

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray^a. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises^b. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church^c and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord^d; ¹⁵and the

^a **5:13 Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray.** The word James uses here for suffering connects this passage to the suffering of the prophets mentioned in verse 10. It also hearkens back to the challenge at the beginning of this letter to “consider it all joy” when trials come. It is not cruel to suggest that sufferers have responsibility. Hard times are not a license to complain or to express anger at God. Sufferers have an obligation to turn to him as their ever-present help in trouble.

^b **5:13 Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.** Just as the sufferer has a duty, so does the person whose cheer is good. Earthly cheer ought to bring you to song, whether feasting on a great meal, a skillful display of the arts or a good ballgame. The command to sing is one of the most common commands in Scripture (Psalm 147:7; Ephesians 5:19). If you are never cheerful you are evidently exempt from this command.

^c **5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church.** The word “sick” means “weak,” including by application people who are weak for reasons others than physical illness.

Elders are shepherds or overseers. The words elder, bishop (overseer) and a pastor are words used interchangeably of church leaders, never of distinct offices. God has governed his people by a body of elders throughout the history of Israel and into the post-cross era of the church (Exodus 3:16; 19:7; Acts 14:23; 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1; Revelation 19:4).

This phrase is instructional on a number of levels. It assumes the readers (or hearers) of this letter from James are connected to an organized body of believers called a “church,” not just part of the universal Body of Christ. It assumes the readers are under the plural authority of a group of church leaders called elders, an assumption consistent with the rest of Scripture. It assumes that in hard times the natural response of a believer should be to lean on the church.

This means church leaders should be equipped to respond to those who ask for help.

^d **5:14 they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.** Notice the phrase “pray over.” This could mean the sick person is bedridden or simply that the weak person should kneel as the elders pray.

The practice of anointing the sick with oil has been understood in different ways. Roman Catholicism has justified the sacrament of last rites or “extreme unction” based on this passage (But the end James has in mind is far different from that of a priest administering last rites). Many evangelicals view and practice this anointing with oil as God’s prescribed way to deal with the sick and to claim a promise of divine healing.

Oil throughout Scripture has been viewed as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but was also used medicinally. What does James have in mind here?

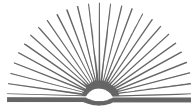
The anointing with oil was practiced by Jesus’ disciples as recorded in Mark 6:13 and by the Good Samaritan in the parable recorded in Luke 10. Isaiah compared Israel’s condition to a person with wounds “not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil” (Isaiah 1:6).

A case can be made that James is speaking simply of a medicinal use of oil. He does not use the word for ceremonial anointing (*chrío*) used of Jesus in Luke 4:18 and Acts 4:27. He chooses the word (*aleipho*) which was used of Mary pouring oil on Jesus’ feet (John 12:3) and by Jesus in His instructions to people who fast (Matthew 6:17) to put oil on their heads so they don’t appear to be fasting. James is speaking of anointing a sick person. This word was commonly used in

James 5:13-15
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prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick^a, and the Lord will raise him up^b, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him^{c,d}

the field of medicine in the days of James. The Arndt and Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* uses the term “household remedy” of *aleipho*.

Jay Adams (*Competent to Counsel*, p. 108) summarizes this position: “And so it turns out that what James required by the use of oil was the use of the best medical means of the day.”

One weakness of this argument is that it appears to place medical care in the hands of church leaders, a duty not required by Scripture or desired by most of us who are church leaders.

It could be that the ritual prescribed here is a matter of obedience we may not understand, but through which God may bring about healing.

The bottom line? When you are sick, call your doctor *and* your church elders. Don't think either one is expendable.

^a 5:15 **and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick.** The word translated “prayer” here is a form of the common New Testament word for prayer. It is translated “vow” elsewhere.

The word “restore” could be translated “save,” prompting some to suggest that this text has nothing to do with physical healing. That is a convenient way to dismiss supernatural healing as a possibility in our day. This text does not suggest individuals should start large public healing ministries, but it does suggest local churches carry on private healing ministries.

The “prayer offered in faith” may not necessarily be possible every time a body of elders prays. The apostles were evidently endowed with healing abilities at some times greater than others (Luke 10). Just as Paul was often unable to heal (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20; Philippians 2:25), the faith of which James speaks may be a gift bestowed occasionally when God “shows up” and confirms his power through the prayers of his people.

There is no promise here of immediate healing. Consider the poor soul who has not been healed having to carry the added burden of thinking it was because he or she lacked sufficient faith to be healed. The faith required here is the responsibility on the elders, not the sick person. God may in fact grow faith more quickly when the healing does not come. Early on in this letter James says we can be joyful for the work God is doing even when we are still in the trial.

^b 5:15 **and the Lord will raise him up.** Some commentators have suggested that since James uses a word commonly used of resurrection (*egeiro*), that he is looking far beyond temporal healing. Use of this term could simply be evidence that the sick person is bedridden.

^c 5:15 **and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.** The sin factor should never be dismissed in a time of physical weakness. The truth is that all illness is the result of sin—one sin in the Garden of Eden. While Job's friends improperly pointed fingers at Job when God was at work making his servant better, others in Scripture became ill as a direct result of their sin (Deuteronomy 28:58-63; Proverbs 3:28-35; 13:13-23; Luke 5:20; John 5:14; Acts 12; 1 Corinthians 11:30). The ministry of the elders should be to inquire about the spiritual health of the weak person. Good shepherds watch for souls and are accountable to God for that work (Hebrews 13:17).

^d 5:13-15 This text tells us what the ministry of a local church ought to look like. The church is full of sinners who suffer because of their own sins, because of the sins of others and because they live in a sin-cursed world. The answer to all this suffering is not the creation of large global operations. It is local church ministry. The Body of Christ works on a local level. The church ministering to hurting people looks like this:

1. The church must promote a God-centered theology. This is done by teaching people to respond in a Godward direction whether times are hard or easy. You learn this best before the hard times come.
2. The church must offer soul care by an equipped group of leaders. We should not outsource love for souls—particularly those who are hurting physically or otherwise.

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3. The church must promote the ministry of prayer. We ought to cry out to God on behalf of others, trusting his powerful character and promises. This is to be done privately and corporately.

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