

Call for the Elders

James 5:13-15

I wonder how many of you have ever seen this done, calling for the elders of the church to anoint the sick with oil? You may have never seen it done, or maybe not even known it to be done. Shortly after I was ordained to the ministry, as a very young man, my Session received such a request from a family within the church and we did exactly what was described here. Some years ago a fellow minister called for the elders of the Presbytery to anoint his young daughter, which we also did. I believe I have done it on three other occasions, so not very often.

Quite honestly, I'd like to do it more. I'd like to be called upon more, as I appreciate the great importance which is ascribed to this act. I think some people are afraid of doing it. Maybe it's too radical. It's not what presbyterians usually do! Maybe it's too much like what the charismatics might do, or the faith healers. Maybe it is seen as something superstitious, or magical. Maybe it is thought to be something that only Roman Catholics do, with their misguided and so-called sacrament of last rites. Maybe it is what people do on television but not in church. Maybe you think somehow that this doesn't really apply anymore, that somehow this practice has fallen away just like the Old Testament ceremonies and sacrificial regulations.

But wait a minute! This passage isn't in Leviticus! This instruction does not come from Moses in the Wilderness, in the context of the Old Covenant. This is in the book of James. And it applies to us just as it applied to the church when James wrote it! So we ought to do it.

The subject really is prayer, which will be my subject next week as well from verse 16-18. And prayer is nothing more than,

I. THE RESPONSE TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE.

All the circumstances, good and bad. Or what might more appropriately be called hard providences and easy providences. They are, of course, all good providences. Everything that happens to you is good, if indeed you love God and are called according to his purpose, for he works those things all out for good. And his providence is always good, as defined by his own goodness and glory.

But that good providence can sometimes be very difficult even as it can at other times be intensely enjoyable. And in either case, the injunction is to pray. Don't forget the first part of that.

A. The prayers of joy.

v.13

Sometimes we can fall into a bad habit--only praying for the struggles of life. We pray for those who are sick, which is so very appropriate as we'll study in just a moment. We pray for the great human tragedies of our lives, and it is easy to neglect the prayers of joyful happiness. The most obvious example of those prayers, however, is not a prayer spoken in an ordinary voice, but sung! That's why you should sing, among other reasons. Because you are cheerful. Because you are happy. Because God has shown his goodness in particularly pleasant ways. Sing his praise, and the word is not necessarily confined to the 150 inspired songs in the book of Psalms we have in the Bible.

If you rejoice, then express your praise to God with music. And do it corporately, together. With one another.

Rom. 12:15 "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

So this is our duty, our obligation, to express our joy together.

And our sorrows.

B. The prayers of suffering.

v.13

The suffering is defined somewhat in the next verse, with the reference to those who are sick, and we ought to pray for the sick. That ought to be an essential element of our praying, for those whose weaknesses of the body are apparent and particularly difficult. We ought to pray for those who are hospitalized, those who are shut-in, those who have surgery, and those who are ill.

But there is other suffering, too. And sometimes we are prone to forget that. Actually, other than sicknesses, we can get very uncomfortable with dealing with the sufferings of others. The result is often that you feel like you have to pretend that everything is fine. I have known situations when church people actually withdrew from the normal intimacy of friendship and fellowship they had with other people because the suffering of those other people made them uncomfortable. I knew a family who, as far as I know now, permanently left the church after the tragic death of their teenage son because others in the church were so uncomfortable with their suffering not knowing what to say that they said nothing at all.

How sad. How wrong. “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” And pray together.

James is coming back to where he started in this book, with reference again to our sufferings. Remember his opening words,

James 1:2 "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing....12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will

receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

So blessed are you when you suffer trials of various kinds. But with that benediction must be earnest praying. As a church be known for our prayers, prayers for one another, both corporately, together, and on our own. For God’s word is as clear as clear can be.

v.3 “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.”

And then, call for the Elders.

II. PRAYER AND THE ELDERS OF THE CHURCH.

The Elders have responsibility to direct the affairs of the church. They have responsibility to watch out for your souls. They have responsibility to teach and protect the doctrine of the church. But here is one more responsibility, too easily neglected. This is a crucial ministry within the church, crucial for the well-being and overall strength of the church.

