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Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreek.church)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Monday, February 20, 2017

James 5:14-16 “Effective, Fervent Prayer for Healing”

Intro. We have issued a call for our church to gather to have special prayer for an infant in our church family, Christian Pontious, who needs a liver transplant. His condition has worsened and the need is critical. In Acts 12:5 we read of a time when the apostle Peter was in great need of prayer. What did the church do? That verse says, “constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.” Not only will we have special prayer in our worship service today, but we need to keep praying for Christian.

Before we have our special prayer time, I wanted to share from this text of Scripture in James. He says in v.14, “Is anyone among you sick?” Here we see that Christians do get sick.¹ Sadly, young children also get sick in this sin-cursed world. Some people get sick more than others, but we all get sick. At times we can get very sick. That is the situation that James has in mind here. The word translated “sick” here literally refers to sickness which renders a person very weak (*astheneo*-without strength). Based on v.15, the person is so sick they can hardly get out of bed. So based on the meaning of that word and the prescription that he gives, I do not believe he is talking about what to do when you have a cold or some minor form of sickness that you will normally recover from. In this text James is talking about what you should do when you get *really* sick. So what should we do? First of all:

I. CALL FOR THE ELDERS OF THE CHURCH

In v.14 James asks, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him....” James has in mind a situation where the Christian is too sick and weak to go to a gathering of the elders, so he asks the elders to come to him.

Who are the elders? The term “elders” in the book of Acts and the epistles refers primarily to the pastors of the church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1). Used more broadly, as was common among the Jews, the term could refer to other leaders of the church as well (cf. Acts 15:4, 22), including the deacons (cf. Php. 1:1).

Now notice who is supposed to call the elders to come and pray. James says in v.14, “Let him call for the elders....” The sick person or his family is to call for the elders to come and pray.² That may be the only way the elders are going to find out! Pastors are very busy, and it is difficult to keep up with everyone in the church at all times. So when you are seriously sick, you should ask the pastors and deacons to pray for you. Here we see there is Biblical ground for the ministry of visitation to the sick.

There have been a few occasions when a member of the church has been hospitalized, I did not visit them and pray with them, and so they got upset and left the church. The only problem is I did not know they were in the hospital! So if you are sick enough to need special

¹ Some say that the atonement of Christ includes freedom from sickness (Matthew 8:17). But if the atonement provides freedom from sickness, why does it not save us from physical death? No, Mt. 8:17 simply means that Christ took upon Himself the consequences of our sin, though He never personally sinned. Only in the life to come will sickness & death be removed from us.

² Who is to call is not specifically stated in the Greek, but it points back to the “anyone” (τις) who is sick. The subject of the verb (aorist, middle, imperative) is implied.

prayer at the hospital or your home, be sure to call and let us know if you desire for us to come and pray for you.

You should not limit your call for prayer to the elders only. In v.16 I believe James is including others in the church who should pray for the sick. He says, “pray for one another, that you may be healed.” This is why we distribute a prayer list, primarily listing the names of sick people. This is why I set up a “Swift Creek Baptist Prayer Room” on Facebook.

This is another reason why you need a church home. Are you a member of a local church? Some people only belong to the TV church. Well when you are sick, don’t expect Charles or Andy Stanley to come and visit you. Don’t expect John Hagee to come visit you. He won’t do it. You need to join *and attend* a local church. You need a church family in times of need.

So imagine that the elders have arrived to the room of a sick brother or sister. What should the elders do next? Well that leads to the next step:

II. HEALING AIDS SHOULD BE ADMINISTERED

In the last of v.14 James says, “let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” The participle “anointing” is in a tense (aorist) that can be translated, “having anointed him with oil.” Thus, the HCSB translates it, “they should pray over him after anointing him with olive oil....” So the original language indicates that the anointing with oil precedes the prayer of the elder. That is to be taken care of first.

Yet what is the significance of the application of oil, and how does that apply to today? What James commends here is what the apostles did. Mark 6:13 says that “they ... anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.”

