

The Power of Healing Prayer – James 5:13-20

We've been studying the book of James in order to Get Serious About Our Walk
Having started January 13th, this is the 18th and last message, from James 5:13-20

Difficult passage – difficult to understand; difficult to frame/outline; difficult to apply
Because of that, this passage is used and abused by everyone from charismatic faith healers who claim to heal on demand, to Catholic priests who claim to absolve the dying of their sin
Neither of which finds legitimate support in this text; or any other for that matter

So my desire is to bring some clarity to this teaching, so we can understand it and apply it
And experience the power of healing prayer as God intends
And *that* is the main issue here – The Power of Healing Prayer
Prayer being mentioned in every verse from 13-18

- But before we get there, I want to start with his closing comments in v19-20 . . .
Since they're not necessarily related to the previous ones on prayer, which is where I want to focus our time; So he says in v19-20 . . .
Death, as is almost always the case in the NT where sin is the issue, refers to the condemnation to eternal damnation that results from un-forgiven sin
And *cover a multitude of sins* was a common way of denoting God's forgiveness
So both of these phrases refer to the sins of the wanderer

This is a gentle reminder at the end of a hard-hitting letter, that all this "Get Serious About Your Walk" stuff is not just about ourselves
It's about those around us as well, on whom we can have a major influence

It's a reminder to always be on the lookout for those who know the truth, but aren't following it; those who know better, but aren't living it
And to take advantage of every opp to talk to them about spiritual things, and invite them to church – where they can experience our worship, see our love, and hear the truth firsthand
Because there's far too much at stake to let them go their own way

- That said, he starts in v13 with a series of questions (read 13-14a)
He seems to be setting the stage for his main issue, by reminding us that different circumstances, require different responses
It's not a one size fits all kind of existence that we live
If we're suffering – we should pray to God; If we're happy – we should praise God
But the next one isn't so apparent . . . If we're sick – we should call for the elders (Read 14-18)

The first thing that's important to note here, is that the power of healing prayer . . .

It depends on you:

Whether you're the one praying for healing on behalf of others . . .
Or you're being prayed for by others . . .

The power of healing prayer depends on you . . .

• To get right with God (v16)

16b – *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*

The implication being – that if there's sin in your heart, your prayers are inhibited
Which almost certainly means, based on the practical nature of James' book, that it's the prayer of the person who's *living* right, that has great power
Short of that, your prayers are inhibited

It's like the Psalmist says in Ps 66:18 – *If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.*

Or Prov 15:29 – *The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*

So the power of healing prayer depends on you to get right with God because if there's sin in your heart, your prayers are inhibited

It also depends on you . . .

• To get right with others (v16)

16 – *Confess your sins to one another . . . that you may be healed*

The thrust here is that confession of sin is a prerequisite for healing

It doesn't guarantee your healing, but it's necessary for it

So if you're harboring sin in your heart, your *own* healing could be inhibited . . .

And the healing prayers of others on your behalf could be useless/powerless

You may or may not be sick because of your sin – James doesn't address that

What he does address, is that you may not get better because of your sin

It's crucial that you get right with others in order to reap the benefits of healing prayer

• To pray for others (16)

16 – *Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

Seems like a no-brainer, huh? How can the people around us experience the power of healing prayer, if we don't pray for them?

They may experience the power of *healing* – God can and will do as he pleases

But if we don't pray for them, they'll never experience the power of healing *prayer*

And don't miss the direct link between our prayer, and healing

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

Clearly from this text, there are times when our prayers are the catalyst for God's healing

Times when our prayer is prerequisite to someone else's healing

And that without our prayer, God may withhold his healing touch

Which is consistent with 4:2 – *You do not have because you do not ask.*

The power of healing prayer depends on you to pray for others

• To ask for help (v14)

Referring in this context to the elders (read 14)

The responsibility is yours

Every now and then someone will ask us to come and pray for their husband/wife, etc

And I ask them – Are *you* asking, or are they?

Because this verse tells us that the onus is on the one who is sick – *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church* (14)

You can suggest it to them, but they are the ones who need to ask

There are several reasons for this:

1. This is a very personal thing

2. It requires personal confession of your sin – that you are right with God
3. It requires a sense that God *wants* you to ask for the elders
Because not every situation calls for it
It's not based on the severity of your illness, prognosis, desperation to get better
Your call for help s/b based solely on the compulsion of the HS within you, that this is what you should do – regardless of whether you think you'll be healed or not

- That said, 2 questions come to mind re this verse:
 1. What does it mean to anoint someone with oil?
 2. What does it look like in real life?

Starting with the first, anointing with oil is most often used in the Bible as a metaphor to indicate consecration for God's purposes and work . . .

