

# *Learning to Pray with Dependence*

## *Part 4 – What To Do When You are Sick*

James 5:13-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 2, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>13</sup> Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. <sup>17</sup> Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. (James 5:13-18, NRSV)

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This passage in James begins with a very straightforward question. “**Are any among you suffering?**” Let me put the question to you. Are any among *you* suffering? Is there anybody here who is currently experiencing some significant trouble or hardship in life?

A quick glance by a casual observer around the sanctuary and you’d be tempted to say no. All of us clean up pretty well on Sunday morning. But don’t be deceived. There are more than a few of us in this room who suffer. One person’s faith is wavering, about to crumble. Another is trapped in a debilitating addiction. A marriage is on the rocks. One of you, probably more, feels consumed by grief. There are people among us here who live with chronic physical or emotional pain, pain that never seems to end. All of us, at one time or another, suffer. And so the answer to James’ question is, “Yes.”

Well, his remedy is simply. “**They should pray.**” It reminds me of that verse in I Peter which tells us, “**Cast all your anxiety on God because he cares for you.**”<sup>1</sup> Is that your instinctual response to suffering and

hardship in your life, to turn immediately to pray and drop every heavy burden into God’s lap?

One of my favorite movies is called *The Apostle*. It stars my all-time favorite actor Robert Duvall as an eccentric Pentecostal preacher named Sonny who gets into trouble when he commits a crime of passion after his wife leaves him. Suffering because he has lost nearly everything, Sonny turns one night to unload it all on God:

*See Movie Clip at:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTVo9ymHBSc>

“Sometimes he talks to the Lord and sometimes he yells at the Lord. Tonight he just happens to be yellin’ at the Lord.” Sonny’s prayer reminds me a lot of many of the Psalms – raw, honest, desperate. And really, what is the point of being otherwise with God? What’s the point of trying to put a mask on things before the Lord? God can see our doubt, our sin, our anger, our pride, our suffering, whatever is inside, even better than we see it ourselves. Sonny knows this, and also knows he is loved by Jesus, and so he doesn’t hold back. Are you able to pray like this? I want to be able to pray like this when I am in trouble.

Of course, James reminds us that when we are cheerful we should let God know that as well, especially with songs of praise. Don’t forget God just because things are going well. But things don’t always go well. And sometimes, as James points out, our suffering comes in the form of sickness. That’s James’ next question: “**Are any among you sick?**” He means just what we think he means. God cares about the health of our minds and our bodies.

The truth is that the church doesn’t have any problem praying for people when they are sick. Sometimes, in fact, petitions for our physical comfort, health and well-being can make up the bulk of our prayers. One sign of spiritual maturity in a church is when the church begins to pray regularly for things beyond physical comfort and well-being – for justice, and forgiveness, for protection from evil, for the full agenda of the Lord’s Prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> I Peter 5:7, NIV

Even so, we are still encouraged, even commanded, to pray for healing for those who are sick. God cares about this. In fact, let's not forget that Jesus was perhaps most well known in his time as a healer. There are 31 different healing accounts in the Gospels<sup>2</sup> – the blind receiving sight, the deaf able to hear, the paralyzed given strength to walk, the possessed made sane, even the dead brought back to life. I can't remember even a single instance where somebody came to Jesus for healing and he refused their request. We see in Jesus' life that God cares deeply for our physical well-being. He wants us whole, not just in spirit but in body and mind as well. It's for this reason that the leadership of our church has committed to lean more into healing prayer, that we might better understand our part in seeing God's healing power released in us and through us for those who suffer in mind and body.

This passage in James is as good a place as any in the Bible to look for guidance on how we might boldly come before God and seek healing for those who are sick. James packs a lot of wisdom into these brief verses, much of it intensely practical. This morning I want to point out five things James teaches us here about healing prayer.

First, when you are sick you should not suffer in silence.

James is clear; when you are sick you should call the elders of the church to pray over you.

