

The Power of Prayer in the Presence of Trouble

James 5:13-20

We come this morning to the end of our study of the book of James. In this last passage, James continues the theme of suffering. In verse 10, he called us to show patience in the face of suffering. Here in verse 13, he asks the question, "Is any one of you in trouble?" The word for *trouble* here is the verb form of the same Greek word he used for *suffering* in verse 10. He is still talking about the same stuff—the trials and tribulations of life. This is anything that causes you to suffer, any difficult circumstance or trial that challenges you. Quick poll by show of hands, by this definition, how many of you face troubles in life? Quick count...It's universal.

First, he called us to patience in the face of suffering—a steadfast endurance against the worst the world and Satan can throw at us. Thankfully, that is not his only answer to the troubles of life. James would not be the go-to book that Christians have turned to time and time again for two thousand years if James' final answer to life's troubles was grin and bear it.

James is an immensely practical teacher. He is chock full of useful teaching and real-world wisdom. James is truth you can use. That's why it helps us take our faith out of the box and put it into practice. James saves one of his most practical tools in his pastoral toolbox for these last several verses, and that is prayer. Prayer is mentioned seven times in these last eight verses.

And prayer is talked about on multiple levels. In verse 13, we see the power of the praying individual; in verses 14 and 15, the power of praying elders; and in verse 16, the power of praying for one another. As he did before with both the prophets and Job, James gives us a biblical example of powerful prayer in Elijah.

Upon first reading, this passage seems rather straight forward— If someone is sick, they should call on the elders, they will anoint them with oil and pray for them, if that prayer is offered in faith, they will be made well, their sin will be forgiven, because the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

However, for a variety of reasons, this passage gets more complicated the longer you look at it. When you begin to study these verses a little more deeply, and peel away the layers of this text, you begin to realize there is a whole lot more going on than meets the eye. You can read ten different scholars and get ten different interpretations of what this passage means.

The greatest difficulty, though, comes from real life personal experience. Anyone of you that's gone through a real serious illness, or you had a loved in the church suffer and even die from a serious disease, treating this text as if it offers an easy answer is an insulting slap in the face. You know the

story. They prayed and they prayed and they prayed. They even had the elders of the church come and pray. They even anointed them with oil, and their illness only got worse. They even died.

Why wasn't their prayer powerful and effective? Were they not righteous enough? Maybe the elders weren't righteous enough. Perhaps they didn't have enough faith. A couple weeks ago I told our small group about a dear friend named Cathy. Cathy was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was filled with tumors. It was late stage, widely spread, very deadly. She was given two months to live. She and her husband were prepared for the worst. They had such a godly attitude as they approached the end. I even interviewed them during a Sunday morning service about approaching death as a Christian. We went through this whole process. She called on the elders. We went to her house, we went to her bedside. We anointed her with oil. We prayed for her healing. And she was. It seemed to be the most remarkable descriptions of this text. She went back to the doctor and every trace of the cancer was gone. The doctors were baffled. They couldn't explain it. The term miracle was freely used. Cathy lived and continued to faithfully serve Christ. But, as the late Paul Harvey would say, "Now, for the rest of the story." Three years later, a whole different type of cancer ravaged Cathy's body. We went through the whole process again—elders, anointing, prayer, but this time, there was no healing, and Cathy died. How does that fit with James 5:13-20? Don't these sorts of experiences undermine the amazing promise of this passage?

The difficulties of this passage only multiply when you start opening some books and do a little study. When you research the words and grammar in the Greek, and you realize there are more layers of meaning in the original than in English. There are different words used for sick. There are different words used for healing, and their meanings can apply to different things. There are legitimate questions about whether James is talking about spiritual sickness or physical sickness, spiritual healing or physical healing, is he talking about a ceremonial anointing with oil or the application of a medicinal ointment. When you put it all together you can end up with a tangled mess.

There are few easy answers here. I will say this. We can spend so much time trying to untangle this mess, looking at all the options, making sure we have all the technicalities resolved, all the questions answered, and making sure that we stake out the proper position, that we miss the point, and the point is we should pray. My heart this morning is a pastoral one. I want you to deepen your relationship with God through prayer. I want to help strengthen your faith during times of trouble by being able to reach out to others for prayer. I want to give you the tools you need to take it out of the box and live it out.