In order to properly apply this teaching, we need to understand what kind of anointing we are talking about here. There are two Greek words translated “anoint” in the New Testament. One of them is *chrío*, from which get the word “Christ,” which means “the Anointed One.” That word is used of anointing in a religious sense (Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27, 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9; I John 2:27; etc.). Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil prior to taking office. It was to symbolize the leading and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The other word is used here (*aleipho*), which referred to application of oil in common, everyday life. For example, the word was used of rubbing on oil for beauty (Matthew 6:17; Luke 7:46), or rubbing on perfumed oil to smell better (Luke 7:38; John 12:3). They didn’t take baths very often in those days. Or perfumed oil was used for anointing a loved one for burial (Mark 16:1). Another common use for olive oil was to promote healing. Lk. 10:34 says of the Good Samaritan, “So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine....” Much of the historical literature of that day confirms the fact that oil was used as a healing remedy both internally and externally.³ It was used to aid in the healing of wounds. Physicians were so scarce and the means of transportation so difficult that they were only called in extreme need. The poor could hardly even afford them. So it seems the elders were in a habit of administering healing oil as a home remedy when they visited the sick. We know today that olive oil has healing properties. It reduces inflammation and has other healing and health benefits.

So James is saying something very practical here. As we shall see, we should avail ourselves of healing remedies as well as prayer. Jesus said in Mt. 9:12 that they that are sick need

³ Greek scholar A.T. Robertson wrote, “The use of olive oil was one of the best remedial agencies known to the ancients. They used it internally and externally.”

a physician. Baby Christian is at UVA hospital for this very reason. So don't neglect appropriate medical care by substituting the ceremonial application of oil. While I am perfectly willing to anoint someone with oil as part of a prayer service as an aid to faith, I believe the primary meaning is that we are to apply any medicine and other medical procedures that will promote healing.

Sometimes people can have very misguided faith. Some time ago a tragic incident occurred near Los Angeles where a man threw away the insulin that his little son was supposed to take because he claimed that God was going to heal his son. The little fellow died, and then the man said that the Lord would raise him from the dead. That didn't happen either. God has given man the intellectual ability to discover ways to bring healing, with medicines, surgeries, and other therapies. Each person has a purpose in life, and for some it is to bring healing. We should avail ourselves of medical treatment, including natural therapies such as olive oil.

Now the primary role of the elders is not to apply oil or medicine. In fact, I suppose we could get into trouble for practicing medicine without a license! You see, the word "anoint" is a participle,⁴ while the main verb is "pray." So let's us look at the primary way the elders are to be involved in seeking healing:

III. PRAYER FOR THE SICK SHOULD BE OFFERED

James says in v.14, "let them pray over him..." Notice this is actually a command in the original Greek. We should always pray when we get sick. And we should invite others to pray for us, especially the elders of the church. The elders of the church will gather around the sick person and pray. But James gives instruction about the kind of prayer we should exercise in regard to healing:

A. We Should Pray in Faith – Notice in v.15 that James says "the prayer of faith will save the sick." Likewise, James had already stated in 1:6-7, "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord." James assumes that the elders will be men of faith. They know the Bible, which contains many accounts of God's healing power. They know God. They personally have witnessed His healing power. They have faith in God's healing power. I believe that God can providentially arrange for the right liver to be given to Christian, and that He will raise him up in due time.

Why should we pray with strong faith? It is because of a wonderful promise given here in v.15, "And the prayer of faith will save the sick,⁵ and the Lord will raise him up..." Here the word "save" means "to save from sickness," i.e. to heal.

So when you are sick, call upon people of strong faith to pray for you. That is one of the conditions of answered prayer.

Furthermore:

B. We Should Pray in Jesus' Name – James says in the last of v.14, "let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." "In the name of the Lord" probably goes

⁴ Robertson says, "The aorist participle can be either simultaneous or antecedent with προσεύχομαι (pray)."

⁵ This is a different word from v.14, but has a similar meaning. It is a present active participle of κἀμνω, "to grow weary," used also in Heb. 12:3.

with both “pray” and “anoint,” for the fact is we are to pray “in Jesus’ name.”⁶ This means when healing comes, Jesus is to get the glory, for prayer was offered in His name. After all, He is the ultimate source of all healing. In fact, notice in the promise of v.15 who does the healing, “the Lord shall raise him up.” The elders, the oil, the prayer—these are simply means that God uses. When healing takes place, all the glory is to go to God!

It also means that our prayer must be consistent with what that name represents. Thus, our prayer not only must be made in faith, but also based on the will of God. In fact, we should never separate faith from the will of God. From 1 John 5:14-15 we can see prayer and the will of God linked together. If the elders discern that it is God’s will to heal, then they will pray with faith in the name of the Lord.