Let me tell you what happens instead far too often in the church. People get sick and they don't want to bother others so they keep it to themselves. I can't tell you how many times we all find out about somebody's major illness or surgery, even hospital stay, after the fact. Let me be clear on this. It is a selfish and prideful act to not allow others to serve you when you are in need. When I let you come serve a real need that I have, who most benefits from that transaction? You do! You all know this. It's a great blessing to be able to serve others in need. Jesus even said so when he pointed out, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive."**<sup>3</sup> So do you see that when you suffer in silence you not only refuse the much needed help others can bring to you, but you cheat them out of the blessing they would receive in helping you!

Notice also that James puts the initiative to reach out on the one who is sick. Sometimes people in the church can become upset because nobody seems to care enough to offer help when help is needed. Let me say this, people here care. But sometimes the problem is that

they just don't know. So when you are sick or in some other trouble, call for help. Tell your Life Group, or some other trusted friends in the church. Call your deacon. Call one of us as pastors. Or ask your family to call. Then, if we don't respond, it is on us. But knowing this church, people will respond. People love to respond.

By the way, notice that James doesn't say to call the priest or the pastor. The elders in those days, as they do in our day, represented the entire church community. In other words, these are not people who necessarily have the specific spiritual gift of healing, but simply people who are full of Christ's Spirit. As pastors we love to pray for people who are sick but just know that our prayers are not necessarily more effective than the prayers of any follower of Jesus in the church. Let the whole church respond to your need, the pastors as well as everybody else. Don't suffer in silence.

Second, James says when we pray we should pray for healing.

Now, when James mentions anointing with oil here, some of us, because we grew up in other Christian traditions, immediately imagine Last Rites or Extreme Unction, the sacrament where a priest is called to anoint and pray for a dying person that he or she would be spiritually cleansed before meeting the Lord. But that's not what James is talking about here. When we pray over somebody who is sick, and anoint them as we do, we are praying for *healing*, for their complete wellness to be restored.

The oil, by the way, isn't magic. It's just a symbol. In the Old Testament, oil was a symbol of blessing. Kings were often anointed to symbolize that God's favor and presence was with them. An anointed person was set aside for God's special attention and care. But though it is only a symbol, it can still have power. Symbols have power. Think about the presentation of the flag at the memorial service of somebody receiving military honors. The flag is just a symbol, and yet there is great power in its presentation in that moment. The same can be true with the oil when it is used to anoint one who is desperately seeking God's attention and care. So pray for healing.

Third, when we pray for healing we should pray in the name of the Lord.

When we ask God for healing and do so "in the name of Christ", we aren't using magic words that trigger a response from God but instead we are praying in a way that reminds ourselves that healing, especially miraculous healing, can only happen by God's power.

<sup>2</sup> See a full list here -

<http://stronginfaith.org/article.php?page=111#31>

<sup>3</sup> Acts 20:35

Remember, God has a name. “I Am Who I Am”. God is the eternal creator and designer of the universe, the author and giver of every good gift. This is not some force we pray to, but a divine person who sees, and hears, and thinks, and loves. We know this God most profoundly in Christ, his Son, who gave everything for us. It is to this God we pray, this God who is sovereign over all things, including whatever illness or injury has debilitated the one over whom we pray. If healing comes, therefore, it has not been empowered by the oil, or our prayers, or even our sincerity, but by God alone.

Fourth, James makes clear that as we pray for healing, faith will be necessary. In verse 15 he declares, “**The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.**”

So here is the question. When you pray for healing for yourself or others, do you truly believe that God can heal, even heal in supernatural, miraculous ways? I’ve said before that it is only the atheist who does not believe in miracles. By logic, if you believe in a sovereign Creator God who is, by definition, above creation rather than subject to creation, than you must believe in a God has the ability to work outside the created order. And remember, that’s what miracles are, events which happen *outside the natural order*. As much as we like to think about the birth of a child, or a brilliant sunset, or a wild coincidence as miracles, they are not. That doesn’t mean that God’s hand is not intimately involved with those things, as God’s hand is intimately involved in every last part of the natural order, but they are not miracles.

When a man walks across the surface of a deep lake, that is a miracle. When a corpse dead several days is brought back to life and walks refreshed out of the tomb, that is a miracle. When the scan reveals that a body once full of untreatable cancer has overnight become cancer free, that is a miracle. A miracle is when something supernatural takes place which science can never even begin to explain.