To show that a person is set apart for God's use, due to the power/presence of the HS in their lives

So the elders apply oil to a sick person in order to visibly show that they are being set apart for God's special attention and care, for the purpose of healing

In that sense, it's an outward symbol of a spiritual truth

Done *in the name of the Lord* (14b) – associated only w/ Jesus, and according to his authority and power

Now do you see why it's a very personal thing, requiring a pure heart, and a sense that God wants you to ask for it? You're being set apart for God's special attention/care

- Having said that, it's not somehow a conduit of God's healing grace, like the word *sacrament* implies – this is where the un-biblical beliefs/practices come in
Some people attach that word to this practice, and in so doing, they are saying that the *act* of anointing with oil is the straw through which God pours his grace of healing
And that apart from the act, there is no healing
Which is totally contrary to what the text says in v15 – that *the prayer of faith will save* (heal) *the one who is sick*, not oil

Nor is the oil for *medicinal* purposes – if that were the case, James would have told us to call a *doctor* to administer it, not the spiritual leaders of the church

And there's no basis in this text, or any other for that matter, to support the practice of applying oil for the purpose of removing sin from the dying, and thereby strengthening their soul

That's a Catholic doctrine called “extreme unction,” invented in 852 AD

And even a cursory reading of this passage indicates that the anointing with oil is associated with healing, not dying

And then there's a final group of people who are like – “whatever; this practice doesn't even apply to us anymore; it was meant for the apostles”

And they conveniently by-pass all the difficulties by throwing the baby out with the bath water

But if that were the case, if it was just meant for the apostolic age, James wouldn't have told us to call for the *elders* – the leaders of the church

So as long as the church exists w/ elders leading it, they can/should be called to pray

So we're right back to where we started from, that . . .

Anointing with oil is an outward symbol of a spiritual truth – to show that a person is being set apart in prayer, for God's special attention, for the purpose of healing

- So if u were to ask the elders of our church to anoint u w/ oil, the process would look something like this –
After first confirming your sense that God *wants* you to ask . . .
We'd schedule a time to meet with you, and encourage you to prepare your heart
Then 2 or more of us would come to your home or the hospital – assuming you're so sick you can't get up or out
We would re-read this passage & briefly explain what it means, what's going to happen
We'd ask you to confirm that you are right with God – harboring no un-confessed sin
Then we'd gather around you, I'd apply a little bit of oil on your forehead in the shape of a cross – doing so in the name of the Father, Son, and HS
We'd gently place our hands on you (symbolic of God's hand), & pray for your healing
That's what it would look like in real life, but it depends on you to ask for help

It depends on others:

Like the elders, as we've just seen

There's no doubt that James sets them apart to pray on special occasions

They are the ones who are supposed to be mature in their faith, godly in their conduct, and the spiritual leaders of the body . . .

So it's a natural to rely on their wisdom/discernment to pray for healing when called on

At the same time, James makes it clear that the church at *large* is also to pray for healing
In v14-15, he was talking about the *specific* situation of elders praying . . .

Then he comes to a conclusion in v16, saying – *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

Implying that the power and responsibility for healing prayer does not rest solely with the elders – it's for all of us

- Notice that there's no mention of calling for supposed “faith healers”
People who claim to be able to heal on demand, and when they can't, blame it on *your* lack of faith
Or say that you're actually healed, you just haven't experienced it yet – right; how convenient

If these people existed, it would have been a natural for James to say, “call them if you're sick” – but he didn't

Why? Because they didn't exist; And they still don't

1 Cor 12 says that the HS gives *gifts* of healing (plural), not the *gift* of healing

Suggesting that at different times and for different sicknesses God gives to different people the ability to heal

The best example of which is apostle Paul, who was able to heal some, but not others
He healed a cripple man at Lystra (Acts 14:10), but had to leave Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20)

His dearly loved co-worker Epaphroditus was *ill near to death*, and had it not been for God's mercy, would have died, with no mention of a miraculous healing on Paul's part (Ph 2:27)

And when it came to his own ailment, he prayed 3 times for healing, to no avail

You'd think that if some of the other apostles could have healed him, they would have. But they didn't, and he couldn't, because God doesn't give the gift of healing on demand as supposed faith-healers would lead you to believe

- At God's discretion, the power of healing prayer is for *all* of us, not just elders, and certainly not for "faith healers"
Just to make sure we get it, he says in 16b – *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

Do you see what he doesn't say? He doesn't say that the prayer of a righteous *elder* has great power as it is working
It's the prayer of a righteous *person* – *any* person who is righteous; who is right before God and striving to live it out, as we saw earlier
Any person who is like Elijah – *a man with a nature like ours*
The power of healing prayer depends on others, not just the elders

And it depends on them . . .

- **To pray with fervor (v17-18)**

Know why I chose that word – not only is it a form of the word that James used to describe Elijah, but it makes me think of a fever
The power of healing prayer depends on others (including you) to prayer with a feverish intensity, extreme passion, w/ great zeal – expending blood, sweat, tears if necessary
That's what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, literally . . .