So, as I wrestled with all of these questions over the last two weeks, I decided to put the text on simmer and slow boil it down to its basic ingredients. These are things we can take away from this

passage even if all our questions are not answered, and these ingredients still work even if we answer some of these questions differently.

I. Pray

The main ingredient? This one's simple. Pray. What should you do in times of trouble? What's James' answer? Pray. If you're in trouble, pray. There is one thing you can always do whenever you are facing any difficulty in life. You can pray. Even when nothing else works, you can pray. Even when you can't do anything else, you can pray. There is one response that is always appropriate to any trial, anywhere at any time— You. Can. Pray.

Notice, James also invites us to sing songs of praise when we're happy. The word here means to be of good heart. The point is that whether things are going good or whether things just plain stink, we can bring it all to God. John Calvin said it well when he says, "There is no time in which God does not invite us to himself."ⁱ Too many of us get in the habit of only going to God when times are bad or when times are good. We only go to God when we need bailed out of trouble or only when things are going our way. That's not a full relationship with God.

Think about it. How would you feel about a friend who only called you when they needed help? Or, how about someone who was only your friend when they got what they wanted? I don't think we would see that as a strong, healthy relationship. We must remember that our God is a God of all seasons. Now, James doesn't unpack both ideas in this passage, so that's not where this sermon is going. The idea he deals with is the idea that we need to pray in the hard times. Prayer should be our first response. Unfortunately, prayer is too often our last resort instead of our first response. Don't just see prayer as an act of desperation, but as an act of preparation.

II. Use Your Brain and Get Treatment

One of the controversial questions about this passage is has to do with the purpose of the oil mentioned in verse 14. Everyone is in agreement with type of oil in mind. It was olive oil. Olive oil was ever-present in 1st Century Israel. It was a staple of everyday life and it was used for so many things— It fueled the lamps, it was used in cooking, it was a lubricant, it served as the base for perfumes and beauty treatments, it was a healing ointment, and it also had significant ceremonial and religious uses.

Anointing with oil had a great symbolic significance in the Bible. Prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed with oil when they began to serve.ⁱⁱ This was to symbolize God's Spirit and His anointing on their life and ministry.ⁱⁱⁱ The significance of the oil goes all the way back to Noah's flood when the dove returned to the ark with an olive branch in its mouth. It was a sign of hope and promise.

The fruit of the olive tree was also a part of the bounty Israel was to receive in the Promised Land.^{iv} As such it symbolized God's blessing and abundance.

James writes in verse 14, *"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord."* It makes perfect sense that the anointing here is a ceremonial, symbolic act based on this history. It is a sign of God acting in the sick person's life in response to the prayer.

The other option, though, is that the oil is not being used in a ceremonial way, but as a medicinal ointment. This is a case of providing medical treatment as well as praying for the patient— the 1st Century equivalent of praying for someone in the hospital. Olive oil was the ancient universal ingredient for medicines. It was used both internally and topically. It was in every medicine cabinet all around the Mediterranean Sea. The prophet Isaiah spoke of its medicinal properties.^v In Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan, the eponymous Samaritan anointed the victim's wounds with oil as a part of the first aid rendered. The healing properties of olive oil are even touted by modern medicine. One article lists more than 15 health benefits of olive oil and calls it "liquid gold."^{vi} Many scholars believe this is the sense here in James 5. If someone is sick, they should seek medicinal treatment as well as prayer.

The question here is which one is right? I'll be open with you. I'm not sure. I have gone back and forth. A good case can be made both ways. So, let me tell you where I am. If someone calls on me as a pastor or on the elders of the church to pray for them and anoint them with oil, I have no problem anointing them with olive oil and praying for them. The symbolic and ceremonial sense of anointing is proper whether that's the meaning James intends here or not. There is such a rich, biblical history; I have no problem with it.

