be sick *from* sin or just sick *of* sin, but either way, call for elders to pray

In tenderness [the Shepherd] sought me, weary and weak with sin;
And on his shoulders brought me, back to His fold again

v. 14 *Is anyone among you sick* - word literally means 'without strength.'

Main meaning: weak, powerless, helpless, can't help yourself (Rom 5:8).

Paul also used this word in the context of pressure and anxiety, 2 Cor 11:28

'there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.' ²⁹ *Who is **weak**, and I am not weak? ...'* Paul prayed for relief from his thorn, and God said (12:9) *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* God's power in James 5 works through prayer for a powerless believer, someone under great pressure, crushed by anxiety. It may be related to sickness or weakness, no strength – call for elders to pray

Examples just yesterday of prayers on the phone and in person

That's humbling to do to admit your weakness and need for help in prayer, but 4:10 says 'humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.' If you humbly do James 5:14, v. 15 says you'll be raised up or lifted up

Discussion Q#2. How does the translation "weak" (physically or spiritually) instead of "sick" in v. 14-15 change how this passage can be applied? What are scenarios besides illness where you might need to ask for v. 14?

Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care?...

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer...

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?...

Jesus knows our every weakness, take it to the Lord in prayer³

He's a High Priest who can sympathize with our weakness. Tempted in every way like us, even "crucified in weakness" (2 Cor 13:4 same word). Hours before Jesus Himself used this word in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He told them to watch and pray, because *"the flesh is weak"* (Mt 26).

Jesus asked Peter, James and John to pray with Him – how much more us?

I hear the Savior say, "Thy strength indeed is small

Child of weakness, watch and pray, find in Me thy all in all⁴

Paul asked for prayer and fellow leaders to come to him, he needed them.

Rom 15:1 *"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the...weak."*

Acts 20:35 tells church elders *'you must help the weak'* (like elders here).

v. 28 says pay careful attention to all the flock, care for/shepherd the sheep.

With 300 people, we need your help calling us to ask for help

ELDERS – MEMBERS – regular connection asking for prayer. If you're a member here, you should have an elder regularly asking you how he can pray for you. If you don't, let me know, we'll make sure we connect you.

But also for any of you at any time, you can let any of the elders know how we can be praying for you or if you need prayer or shepherding in person.

Right after service, come up to pray with us or a women's care team lady

Example of people in hospital – at home – in lobby just a few weeks ago

Discussion Q #4. When James 5:14 says “call for the elders of the church”, how is that an argument for why in-person church is so essential? How might you use verse this to exhort someone who’s not a member of a church or not seeking out shepherding in their life? [Virtual church doesn’t work with this verse].

1. Call for shepherding and prayer in your struggles (v. 14-15)

2. Confess your sins to others for prayer (v. 16)

James 5:16: ‘*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*’ 2 main categories of when to confess sin to others:

1. **To reconcile** - when you sin against someone, to heal a relationship
2. **To be accountable** - when you need prayer and help fighting sin

Confession to others and intercession for others is **God’s way of healing**. When you pray to God for a person, it changes your heart to that person. Especially if you see your sin and confess it to God and the brother you’ve sinned against. Admit you need healing of bitterness or other sin, confess it, and pray together to be healed. Mt 5:23 says if you’re at worship and ‘*remember that your brother has something against you, leave ... go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come ...*’ If you haven’t confessed, go before you come to communion, as much as it depends on you for peace

7. When you confess to someone you sinned against, why is below important? Can you think of where there wasn’t healing in a relationship because you didn’t do below? (from PeaceMakers by K. Sande)

- a. **Ask forgiveness** (not just “I’m sorry,” but “will you please forgive me for ...”)
- b. **Avoid “if,” “but” and “maybe”** (“if you were offended ... yeah, but you ... maybe I’m not the best”)
- c. **Acknowledge the hurt** (not just about the facts, feelings matter, may need to ask questions here)
- d. **Admit specifically** (actions or attitudes you see you need to change and how you hope to)

Confess to reconcile - when you sin against someone, to heal a relationship
And lastly, to be accountable - when you need prayer and help fighting sin

Discussion Guide #5. Why is it important to confess sins to believers when struggling (end of v. 15) and pray for each other? What are some important cautions in confessing sin, or in receiving confessions? See v. 9 also.