So the question is, do you believe in miracles? As Christians, we must. The early church certainly did. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century apologist Justin Martyr recorded how countless people were miraculously brought to health by prayer when all other drugs and treatments had failed. In that same era the church father Irenaeus records that many, many people were healed by having hands laid on them in prayer. Tertullian even records that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the Roman Emperor himself, Alexander Severus, was healed when a Christian called Torpacion anointed him in prayer. The emperor was so

grateful he kept Torpacion as a guest in his palace until the day of his death.<sup>4</sup>

I’ve seen this myself, as have some of you. Twenty years ago I was leading a church youth group from Omaha on a ski trip in Colorado when one of our students was seriously injured in a freak accident. When we found her she had no pulse and her face was sickly blue. We didn’t know exactly how long she had been in that condition, but it had been long enough that we assumed that even if she was resuscitated, serious permanent brain damage had already occurred. Without going into details, I will tell you that while a few medically trained leaders in our group worked to revive her, I simply laid a hand on her and prayed. As I did the only thing that came out was the name of Jesus, which I prayed desperately over and over again. Others nearby prayed as well.

Though they were able to regain a pulse, when she was taken to the hospital the doctors instructed us to call her parents so that they could travel out to Denver and decide whether or not they wanted to take her off life support. Three days later, however, this young woman walked off a plane back in Omaha, something that no doctor in that hospital would ever have envisioned possible. Today she is married and has two beautiful children and no recognizable impact from the accident.

Do you believe God can work these sorts of miracles in response to our prayers even today? I’ll admit, it’s not easy to believe this. I’ve seen miracles and it’s still hard sometimes for me to believe. But James says we must try, because God wants to use prayer offered in faith to save the sick and raise them up.

That’s the last thing James teaches us here. When God heals, God raises us up. Said another way, healing is about resurrection.

Think carefully with me here. When we are sick we must not suffer in silence. Call others to come and pray. When we pray we should pray boldly for healing, and do so in the name of the Lord expecting that Jesus still does work in miraculous ways. And yet, there will be times – you know this – when even the bold, enduring prayers for the sick by the faithful will appear to go unanswered. Sometimes people don’t get well. Sometimes people die. In fact, eventually all people die. So how do we explain this in light of God’s promise here to heal?

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<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Letters of James and Peter*, Revised Edition (Westminster, 1976), 129.

Well, we know it is God's will for his people to be fully healed in body, mind and spirit. And yes, sometimes God works in miraculous ways to bring healing, even miraculous healing, in this life. But even when he doesn't, God will still bring this healing eventually to those who come to him in faith asking for it.

When I pray over somebody who is sick, even somebody who is very old and very sick, somebody who nobody expects to recover, I still pray boldly for healing – physical healing! - because I believe it is the will of God to grant it. Yes, I know, healing may not be granted in this lifetime, but God still wills that it be granted. That means that if you are a person who has placed your faith in Christ, listen to me. God will heal you in his time. It may not be in this life and if isn't you can trust that God have his reasons for it. And even if God does heal you, there still will come a day when your body will eventually give out again. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he still eventually died again someday. But there will come a day – this is the promise! - when those who trust Christ will be given bodies which never fail again, a day when pain, and sickness, and suffering, and even death will be taken away forever. I believe this. We must all believe this. May our prayers boldly reflect this belief.

In this we are reminded again that while God is certainly interested in our physical and mental health, God also understands that spiritual healing is primary. Not in the sense of being more important, but in the sense of being first. Said another way, spiritual sickness is the root of all other sickness. Our sin, our turning away from God, is what has distanced us from the life, and health, and wholeness which flow from God. All that is wrong in our world, including all that is wrong with our minds and bodies, is either the direct or indirect result of human sin.<sup>5</sup> What that means on the flip side is that spiritual healing is also the root of all healing. When we are made right in our relationship with God, by the grace of God in Christ that comes by faith, then we can know that in time what has been healed spiritually will result in our complete and lasting healing.

Listen to Paul's words in I Corinthians 15:51-53:

**Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.**

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 3:17-19 & Romans 8:18-22.