I also believe that we should seek and apply whatever appropriate medical treatments are available. The Bible never presents prayer for healing as something we do instead of treatment, or something that is opposed to treatment. Paul had a doctor accompany him on many of his missionary journeys. He gave the young evangelist Timothy medical advice for his stomach problems. He didn't tell him to go find someone who could heal him. The God who heals in response to prayer is the same God who created plants and chemicals with healing properties, and gave us the intellect and creative spirit to utilize those tools. We need to thank God for both. As Alec Motyer writes,

Even when we go to the doctor, then, our eyes are to the Lord. He alone can heal. There is no such thing as (so to speak) 'non-spiritual' healing. When the aspirin works, it is the Lord who has made it work; when the surgeon sets the broken limb and the bone knits, it is the Lord who has made it knit." Every good gift is from above.^{vii}

To use God's good gifts in the medical sciences and the medical arts can be as much an act of trust in God as is calling on the elders to pray for you. There is nothing less spiritual or less Christian about using your brain and getting treatment.

III. Pray for one Another.

The third ingredient is that we are to pray for one another. It's not only the elders who can pray. James doesn't call out the elders because they are more special, or God hears their prayers better. Verse 16 says, *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."* So, whose prayers can heal— the elders or each other's? Yes. Part of my job as a pastor is calling on the sick. Just this week I went to Springfield to have prayer with Judy Wilson before her surgery. I think that's biblical, and we see support for this idea right in this passage. So, by all means, let me know if you're having surgery. Let me know if you're really sick. I'll be happy to come and see you and pray for you.

But know this. My prayers aren't more powerful and effective than yours. I don't have special access to God. Let me take that back. I do have special access to God, but so do you. Through Jesus Christ, every brother or sister in Christ can approach the throne of grace with confidence. We need to be praying for each other. Pray for those in your Sunday School class. Pray for those in your small group. Pray for the sick. Pray for those who are facing troubles. This is why we put out a prayer list.

Your prayers for each other can be just as powerful and effective as mine, or the elders, or even as powerful and effective as the great prophet Elijah. In verses 17 and 18, James talks about how Elijah earnestly prayed, first for it not to rain, and there was drought for three and a half years. Then he prayed for rain, the heavens opened up, and the crops returned.

Now, this doesn't mean that if you pray for it not to rain this weekend because you got plans, that God promises it won't rain. We know from other passages that our prayers must be in keeping with God's will. Prayer is not a token to a cosmic vending machine to get what you want. 1 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."*

Elijah was praying in accordance with God's will, and God answered his prayer. He will answer you too. You might be thinking, "But Elijah was a great prophet. I'm nothing like him. There's no way God will hear my prayers. Look at the first sentence in verse 17. What does it say? *"Elijah was a man just like us."* God will hear your prayers, so we should pray for each other.

IV. Examine Your Life for Sin and Confess It.

Number four. Examine your life for sin and confess it. There has been an ingredient running throughout these verses I haven't mentioned yet, and that is unconfessed sin. Verse 15 mentions that following the prayer of the elders that the sick person will be raised up, and "*If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.*" In verse 16, we are urged, "*confess your sins to each other.*" The book closes with this warning,

¹⁹*My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

So, what's going on here, and what does all this talk of sin, forgiveness, bringing back, and covering sins have to do with prayers for healing? Let me give you three levels or layers for understanding this passage, starting with the most specific and moving to the more general, and each one could include the ones before. These are summarized well by Alec Motyer in his commentary on the book of James.^{viii}

1. James is not talking about any kind of illness here, but specifically an illness that is the consequence of some sin in your life. Some have improperly taught or believed that all sickness is because of some sin in our lives. Jesus makes very clear to the disciples in John 9:1-5 that not all sickness and disease is the result of personal sin. Sometimes we get sick simply because we live in a fallen world where people get sick (Gen. 3:19). It might be caused by Satan or one of his demons (Job 2:4-7; Lk 13:11). Sometimes God has a very specific purpose. God may allow it so that we might grow in patience (Jas. 1:2) He might use it to strengthen us (Jn. 15:2). Other times, God uses such things to test our faith (1 Pet. 1:7), or to display his glory (Jn. 9:1-3).

However, the Bible is also clear that some sickness is the result of personal sin. Sometimes, this might be obvious to us. We aren't surprised when an alcoholic gets cirrhosis of the liver, or someone who sleeps around gets herpes. But there is something happening at a deeper spiritual level here. Sometimes, unrepented, unconfessed sin can lead to illness. I think this is something God does to keep us from going completely off the rails. This doesn't mean we shouldn't pray about all illness or sickness that doesn't come from sin, but the healing promised here is for that specific sort of illness.