3 cautions: Complaining, grumbling, gossiping (v. 9)

Confiding and confidence

Confessing thoughts (I don’t want yours or to share mine!)

The book Love That Lasts talks about how mutual confession of sin and asking for prayer cures us from ‘Keeping our own counsel; pursuing our own goals, gratification, and fulfillment; hiding our struggles, weaknesses, and problems... We need others not only beside us but ahead of us and even over us [elders and members]... A couple who commits to a local church begins to put to death proud and dangerous independence. As they press forward, seeking to be fully known, to walk in the light, and to confess temptations, struggles, and sin, they begin to take on... humility and servanthood. And they begin to get the help we all need but are often too proud to ask for. Friends, sanctification – becoming like Christ – is indeed a community project ... In every [family] there are times of trial, struggles with sin, and seasons of suffering. The loss of a job, a significant illness or injury, a financial crisis, persistent patterns of sin... It is at these times that our brothers and sisters in the local church embody the love of Christ to us.’⁵

How are you doing with that in your church family? In your own family?

Discussion Question #6. How can you pursue relationships like v. 16 and grow in vulnerability and accountability?

Illustration: **A Surprising Liberation, by Rachel Gilson**⁶

“What surprised me was that confession wasn’t humiliating—it was liberating.” I sat across from a young woman who said this sentence so calmly, even casually. Yet these words hit me with full force. They dismantled one of the stealthiest lies in sanctification: that admission of wrongdoing is disaster.

Why do we not seek it out? Perhaps we believe that if we were truly known, we would be rejected. After all, not every Christian is mature enough yet to appropriately handle the tender things of another person’s heart. Or it could be that we believe the lie that we are the only ones who have failed this way, this many times, or for this disgusting reason. If I’m honest, at times I have somewhere in the corner of my heart believed that if I didn’t speak a thing out loud, that it would disappear along with its consequences. This is especially true if my sin involved (in my limited view) only myself.

These are each lies, powerful lies. But each, in the right circumstances, can feel true. And yet there is something far more true, which is the power of God’s work through his promises. He never lies to us, he never misleads us. And in this case, he has promised that there is healing in confession to one another (James 5:16).

This is precisely what my friend experienced. The Spirit was urging her to confess her sin, and she sought out her pastor. She spoke to him, halting due to embarrassment, but she was able to get to the end. Bracing for what would come, she received warm words of thankfulness, forgiveness, and acceptance. This was when she made her discovery: the act hadn’t shamed her, it had freed her. The weight had been lifted.

I have experienced this in my own life as well ... how the forgiveness and embrace of a Christian can bring a flood of relief ... the one who confesses, and the one who receives the confession. May the Lord strengthen us to execute both human roles well under his guidance, by his authority and grace.

1 Pet 5:5 *all of you, be submissive to one another, and **be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble”** ... [then this on prayer] casting all your care upon Him, for **He cares** for you*

We all need shepherding, care, and prayer, and our Chief Shepherd in His care and kindness for us has given a context for that in the local church, a means of grace if you humble yourself to receive it. It's humbling to admit your spiritual weakness and ask for help or to confess your sins to another to ask them to pray for you, but God gives grace to the humble and He cares for you. It's a great comfort to me to know that even where we fail as humans, we have a never-failing always-caring perfect Shepherd in Jesus.

Closing prayer to include those struggling physically and in other ways

¹ Spiros Zodhiates, *Faith, Love, & Hope : An Exposition of the Epistle of James*, Exegetical Commentary Series (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1999), 5:14.

² Acts 28:27.

³ Joseph Scriven, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

⁴ Elvina M. Hall, “Jesus Paid It All.”

⁵ Gary and Betsy Ricucci, *Love That Lasts: When Marriage Meets Grace*, 24-25.

⁶ <https://www.rachelgilson.com/blog-index/a-surprising-liberation>