

“A Healing Community”
James 5:13-20
September 17, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

James is too gospel-centered to conclude his letter with a call to patience and steadfastness, the theme of last week’s passage. Patience assumes suffering and difficulties in life, and the enduring of such difficulties should not be the last word for any who have embraced the hope of the gospel. Jesus always gets the last word, and his is a word of life, joy and the end of all suffering and death. So it is appropriate that James conclude his letter with the topic of healing. The healing of all the damage done by sin, whether it be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual, is the confident expectation of all God’s people. While our full healing will not occur until the return of Jesus, elements of it are present already within the community of God’s people.

One of our core values as a church is to be a healing community. There is not a single one of us not in need of healing of some type. We have all been broken in various ways. We were all raised by broken parents, taught by broken teachers and coached by broken coaches. But we can’t just put our brokenness off on others. We have responded sinfully to the sins done to us. We are broken in our relationship with God, thinking that God is either not interested in us or flat out against us. We think he is the problem rather than the solution. So we live as if everything is up to us. We need healing, and God brings it through the community of his people, the church. Notice how James develops this theme in his final paragraphs, with a special focus on prayer.

I. The Prayers of Healing

A healing community is a praying community. There are seven references to prayer in these verses. We encounter here a praying individual, praying elders, praying friends and a praying prophet. He begins with his version of Paul’s command to pray without ceasing. If you are suffering, James says that the appropriate response is to pray. If you are cheerful, he commands another form of prayer, the singing of praise. Every occasion, whether it be sad or happy, should be seen as an occasion to come to God. He invites us and welcomes us to come to him in prayer. There are challenges to doing so in both cases. For those who are suffering, the temptation is to be angry at God instead of coming to him in prayer. And if things are going well, the temptation is to forget God. So James reminds us to come to God in every condition, whether sad or happy or somewhere in between. As George Herbert said in his great poem about prayer, prayer is the “Church’s banquet.” It is a feast of abundant, satisfying food, provided by God himself. Have you joined the feast?

I'd like to spend a little more time on the prayer of the elders. James directs the sick person to call the elders of the church to **“pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”** (v. 14). It has been our privilege as a board of elders to practice this kind of prayer and anointing. Let me make several points about it. First, I notice that it is the sick person who is to call the elders, not the elders who are to call the sick person. In other words, the initiative lies with the sick person because it is an act of faith to make that call. The way this works practically in our church is that a person calls me to ask for such prayer and anointing, and I announce to the elders a time to gather for that purpose, and those whose schedule permits show up to do so. We then ask the sick person how we can be praying, after which we seat him or her in a chair in the middle of the room. We then gather around and anoint that person with oil, making the sign of the cross on their forehead with it. The oil we use is more like a paste than a liquid, so it is not a messy process at all. The elders then lay hands on the person and take turns praying.

Another question that arises with this practice is when the elders should be called for this prayer and anointing. Does it apply to any sickness or only certain ones? I think there is reason to think that it applies only to more serious illnesses. For one thing, James indicates that the elders go to the sick person, perhaps because he is too sick to come to them. Also, it would be impractical for this to happen with every illness in the congregation. I don't think we should think about this as a requirement placed upon God's people, but rather an option given to them when they feel led of the Lord to use it.

What about the oil? The oil is neither medicinal nor sacramental. This passage is the basis of the Roman Catholic sacrament of last rites, but I think that is a misreading of the text. The oil is better understood as symbolic of the healing presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

It should also be mentioned that this practice is not meant to replace the common means of healing available to us—the medical community with all the skills and wisdom available there. Since we have so many in our church who work in the medical field, let me suggest to you that the reason God has blessed our world with so many medical advances is in answer to many prayers for healing. You and your profession are an answer to the prayers of millions. When the elders pray, we pray for healing, not necessarily for a miracle. None of our elders claims to have the gift of miraculous healing. We are not opposed to miracles, but simply leave to God how and when he wants to bring healing. I am sure that he has done so at times with a direct miracle, apart from human means. But I am also sure that in the vast majority of cases he uses more normal means for such healing, means such as surgery, medicine and time.

The other big question arising in this matter is how we are to understand the promise of verse 15, that the **“prayer of faith will save the one who is**

sick, and the Lord will raise him up.” I would like to postpone answering that question to our next point.

James next moves to consider the praying of Elijah as a good example to us. He introduces the prayers of Elijah with a word that has an ominous and exclusionary ring to it. **“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working”** (v. 16). It’s probably only the self-righteous, those who think they are righteous but really aren’t, who are not intimidated by this word “righteous.” James recognizes the danger, so he quickly adds the words in the next verse. **“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.”** He’s not talking about Elijah’s human nature, but the mixture within him of a redeemed part that trusted God and did in fact behave righteously and with faith at times, together with a sinful nature that behaved abominably. So we read of Elijah’s great act of faith on Mt. Carmel, when he called forth God’s fire on the offering in his battle against the false prophets of Baal. And immediately on the heels of that, he fell into the depths of despair and depression, fleeing at just a hint of danger from Queen Jezebel. There were times when he was filled with selfless love for others, such as his love for the widow of Zarephath, a Gentile woman whose son died. Elijah’s selfless love for her and her son comes through loud and clear as he asks, and is granted, the miracle of a resurrection for the son of this widow. But only two chapters later (19:10), Elijah is so filled with self-pity, a form of selfishness that is the opposite of love, that he fails to see things clearly and blames God for his troubles. James’ point is clear. “Righteous” cannot refer to someone who always acts righteously, but must refer to someone who has a righteous standing in spite of the fact that he doesn’t always act righteously. The Scriptures are clear in stating that all who trust in Christ are given such a standing. If your faith has been placed in Jesus, then you can be assured that you have been given this righteous standing, not because you are perfectly righteous, but because Jesus is. The result is that you can know that your prayers have great power, as much power as Elijah’s prayers.