In 1 Corinthians 11 talks about how there are some who are sick in the church at Corinth because they have been taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. In John 5:14 Jesus warned a man he'd just healed to "*sin no more, than nothing worse may befall you.*" What James may be saying here is that if you are sick and you are aware of some sin in your life that may be behind this, then don't just address the physical illness, but address the spiritual illness as well. Repent, and confess your sin.

2. The second option is that we should use our time of illness for a time reflection and self-examination. The language James uses in this passage indicates that he is talking about serious illness here. This isn't just a little headache or bloating. This is you're sick in bed sick. And one thing you have when you're laid up in bed is time to think. Perhaps James is telling us to use this time recall and repent of sin in our life.

3. A third possibility is to remind us not to only seek physical healing, but to seek the wellness of the whole person. We shouldn't only seek to heal a broken body, but a broken heart and a broken soul as well. This passage could be a reminder for us to realize that complete healing involves the whole person. Tend to your spiritual wounds as you tend to your physical wounds.

V. Don't make judgments about the illness of others

The last thing is this: don't make judgments about the illness of others. Just because some sickness is the result of sin, doesn't mean that every sick person is ill because of sin in their life. We should be very wary of pointing fingers and saying, "You are sick because you did this or that." This is something that the Holy Spirit has to convict someone of in their own heart, and they in turn confess their sin, and seek the counsel and prayer of the church's elders and other believers to pray for them.

Our job is not to judge others and tell them that God is punishing them. Our job is to care for them, and pray for them. If they have a sin to confess, then we are to forgive them and restore them, as verse 19 says, bring them back. There are times it may be appropriate to ask the questions, "Is there anything in your life you need to confess? Is there any hidden sin that God may be calling your attention to?" However, it's not our place to go on search and destroy missions for sin in every sick person's life. Leave that to the Holy Spirit. He's much better at it anyway.

In some circles, they wrongly take this passage as a guarantee of healing, and if healing doesn't come, then it's your fault, because, obviously, there's some sin in your life. In one of my previous ministries there was a couple named Lyle and Mildred who lived down the street from the church. Several years earlier Lyle suffered a massive stroke that left him an invalid. He couldn't feed himself. He couldn't move or hold his head up. He could only be moved with a hydraulic hoist. Mildred quit her job as a nurse to care for her husband full time.

Every week, I went by to take Mildred communion, a copy of my sermon, to pray, and to read scriptures with Lyle. After a couple of years of this, the pastor of a so-called faith healing church came and told Mildred that he could pray for healing for Lyle and if they had enough faith, Lyle would be healed. Filled with hope, Mildred had them try twice. Lyle only got worse. This charlatan of a pastor and his wife had the audacity to tell Mildred that it was their fault. They didn't have enough faith. They had

some sin in their lives. Mildred had a deep and abiding faith in God, that I had seen demonstrated many times. That faith was nearly devastated by the spiritual malpractice of this idiot. Please, do not buy into that kind of thinking, that is not what James is teaching.

So, if you find yourself really sick, call the doctor, and follow her instructions. Then examine yourself. Do some soul searching. Pray the Psalm of David from Psalm 139:23, *“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way of the everlasting.”* If the Spirit reveals something to you, then take care of it. Confess it to whomever you need to confess it to, and have them pray for you. Call on the elders, have them anoint you with oil, and pray for you.

ⁱ Calvin, John. Trans. By Rev. John Owen. (1855) Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles. Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, Scotland. p. 354

ⁱⁱ 1 Kg. 19:16; 1 Chron. 16:22; Ps. 105:15; Ex. 40:15; Num. 3:3; 1 Sam. 9:16; 10:1; 1 Kg. 1:34, 39)

ⁱⁱⁱ Zec. 4; Mt. 25:1-13Ac. 10:38

^{iv} Dt. 6:11; 8:8

^v Is. 1:6

^{vi} Grufferman, Barbara Hannah. (Sept. 10, 2011) The Healing Power of Olive Oil. www.huffingtonpost.com. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barbara-hannah-grufferman/olive-oil-health-benefits_b_945506.html on Oct. 28, 2015.

^{vii} Motyer, Alec, (1985) *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL pp. 193.

^{viii} Motyer, Alec, (1985) *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL pp. 194-195.