A. The ministry of praying Elders.

Consider the events described in,

Acts 6:1 “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Understanding that, really understanding that passage, is a fundamental requirement for proper church ministry and government. There is to be a ministry of mercy. Widows, particularly, along with orphans, representing the most needy and the most helpless of all God's people, ought to be cared for by the church. James is well aware of that, having written in,

James 1:27 "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

So the widows were being fed. Maybe something similar to "Meals on Wheels" today, administered by the church. But the twelve apostles were increasingly unable to do the job well because of the restraints upon their time, so other godly men were selected to see that there would be no complaints, to make sure that no one was missed. They weren't called Deacons in that passage, but surely it is the first reference to the work of the office of Deacon. A ministry of mercy.

But notice the final response of the Apostles when they were satisfied that the widows were not going to be neglected. "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Not just the ministry of the word. Not even first of all the ministry of the word. But prayer. It was the responsibility of those spiritual leaders in the church to pray, a continuing responsibility given now to the elders of the church. So,

v.14 "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him."

That is why it is important for me to visit in the hospital. That is why it is a primary responsibility of mine to devote myself and my time not only to the ministry of the word but to prayer. And

quite frankly, that is why I need to know everyone in the church. How impossible this ministry of prayer would be if I simply didn't know the flock, and indeed, that ministry is next to impossible in the large churches of our day. That is such a crucial aspect of the work of shepherding.

I should note that this work is a significant item in our regular session meetings, too, and needs to be so. It is a priority for the word of the elders, especially when they are meeting together, to pray for the flock. Especially the sick. And not simply because of their own opportunity or duty, but because God has ordained it! Elders are not priests for you, that is mediating between you and God. You don't come to God through the elders as the Old Testament people of Israel came to God through a priest, but the responsibility remains within the office of spiritual oversight that God has established. The elders are not called because they might know how to put words together in an eloquent manner, as if that was the key to effective praying. The elders are not even called because they might be compassionate and concerned, which they should be. But the elders are called because of their office. The elders are called because they are elders! The elders are called because it is through them that Christ exercises his authority within the church. The elders are called because they, in their office, are the means by which God shows forth his own authority and power.

And, therefore, not only do they pray, but they have,

B. The authority to invoke God's name with oil.

v.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."

Now let me be plain. The oil in itself has no magical powers.

It is not “holy oil.” It is oil purchased in an ordinary grocery store, typically ordinary olive oil. Nothing special. It doesn’t transform into something else when the elders pray. But rather it is a symbol. A symbol of authority--God’s authority. Notice what the Elders do. They anoint the sick in the name of the Lord. That’s not just a formula, that’s an invocation.

The power is with God, not with man. And certainly not with the oil. The oil symbolizes the healing power of the Lord Jesus Christ, power administered through the lawful channels of authority within the church, the elders. And so the anointing is a formal way of invoking God’s name, to call upon God in prayer, to bring healing. And it is a proper and appropriate pattern for us to follow. It is the prayer which accompanies the anointed that beseeches God to act, and it is the oil anointed upon the sick that demonstrates the faith of the one praying to call upon God for his mercy.

This is not the gift of healing, thought by some to still remain in the power of men. Elders have no authority to pronounce healing in God’s name, that would be to take his name in vain. Elders have no infallible authority to command a healing in God’s name, and if healing doesn’t take place, you cannot attribute it to a failure in procedure by the elders. Maybe the wrong oil was used, or not enough. That’s foolishness.

The problem is not necessarily a lack of faith, nor can you presume that unconfessed sin is the reason why it didn’t “work.” This is not a mechanical process, but a deeply spiritual one. The anointing with oil is an intensified and specific form of prayer, prayer done with all the proper recognition of the spiritual authority of the Elders. But it is still left to God’s sovereign will to answer according to his own will.

