

Sickness, Healing & The Purposes of God - James 5:13-18

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Message*

1. Today's message is one of the most *difficult* I have ever, or *will* ever share.
2. The reason I say that is because the subject matter of these verses is sickness, healing, & the will of God.
 - a. we are entering a realm where the deepest truths of theology intersect with our daily lives
 - b. and there is much here that is nothing less than *mysterious*.
3. Despite the difficulties this passage presents, I long for our time together today to make a lasting difference in your life!
 - a. some of us here this morning are enduring serious illness
 - 1) some among us experience intense pain every moment of the day
 - 2) some have been ill for months, even years
 - b. others have loved ones who are sick and virtually incapacitated by illness
 - c. and then there are those who are miraculously healed by God.

B. *The Tension*

1. It's been our privilege to witness many healings - And there's where the tension lies
 - a. how is it that some are prayed for and healed, while aren't?
 - b. two people will come forward and ask for prayer,
 - 1) we lay hands on both and pray for them - one is healed, the other is not!
 - 2) why?
2. I hope to shed some light on this, this morning.

II. TEXT

A. *Vs. 13-14*

- 13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.**

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.

1. When James composed this letter, he used the common form for a letter of that day.
 - a. you'll notice that this is the tail end of the letter
 - b. and as was typical, he brings it to a conclusion by penning several brief reminders
 - c. he wouldn't introduce anything *new* at this point because he didn't have the time or space to elaborate or explain.
 - d. these final exhortations were simply *reminders* to keep doing what they were already doing.
 - 1) much like us as we're wrapping up a letter and might say something like,
 - 2) say "Hi" to the family • don't forget to write • and send me a recent photo.
 - e. so, what James wrote here was nothing new; it was simply an encouragement to keep doing the things that are needful
 - f. and in vs. 13 & 14, what we says is needful is prayer -
 - g. prayer that's appropriate in light of the circumstances.
2. So in v. 13 he says, if someone is suffering, he/she ought to take his/her suffering to the Lord, seeking comfort and help from Him.
3. If things are going well – then they ought to lift up the prayer of praise!
4. And in v. 14 he says that if a person is sick, they ought to seek out the spiritual leaders of the church and ask that they pray for them.
5. Now, why this change in the perspective of prayer?
 - a. why does James say that prayer for the sick is the special realm and focus of the elders of the church?
 - b. the answer to that is found by adding v. 15 to this . . .

B. V. 15

15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

1. A little *background* on the mentality of the early church regarding sickness and healing I needed here . . .

2. Keep in mind that this was the first NT letter to be written and James addressed it to *Jewish* followers of Jesus Christ.
3. Among the Jews, when someone was ill, they went to the local *rabbi* rather than a doctor.
 - a. the rabbi would ask questions to discover the *cause* of the illness, [1]
 - b. and then prescribe any changes to the lifestyle or apply some basic medicine he knew would help.
 - c. he might even refer the person to someone he knew was skilled at bringing relief
 - d. but *most importantly* – the rabbi would *pray* and ask for God's touch on the person's body.
4. Again, James is introducing *no new ideas* here as he moves to conclude the letter.
 - a. he is simply reminding them of the *correct* way to go about praying for the sick.
 - b. the writings of the early church fathers reveals that the early church was indeed a praying and healing church!
 - c. great attention was paid to the ill and the community of Christ gained a reputation as a group where the sick were well taken care of. [2]
 - d. Justin Martyr wrote that countless demon possessed individuals were delivered by Christians when they had been able to find relief from no other quarter. [3]
 - e. Irenaeus, writing in the 2nd Century, tells us that the sick were *still* being healed by having hands laid on them.
 - d. and in the 3rd Century, Tertullian says that no less a person than the Roman Emperor Severus was healed by the a Christian named Torpacion who laid hands on him in prayer.
 - e. in gratitude, the Emperor kept Torpacion as a guest in the royal palace for the rest of his life! [4]
5. Among the many writings we have from this period of the Early Church, we find several documents spelling out the duty of elders and deacons.
 - a. one of the most common tasks assigned to the *deacons* was to keep an eye out for those in the body who were ill and bed-

ridden.