This is why right in the middle of his teaching on prayers for physical healing James shifts suddenly here to speak about confession, which is really the act of praying for spiritual healing, the root of all healing. **“Confess your sins to one another,”** he says, **“and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”** And while I don't have much time left to speak in depth on this, let me at least point out that the same five things which were true about physical healing are true about spiritual healing.

First, in our sin we are not to suffer alone in silence. We must find others to whom we can confess, not necessarily a priest or pastor as it works in some traditions, but somebody in the faith you trust who will be honest enough to agree with you about your sin, humble enough to recognize their own sin, and loving enough to petition for God's mercy on your behalf. Confession in this way must not only be private. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, “He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone [but] when I go to my brother in confession, I go to God.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, when we pray for forgiveness for others, we must pray boldly, asking for the unthinkable, that God would forgive us for every last sin in our lives even though we are in no way deserving that he forgive even one.

Third, as we pray let's pray in God's name remembering that God alone, in Christ, can forgive. We are at his mercy, and his mercy alone. Thankfully, he is abundantly merciful.

Fourth, as we confess to one another and then seek God's grace for one another, let us have faith, believing that God will forgive, that the sacrifice of Christ has been sufficient and that we can now stand before God as his beloved sons and daughters in whom he delights.

Finally, as we pray for spiritual healing for one another we must hold out hope that a day will come when such healing will be granted fully. Though we are forgiven, sin still drags us down. In the same way, even though God may heal us from sickness, we will likely still get sick again and we will definitely still die someday. Let us trust, however, that spiritual and physical healing both, though not yet fully ours, already belong to us in Christ. Just as there will come a day when there will be

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (Harper, 1954). For a powerful understanding of corporate confession I highly recommend reading chapter 5 of this great book entitled “Confession and Communion.” It is such a wonderful recovery of this act of confession which has been lost in many traditions, especially Protestant.

no more sickness in our bodies, there will come a day when there will be no sin in our spirits.

So whenever we are praying for healing, whatever kind of healing we may need in our bodies, minds or spirits, James reminds us that **“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”** Even an ordinary fellow like Elijah, who was really just a human being like the rest of us, could offer prayers that moved God to act in extraordinary ways. Really, the only thing unique about Elijah was that he trusted God. That can be what can be unique about us as well.

And so let me end with a question that is really a challenge? Could it be that in our day we see so few miraculous healings in the lives of people, not only in their spirits but even in their bodies, because we have not yet learned to pray as boldly as James tells us to pray? Of course it’s good that we pray for God’s guidance over the hand of a surgeon, or for peace and comfort for those who are not well, and even for protection from disease or pain for those we know and love. These are honest requests and our Father in Heaven, like any parent, cares even about the smallest details of our lives.

But what might happen if we prayed more boldly, for things that absolutely could not happen unless by the supernatural intervention of God’s hand? We are pretty good at talkin’ to the Lord? What if we did a little more yellin’ at the Lord, praying boldly over those who are sick, for the chronic pain of years to be no more, for inoperable cancer to vanish, for eyesight or hearing to return, for the one weighed down heavily by sin to be set free, even for those near to the grave to be restored to life. Could it really be that such prayers offered by ordinary people like us who love and trust Christ might become, by God’s grace, powerful and effective, if not in this life then certainly in the next? Can we pray with this kind of faith, this kind of hope, this kind of expectation and anticipation that God is truly ready and willing to make us well in all the ways we need to be made well?

Amen.

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## The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read James 5:13-18 again. There is a lot here. What stands out to you first?

2. What was your response to the video clip from *The Apostle*? Do you ever find yourself praying with that sort of raw and honest desperation? Would you like to?
3. James speaks in practical terms to those who are sick, telling them to call the elders to come and anoint them with oil and pray over them. Would you do this if you were sick? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that God can and does act in supernatural ways, even to heal?
5. Do you practice confession in the way James instructs us to do so here, confessing your sin openly to others instead of only privately to God?
6. The martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says this about confession: “He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone, [but] when I go to my brother in confession, I go to God.” What do you think he means by this?
7. How can you pray more boldly? What is one thing you can be praying about now that, if answered, will take a miraculous movement of God’s hand?
8. James concludes, **“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”** What do you take this to mean?

**Table to Table Question**  
*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Does God heal people when we pray for them? Who should we be praying for right now for healing?