But don’t let any of that discourage you from calling the elders, any more than it should discourage you from praying in the first place. Quite frankly, I would be very glad to receive requests for such anointing the future, and I would encourage you, challenge you, to consider this very thing. Consider the place of the Elders within the church, and call upon them, beloved. Call upon them so that they, in their office ordained by Christ, might call upon the Lord on your behalf. With this great encouragement,

v.15

There is,

III. THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER.

Or the effectiveness of it. The effective working of prayer. We’ll look at this more next week in the following verses, but please take great comfort from this encouragement, that “the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.”

So let’s study the whole subject of prayer a little more deeply. This can get confusing or discouraging, if you take promises such as this as infallible assurances of what God is required to do in every circumstance. You cannot box God into a corner, such that he is obligated to do exactly what you say. He remains a sovereign God able to do as he pleases without any external constraint. But he does accomplish his will in response to our prayers. And notice the strength of this language,

v.15 “The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.”

That’s a good literal translation. Prayer will save. The word in the Greek means to save, or to rescue. Even to restore. Obviously, in the fullest sense of the word, our eternal salvation is in view. That is not the focus of the word here, but still you should sense the significance of this word. “The prayer of faith will save him.” The prayer of faith will restore him. Yet still, as always, in accordance with God’s will.

So maybe you prayed for someone, and they didn't get better. They died. Does that mean you didn't have enough faith? Well, if I were to teach you that, I would be teaching you that the actual power of prayer is in you. And I would lay upon you a burden that no one among us is able to bear. That's God's burden, and he bears it perfectly well. But still we have those words, "the prayer of faith will save the sick." The promise is this, there will be,

A. Help in time of need.

God will restore, often through direct response to our specific requests. But not always. But always will he answer the prayer of faith. And always his answer will be good, even if it isn't exactly what we asked for.

So the encouragement is to pray. It is not a meaningless exercise. It is not something you do just to make yourself feel better, either. It is the sincere attempt to call upon the name of God to answer you according to your need. So we read in,

Heb. 4:14 "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

God the Father didn't even grant the request of every desire of his only begotten son. Remember the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." God did not let that cup pass from him. But Jesus did find grace to help in time of need.

So pray, beloved, in time of need. It is in response to your

prayers that God will establish you and show forth his grace to you, that his grace will be sufficient for your need. It is as you pray that you receive that grace itself. And that is exactly what we ought to come to expect. And ask of God. We ought to ask boldly. Reverently and humbly yes, but still boldly.

Heb. 10:19 "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

"The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." And even more importantly, bring about,

B. Spiritual restoration.

v.15 "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

There is sometimes a connection between sin and sickness, and we shouldn't ignore that since James ties the two things together here. Sometimes sickness might even be a direct consequence to the presence of sin, but often they are unrelated. For sickness, even unto death, comes to everyone of us in this age, until the Lord returns. So you ought not to assume that physical affliction, or for that matter, God's unwillingness to remove that physical affliction, implies the presence of a particular sin.

On the other hand, never presume that you are ever without sin! And never forget that your spiritual restoration is far more important than the mere strength and health of your present earthly body. Jesus made that perfectly clear during his earthly ministry,

Luke 5:18 “Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him. 19 And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus. 20 When He saw their faith, He said to him, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” 21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” 22 But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, “Why are you reasoning in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise up and walk’? 24 But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”

There Jesus initially left the man as a paralytic, but forgave him his sins. He then healed him in order to demonstrate his authority to forgive sins. So the body and soul are connected, and Jesus is the healer of them both! And that leads us to what we will study next week beginning in,

v.16 “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Woe to us if, when we pray, we seek to deal only with the physical needs. Prayer ought to be for body and soul together. Therefore, beloved, pray. Call upon the Elders, to be sure. Call upon us to pray for you in particular circumstances. And when those circumstances make it appropriate, call upon us to anoint with oil. And do so with the confidence that those prayers are a means of God bestowing his grace upon us.

As a church, may our strength be found in the commitment to such prayer. And demonstrated by the commitment to pray

together. That is what we do in worship, though led by one voice we are praying together as one body. With one voice, we are all praying. Never think that you are simply listening, but actively engaged in praying even as someone else speaks the words out loud, with this confidence that God will grant us his grace in response to our prayers.

Mat. 7:7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”