- b. they were to then report these cases to the elders – and the elders were to go to them and pray for their healing.
6. That is precisely the thing James is writing about here . . .

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.

7. James pictures someone who is bed-ridden and cannot make it to the general gathering of the church.
- a. they are to get word to the elders, the spiritual leaders of the local fellowship
 - b. and they are to come to his/her bedside and pray for them
8. James says the sick are to be **anointed with oil**.
- a. the word he uses for “anoint” is not the word that’s used to refer to a *sacramental* or *ritualistic* anointing
 - b. James does *not* mean the application of oil in a *religious* sense.
 - c. the word he uses here would better translated as “daub” or “smear” and was used of the application of medicine!
 - d. remember who James is writing to – Jews who were used to going to their rabbi when they were ill.
 - e. the rabbi was much like a *general practice doctor* who had in his inventory a half dozen or so medicines for treating the most common ailments
 - 1) these medicines were usually oil-based and were applied by daubing or smearing them on the area of the body that was afflicted.
 - 2) Galen, the famous Greek physician called oil “the best of all medicines.”^[5]
 - 3) herbs and special chemicals were ground up and mixed in to oil which acted as the carrier
 - 4) this was then applied to the body, and covered with a wrap.
 - f. if the rabbi was confronted with an illness beyond the scope of the medicine he possessed, he would recommend another doctor who had what was needed.
 - g. so in this way, the rabbi was like a *general practitioner* who could treat most illnesses, but referred tougher cases to a *specialist*.

6. James sees the elders of the Christian church taking the role and place of the rabbis in the Jewish synagogue.
 - a. when someone was ill, they were to call on the elders, who were to go to them
 - b. the elders would then ask some questions, seeking to do a bit of diagnosis on what precisely was wrong.
 - c. if medical treatment was in order, they were to apply whatever was appropriate.
 - d. but James did not see medicine as the *effectual cause* of healing
 - e. prayer is what affects healing!
 - f. medicine might be the agent – but it's the power of God which is the real cause of healing!
7. Notice how James phrases it –

let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

- a. the construction of the language puts “prayer” in the *primary* place while “anointing” is secondary.
 - b. both prayer and anointing are done in the name of the Lord – meaning the elders are lifting this matter into the presence of God and asking for His insight and intervention.
 - c. and it is precisely at this point that we gain the best clue as to *how* James sees sickness & healing.
8. You see, it's the aim of the elders of the church to honor the Name of the Lord in all things.
 - a. this is their chief preoccupation
 - b. in the midst of sickness – their goal is God's glory!
 - c. if that glory is advanced by healing – then may God heal!
 - d. if God's glory is advanced by some virtue illness may impart, then may the illness accomplish it's purpose and continue till it's job is done!
 9. In both cases, it's prayer that will bring about the *end* God has ordained.
 10. James makes this clear in v. 15

15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

11. The **prayer of faith** is the prayer that *discovers God's will* and so is *absolutely confident* in making a *specific request* of God.
12. John describes the prayer of faith like this in 1 John 5
- 14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.**
- 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.**
13. In the model prayer Jesus gave the disciples, He taught them to pray –
 - a. “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”
 - b. Jesus did not intend that we pray those *exact words* as a rote or memorized prayer;
 - 1) He didn't say, “Pray these words.”
 - 2) He said, “After this fashion, pray . . .”
 - c. He meant that we are to pray that God's rule and will would be accomplished in the *specific issues* we bring before Him.
14. By “**the prayer of faith**” James means that the elders, by virtue of their spiritual maturity and intimacy with God, can discern what God's will is in the specific instance of sickness before them, and they will pray in agreement with God's will to see it affected in the life of the one who is ill.
15. For notice the result of the prayer of faith – “**And the prayer of faith will save the sick,**”
 - a. instead of simply saying the sick will be “healed”, he says the ill one will be “saved.”
 - b. the word *includes* healing but means much more
 - c. it means to be made *whole*; in body, soul, and spirit.
 - d. so James adds – “**And the Lord will raise him up.**”
 - 1) up out of his sickbed
 - 2) and up out of the conditions that may have caused his/her sickness in the first place.
16. James sees sickness as far more than merely a happenstance – a chance misfortune.
 - a. he sees it as something *used by God* to accomplish some higher