And that's what Elijah did in his battle with Ahab, Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal – *he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for. . . (read 17b-18)*

Do you remember last week that patient endurance produces precious fruit?

God may or may not answer your prayers for healing

And if he does, it may not be right away

Which means that healing prayer may require patience to go with your fervor

And the point that James makes is that *our* prayers can have the same powerful effect as Elijah's prayers, because he *was a man with a nature [just] like ours*

The same human nature; The same sin nature; The same struggles; Same doubts

And the same mortality – even though God took him from the earth in a chariot of fire before he died

He was just like us, and the point is – we can pray just like him, with great power as it is working

The power of healing prayer depends on others to pray with fervor; and . . .

- **To pray in faith (v15)**

Realizing that these principles are for all of us when it comes to healing prayer . . .

V15a says – *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

Save meaning "heal physically;" Not, *save* in terms of salvation

There are 2 reasons for this

1. Salvation is never seen to be the result of prayer by other people in the NT
2. Physical restoration is what the context implies based on *raise him up* (15) and *pray over him* (14)

Conveying the picture of the elders praying over someone who is sick in bed, and the Lord intervening to raise him up

So *save* here refers to *physical* saving, *physical* healing

- But the primary issue, is that when someone is sick, the power of healing prayer depends on others to pray in *faith*
To pray with a Spirit-led, Spirit-enabled conviction that God will indeed heal the person who is being prayed for

It's not about generating a certain *amount* of faith (whatever that means) in order for God to answer

Nor is it about *convincing* yourself that God is going to heal the person

"God's going to heal, God's going to heal, God's going to heal" – maybe if I repeat it enough times, I'll eventually believe it and be able to pray a prayer of faith

The prayer of faith is the Spirit-led, Spirit-enabled conviction, verbalized in prayer, that the Lord will indeed heal the person for whom you are praying

When that's the case – *the Lord will raise him up* (15)

Which means that the power of healing prayer depends not only on you, and on others, but most importantly . . .

It depends on God:

The Lord will raise him up makes explicit that power of healing prayer depends on *God*

First and foremost . . .

- **To forgive your sins (v15)**

Read 15 – it almost seems like James is saying that the prayers of others will bring about the forgiveness of the sick person's sin, doesn't it?

But we know that can't be true, because there's nothing to support it in the rest of the NT – in fact, there's plenty to refute it

Plenty that says we come to God via our own faith and our own repentance – nobody can do it for us

So we know *that* can't be what James is saying

- What he *is* saying is that sin is sometimes associated with sickness (and vice versa)
That's not always the case, and he indicates as much when he says, *if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*
IOW he allows that sickness may happen and healing may occur *apart* from any sin or forgiveness

But, consistent with other Scriptures, sometimes sickness *is* a result of sin

Choose to sin, choose to suffer – sometimes even physically

And when that's the case, a person's healing not only indicates their *physical* wellness, but their *spiritual* wellness as well; their forgiveness

Healing doesn't bring *about* their forgiveness, it's an indicator *of* it

Because v16 (his conclusion to that point) implies that forgiveness comes *first* when they confess, and *then* healing – *confess your sins . . . that you may be healed*

So confession comes first, resulting in forgiveness, and opens the door for healing

Which, if it occurs, is an indicator of forgiveness

That's important, otherwise you might mistakenly conclude that that the prayers of others will bring about the forgiveness of the sick person's sin

The power of healing prayer depends on God to forgive your sins; and . . .

- **To answer accordingly (v15)**

15 – *The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

The difficulty here is the emphatic nature of James' language

He doesn't say "may" raise him up; Or "might" heal him

He says – will raise him up

That doesn't leave much wiggle room

But it's clear in the Bible that God does not always heal, despite the fervent prayers of the saints – we've already cited several examples to that effect

Which means that it all comes down to whether our prayers are *the prayer of faith* (15)

Whether they are borne from a Spirit-led, Spirit-enabled conviction that God will in fact heal and answer accordingly

When he doesn't, it doesn't mean that we were faithless in our prayers – not at all

Generally speaking, we *always* pray with faith (or at least we should)

We always pray, trusting that if our request is part of God's will, he will do it

But sometimes, the faith with which we pray, includes a God-given assurance that our request *is* a part of his will – and therefore, he *will* answer accordingly

Which is why James can say so emphatically – *The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

And that faith will only be present in our prayers, when it's God's will to heal

- The power of healing prayer is an awesome gift of God

People who have that confident assurance on occasion, usually don't say anything about it – they just pray, and wait for God to answer accordingly

And when he does, they're often the first to give him the credit

We've already seen great things in that respect around here, and I can't wait for more

But it depends on you, it depends on others, and it depends on God