However, I do not believe it is *always* God’s will to heal in this life. Even the apostle Paul had an associate whom God did not choose to heal (2 Tim. 4:20). So when would it not be God’s will to heal, at least not quickly? As implied in v.15, at times sickness is due to sin, and in such cases it would not be God’s will to heal until that sin is confessed and forsaken. That is why James says in v.16, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” Dealing with the sin is a condition of healing in such cases. Furthermore, sometimes God’s purpose is for sickness to humble us, or to build character, or to teach us some spiritual lesson. Until God’s purpose has been fulfilled, it would not be God’s will to heal. At other times it is not God’s will to heal simply because it is God’s appointed time for a person to die. Hebrews 9:27 says that “it is appointed for men to die once....” Someday you are going to become seriously sick because it is your time to go home to be with the Lord.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one of the greatest preachers in England during the 20th century. He battled illness much of the last 2 years of his life. By February of 1981 he was telling his family, “Don’t pray for healing; don’t try to hold me back from the glory.” On March 1 he went home to be with the Lord. It was him time to go.

But typically, I believe it *is* God’s will to heal, for He is compassionate, and healing as a result of prayer is one way to bring glory to Himself. So the elders are to seek the mind of God in the matter, and then pray in faith according to His will.

We have a member of the church who has experienced the fulfillment of this promise. At the age of 48 Chris Lee was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer. The cancer had spread to his bones and spine. He was given this news on the day of his 20th wedding anniversary. So back in 2010 he asked for the elders of the church to have special prayer over him. We had a special prayer service, following this scripture passage, including the application of oil. His cancer went into remission. Today, he feels great. The cancer is gone. His was the greatest example of answered prayer for healing I had ever experienced.

There is one more aspect of answered prayer that you don’t hear much about these days:

C. Our Prayers Should Arise from a Life of Righteousness – James says in the last of v.16, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” That is one reason why he advises calling the elders of the church, who are to be morally blameless even to hold that office (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6-7). Furthermore, in light of the confession of sin mentioned in v.16, and the example of Elijah in v.17, I believe James mainly has in mind those who *live* righteously. When we are in daily fellowship with God our prayers will certainly be more effective. 1 John 3:22 says, “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.” Effective prayer takes place when our prayers arise

⁶ However, if it goes with “anoint” then that would support a ceremonial anointing.

from a life that is generally lived in conformity to the will of God. Yet notice what happens when you are *not* living righteously. Psa. 66:18 says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.” 1 Peter 3:7 says that we husbands should give honor to our wives “that your prayers may not be hindered.” So that is why James says the prayers of a *righteous* man avails much.

Someone has said, “It takes only a short prayer to reach God...if you don’t live too far away.”

So not living right with God is not inconsequential. If your prayers have gone unanswered, you should examine your life. Perhaps you have some unconfessed sin in your life that is hindering your prayers. That is why James says in v.16, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed....” Before you pray for Christian, you should make sure you are right with God. Confess your sins, and receive cleansing by the blood of Jesus!

Furthermore, notice what a life of righteousness does for your praying. In the last of v.16 James says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” The words “effective, fervent” come from one Greek word (a present participle), from which we get our word “energy.” It may refer to energetic, fervent prayer. Notice in v.17 that Elijah “prayed earnestly.” So if that is the correct interpretation, James is indicating that we ought to put our heart, soul and energy into our prayers. On the other hand, based on use elsewhere in the New Testament, it probably simply describes prayer that works, that is effectual by the power of God. My main point is this: such prayer “avails much.” “Avails” (*ischuoo*) means that the kind of prayer described here is strong and powerful. For example, God has the power to convert and save the soul of a great sinner. God has the power to heal a person with a deadly sickness. Jesus said in Mt. 19:26, “with God all things are possible.” Never doubt the power of prayer! What God did for Chris Lee He can do for you.

Conclusion: If you or a loved one has gone through a time of serious sickness, what did you do? Did you face that adversity with a stiff upper lip and try to handle it on your own? Or did you seek God in prayer? Did you call on the elders and others to pray for you? If you have not followed these commands of the Word of God, then I encourage you to make a commitment to God right now to change the way you have been responding to sickness. In good times and in bad, look to the Lord. Put your trust in Him. And you will see God work in your life in marvelous ways!

Sources: J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); George Sweeting, *How to Solve Conflicts: A Practical Study of the Book of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973); Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature: James* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978); Spiros Zodiatas, *The Behavior of Belief: An Exposition of James Based Upon the Original Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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