- purpose.
- b. sickness isn't something just to get over or be healed from.
 - c. illness is a tool to be used to accomplish God's will in our lives.
17. Ultimately God wants to heal us – yes!
- a. but the healing God looks for extends beyond our bodies to the inner person.
 - b. *sometimes*, our *sin* leads to physical illness
 - 1) sin has a consequence – and sometimes illness comes as a consequence to foolish choices
 - 2) God may also sue sickness as a form of discipline
 - c. that's why at the end of v. 15 James writes, **“And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”**
 - d. James does not attribute all illness to sin, but some sickness is the result of sinful choices
18. Actually, the way James words this, it ought to be translated like this – “And if he has been committing sin, he will be forgiven.”
- a. James pictures the elders being called to someone's bedside
 - b. they begin by asking some questions and then praying for discernment into the Lord's will
 - c. as they prayerfully wait on the Lord, they're led to the conclusion that the illness is the result of unwise choices
 - 1) it may be a case of bad diet
 - 2) a lack of self control
 - 3) promiscuity
 - 4) simply bad habits
 - 5) or it may be something deeper and more spiritual in nature, like bitterness and unforgiveness
 - d. modern science is coming to an ever greater appreciation for how the disposition of the soul affects the health of the body.
 - 1) bitterness is a spiritual poison that can do serious damage to the body
 - 2) resentment is a spiritual cancer than can result in ruined health
 - 3) anger can cause blood and heart problems
19. When you go to the doctor, you go because of some symptom that bothers you.
- a. you want relief from the symptom

- b. but the doctor knows that real & lasting relief only comes by addressing the *root cause* of the symptom.
 - c. so the medicine he prescribes attacks the root.
20. The elders do the same thing when they pray for healing.
- a. as those who are spiritually mature, they know that nothing comes in to the life of one of God's children that isn't ultimately ordained by God.
 - b. so they seek to discover the *root cause* of the symptom and they apply their prayer on that.
 - c. *IF*, and it's a big "if", sin is the root cause of illness, then the sin needs to be identified, challenged, and repented of.
 - d. with the forgiveness and release of sin, healing can flow.
21. What about those situations in which there *is no healing* and a person dies?
- a. was there a lack of faith?
 - b. was there a refusal to repent?
 - c. is what we find here in James 5 a formula for healing 100% of the time and when there's no healing it means we failed to "work it" properly?
22. Absolutely NOT!
- a. what James is giving us here is simply a *reminder* that we are to pray for *God's will to be accomplished* in the lives of His people –
 - b. and let's face it – there comes a time in everyone's life when it's God's will that we lay down our physical lives that we might enter His presence.
 - c. for some of us, this change will happen quickly and dramatically
 - d. for others, the transition will be slow and may be accompanied by much pain.
 - e. regardless of the details, God wants each and every one of us to face our graduation with courage and peace.
23. Nothing so reveals the difference between the lost and the saved than our attitude toward death.
- a. Christians believe that death is a doorway to glory and eternal bliss.
 - b. death is not something we *fear*, but rather, that we anticipate with a sense of excitement.

- c. if approaching that doorway means walking a path of pain, then we know God will give us the grace to endure whatever He calls us to go through.
24. I've had the privilege of watching the courageous faith of some precious brothers and sisters as they came to their last days.
- a. bed-ridden and wracked with pain – they exuded a longing for heaven that made my faith seem puny in comparison.
 - b. I visited one woman who was a godless unbeliever and who was tormented by the prospect of dying.
 - 1) she was an eternal trial to her daughter and son and in law with whom she lived
 - 2) she was petty and nasty every moment she was awake.
 - 3) whenever I went to visit her she asked pointed questions that blamed God for her pain, a God she, on one hand, said she didn't believe in, but then want to blame for her troubles.
 - 4) then one day, when I entered her room, she seemed to be far more calm than usual
 - 5) she greeted me cheerfully and said she'd thought a lot about our talks and wanted to give her heart to Christ
 - 6) we prayed, and there was a dramatic change in her whole countenance
 - 7) she only lived a couple weeks after that, but she was a completely different person.
 - 8) her speech was filled with kindness, and whenever someone entered her room, she sought to cheer them.
 - 9) when her passing finally came – she faced it with total peace and courage.
 - 10) her last days were one of the most powerful testimonies to the power of God I have ever witnessed!
25. You and I face many trials – some more serious and difficult than others.
- a. but no trial is as difficult as facing an illness that's marked by chronic, severe pain; specially if that illness is terminal.
 - b. seeing that apart from the Lord's Return, *every one of us* will know the challenge of our *last* trial – our death –
 - c. don't we NEED *examples* of others who faced death with courage and peace?
 - d. will not God, in His grace, in *every* generation provide