Through his prayers, Elijah was able to do what only God could do. He prayed that it might not rain, and the result was that it didn’t rain for three and a half years. He prayed again and the rains came. It should be pointed out that Elijah’s prayers were also informed by the Scriptures. God had pronounced in Deuteronomy that Israel’s idolatry would result in droughts such as this. When you pray in Jesus’ name something that God has said in his word, powerful things unfold. Those diseased with the congenital defect of selfishness can begin to be healed and learn to love others. The untamable tongue, bent on evil and destruction, can be tamed. The fearful can gain confidence and the cowardly courage.

II. The Healing of Prayers

What should we think about the promise of verse 15? **“The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.”** Specifically, does God promise to heal everyone who receives the ministry of prayer and anointing from the elders, as this promise seems to indicate? The problem is that in practice not everyone is healed. I know for a fact that it has been our experience here that God does not heal all who have received from us this ministry. Some have even died after we prayed for healing for them. Other churches have experienced the same outcome. So we encounter a bit of a difficulty here where God seems to promise healing, but our experience shows that healing does not always come.

One attempt to escape this difficulty is to understand the “prayer of faith” in something of a technical sense. According to this understanding, it refers to a prayer God leads you to make with an assurance beforehand that God wants to grant a healing. So the uncertainty is on the front end, before the prayer is made. I find that explanation unconvincing.

A better approach, and one that seems to be more faithful to the text, is to broaden our understanding of healing. I note that in verse 15, where the promise occurs, the word healing is not used. James uses words that are more broad than physical healing, saying that the sick person receiving prayer and anointing will be “saved” and will be “raised up.” Those are words that are used repeatedly in the Bible for the broad work of salvation God accomplishes for his people. It does include healing, but maybe not as soon as we would prefer. I do think ultimate healing is in view with the words “raise him up,” words commonly used to refer to the resurrection of our bodies with new, immortal bodies at the coming of Christ.

Another reason I think it is better to understand the healing as more broad than just physical healing is James’ introduction of confession of sin. Right after saying, “the Lord will raise him up,” James adds, **“And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”** We tend to separate the physical from the spiritual in our worldview, but the Bible sees these two as related to one another. There is a verse in 1 Corinthians where Paul reports that people were getting sick and some were even dying because of their unconfessed sin in partaking of the Lord’s Supper unworthily (11:30).

The healing in view in this passage is greater than physical healing. Consider the healing that comes to us through confession of sin. We do that each week during our corporate worship service because, among other reasons, we believe that there is healing here. Our relationship with God is healed as we honestly bring our sin to God. Our emotional lives are healed as we confess our sins, delivering us from the bondage of shame. As we hear others confess sin and express their confidence in Jesus’ blood to cleanse us of that sin, our hearts are encouraged to do the same. We don’t feel so alone.

It is clear from the Bible that God doesn't always answer every prayer in just the way we ask, including the prayers for healing. The apostle Paul prayed for healing from his thorn in the flesh, and God said no. Why would James write in the previous section about responding to our suffering with patience if we could always just pray away any suffering in our lives? Would you want to live with the burden of having God answer all your prayers just as you asked? My wisdom is not even close to being up to that task. I think I would stop asking God for anything out of fear that I am asking for the wrong thing. Thankfully, God is a loving Father who welcomes any request that we care to bring to him. Even when we ask foolishly, he would rather have us come to him. But he will never give us anything other than a good gift. So if you are sick or suffering in any way, don't hesitate to ask God for healing and relief. He knows the best way to bring healing into your life.

III. The Community of Healing

James closes his letter by continuing to talk about the way the church, God's community of healing, brings healing to someone who wanders away. Wandering is an accurate word to use for this. Most people don't deliberately turn their back on God and his people, but instead gradually wander away. We are all prone to such wandering, and when it happens, James says that the instrument that God will use to bring back the wanderer is a brother or sister in Christ. **"Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins"** (v. 20).

How do we bring a sinner back from his wandering? Notice that the things it says that we do are the things that only God can do. Only God can save a soul from death and cover sins. But it is said here that we do those things because, through prayer and the power of the gospel, God uses us for this purpose.

CONCLUSION:

God has made our church into a healing community. As a pastor, I have seen it happen numerous times. Sometimes the healing is physical in nature. More often, it is the deeper healing that is a prelude to Jesus making all things new. There is emotional, spiritual and relational healing that God brings. It is almost always more gradual in nature, but no less real for that reason. We believe that we are, by God's grace, a model home of the coming kingdom, a kingdom of newness and healing. May God make it so!