- examples of how our faith overcomes the trials of this world – even that last trial?
- e. we know we need good examples of how to *live* the Christian *life*;
 - f. why not good examples of how to *die* the Christian *death*?
26. God indeed *does* heal!
- a. there are many in this room this morning who have known God's healing touch
 - b. and I don't mean just healing that some might attribute to natural causes
 - c. I mean *miraculous* healing!
 - d. I for one – have been healed miraculously, as were many of you!
 - e. I have been a witness to miraculous healings in others.
27. But James would have us expand our horizons and see healing in a larger and more important context – God is as interested in the healing of our *soul and spirit* as He is in the healing of our body.
28. And sometimes, physical illness is the *tool* He uses to bring about the healing and fitting-out of our soul.
29. When the elders are called on to pray for someone – it's their aim to discover what God is doing, and pray for *that* to be accomplished.
- a. it may be that *all God wants to do* is demonstrate His power over some physical ailment.
 - b. then simple prayer for healing is the right thing to pray so that a miracle might be performed and God's goodness and power is revealed.
 - c. then again it may be that a person is harboring bitterness and resentment towards another and this has led to a poisoning of their spirit that has overflowed in some sickness, some nerve disorder maybe.
 - 1) as the elders wait on the Lord, they understand the root cause and confront the issue in prayer.
 - 2) they ask for God's grace to heal the person's poisoned spirit, and as the patient is convicted by God's Spirit, they repent and release the pent up hatred.
 - 3) physical health then flows in where the spiritual poison is expelled.

30. It's clear that James has this perspective in mind as we read on .

C. Vs. 16-18

6 Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

1. From the special case of the elders being called on to pray over those who are shut-in and bed-ridden, James moves to the need for confronting sin on a *daily basis*.
2. Long before a person has become so ill that they're bed-ridden, they need to be in the *habit* of dealing with sin as quickly as it rears its ugly head.
3. Calling on the elders is a *last measure*.
4. Before we get to *that* point, we ought to be in the habit of sharing our lives and struggles with those in the Body of Christ that we've been drawn into intimate communion with.
5. When James says, **“Confess you trespasses to one another”** he means that literally!
 - a. but he doesn't envision people getting up in front of the entire congregation when they gather all together in a kind of open mic setting.
 - b. he means that we're to confess our sins within the context of those who are an intimate part of our spiritual growth and development.
 - 1) don't forget that in the early church, people met mostly in homes.
 - 2) they would gather *first* at some central location like the temple courtyard or some other large, open area to hear one of the pastors teach on the life of Christ.
 - 3) then they would break into smaller groups to meet in one another's homes and discuss what they'd heard.
 - 4) it was in these home-groups that they shared a meal, prayed for one another and sought to minister to one another in practical ways.
 - 5) this was the setting in which James encouraged them to confess their sins to one another.

6. If we're in the habit of dealing with our sin *quickly* instead of sitting on it, rationalizing it and hiding it away, it will mean less complication latter.
7. Then James adds – **“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”**
 - a. the critical issue in this entire section is the importance of prayer.
 - b. people need to pray for themselves - the elders need to pray for the sick,
 - c. we need to pray for one another
 - d. and the prayers we pray need to be *focused* and *fervent*.
 - e. such focused and fervent prayer accomplishes much!
8. James knows there might be some who think that because they aren't **righteous**, their prayers won't be of much use
9. So in vs. 17 & 18, James gives an example of effective prayer . . .

17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.

18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

- a. Elijah, though a powerful prophet of the Lord, proved himself to be a man much like us.
 - b. after his mighty victory in his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, in which he called down fire from heaven in the sight of the king and all the people, he fell into a deep depression and threw himself a terrible pity-party.
 - c. he was so low he asked God to kill him.
 - d. and yet his fervent prayers, armed with the confidence that God desired to turn the nation back to Himself and that only a period of national calamity would affect such national repentance, closed the heavens so that it did not rain for 3½ years.
10. James's point is that when we pray, it ought to be our abiding aim to discover God's will, and then pray that will till it comes to pass on earth, as it is in heaven.
 11. Prayer is not a way to get our will done in heaven – it's the way

to get God's will done on earth.

12. And this is why it's so critical that when someone is ill or going through some kind of difficult trial, we must pray to discover the root cause and what it is God is seeking to do.
 - a. is He seeking to teach patience and long-suffering?
 - b. is He seeking to teach us how to forbear and endure?
 - c. is He challenging something inside us that falls short of the image of Christ?
 - d. or does He merely want to show His power to work a miracle and raise someone to health?

III. CONCLUSION

A. Faith Unshaken By Circumstance

1. In 1 John 5:4 we read, "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith."
2. One of the primary lessons God is teaching us is that He is *utterly trustworthy!*
 - a. we can trust him, not just for the things of this life -
 - b. but for *eternity!*
3. When the Christian maintains his/her confidence in the goodness of God even in the face of severe trial and the throes of acute pain, it bears a witness to the faithfulness of God the world must stand silent before.
4. Our faith is never more pure and holy than when it is sorely tried and every *evidence* for the goodness of God is removed – so that *all we have left* is simply His promise; His Word, which we know cannot fail for God cannot lie or deny Himself.
5. God intends to make of us the screen upon which He reveals His glory.
 - a. for some of us that will mean the miracle of instantaneous physical healing
 - b. for others, that will mean the use of illness to shape and mold in us the virtue of patience and long-suffering.
 - c. and for still others, it will mean facing death with courage and resolute faith that God is good and that death isn't to be feared, but to be faced with grace.

- d. for most of us, it means our lives, at various times will see all of these things discovered and lived out.
- 6. God would have us say with Job -“Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him!”

B. Selflessness

- 1. Right now in our fellowship, we have people who are suffering with grave physical ailments.
- 2. They are enduring them with faith and courage and so give to us living proof of the power and grace of God.
- 3. One case in particular I want to mention this morning
 - a. we have a lady who has diabetes and her kidneys have failed.
 - b. unless she has a transplant, she faces grave medical problems and likely will not survive.
 - c. word was sent out among the body and several people stepped forward to offer one of their kidneys!
 - d. the tests were performed and a match was found.
 - e. on Jan. 15th, these two sisters, bound not by a physical blood tie, but by the blood of Jesus Christ, will enter the hospital together, and a healthy kidney will be taken out of one and placed in the other.
 - f. one will *literally* give the other the gift of life!
- 4. Now, here’s the point – God could have healed our sister of her diabetes and kidney failure, and if He had, it would have been the cause of great rejoicing!
- 5. But how much MORE glory will God get because of the example of grace this gives us?
 - a. which is the bigger miracle; to heal a kidney –
 - b. or so affect a human heart that they would be willing to lay down their life that another may live?
 - c. personally – I think the later is by far the greater miracle!
- 6. And in this, in this gracious sacrifice we see an incredible lesson lived out.
- 7. For God Himself became flesh and suffered as a man so that He could sympathize with and offer assistance to those who suffer.
- 8. He laid down *His life* to give to us what we did not have and what was leading to our eternal death.
- 9. At the cross, The Father performed a *spiritual transplant*, He took

our sin and placed it on Christ and took Christ's righteousness and placed it on us.

10. He took our place in death that *we* might live forevermore.

[1] Barclay, William, *The Daily Bible Study Series, The Letters of James & Peter*, Pg. 129

[2] *ibid* Pg. 129

[3] *ibid*, pg. 129

[4] *ibid*, pg. 129

[5] *ibid*, pg. 129