

“Prayer, Healing and the Kingdom of God”

James 5

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Many years ago a woman called and asked if some of the other elders and I would come and pray for her healing.

Cancer had racked her body.

The treatments were done, nothing but a miracle could change the course of her life.

As two other elders and I drove to her home, some questions plagued me:

- When we pray, what if she isn't healed?
- Maybe she will assume her faith, or ours, isn't strong enough?
- Maybe she or her family members will now question God?
- Is it worth the risk?

The closer I got to that home the more skeptical I became about what could happen as a result of our prayers.

Oh, I **wanted** God to heal her, I believed that God **could** heal her but I realized that I didn't expect that God **would** heal her.

In the text before us today, it is probably this issue of healing that is of most interest to people.

Soon we will read again the following words from James 5:

“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up...”

We'd love to believe that especially when a loved one or we are very sick and death threatens.

When our computer doesn't work, we pull up the help menu to find the formula to follow to fix the problem.

We push the right buttons in the right order and it works.

When we get sick we go to the doctor to get the medicine to correct the problem.

We take the prescribed number of pills for the correct number of days and we get well.

But when doctors can do no more, we'd love to call the elders, anoint with oil and say the right words and voila, healing occurs.

As much as we might wish that, most of us have been around long enough to know it doesn't work that way.

In fact most of us have been around long enough to conclude it simply doesn't work at all.

And the result is that we just dismiss these verses as maybe nothing more than quaint relics of another era.

But instead of dismissing them, I'd like us to see these ideas as James presents them.

I'd like to show you that the primary issue here is not healing but an active daily expecting and accepting dependence on God as manifested in our prayer.

It's probably time to read the text:

James 5:13-16 "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

These words were not written in a vacuum.

James has written to Christians who were living under severe circumstances.

James began his letter calling his readers to perseverance, to patient endurance of hardship: James 1:2-3 "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

He returned to that theme near the end of his letter by giving them **reason** to be patient in the midst of suffering and trials: 5:7-11 “Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming... You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near... As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered...”

Perseverance, patience, endurance – Is that all they can do; are they just to be patient, waiting for Jesus to return?

No, James says, they can be **proactively patient**; they can pray!

Let’s start where James does in verse 13 “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.”

Life is constantly changing.

Are you in trouble, physically, emotionally, spiritually?

Are you happy – at peace, contented?

The point is that in every circumstance of life, bad or good, our first reaction should be what? PRAY

The Psalmist is a great example of that kind of prayer life.

He praised, he complained, he grieved, he reveled, he asked, he pleaded, he rejoiced – it was the full range of emotions depending on the situation.

Most of all, he knew God was part of all that was happening and he intentionally went to God with it all.

The Apostle Paul said it this way in Philippians 4:6 “Do not be anxious about anything, but **in everything**, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

I know people whose first response to every situation of life is to think of God and to pray to him.

Things are going badly for them or someone else and their first response is to pray.

Something special happens in their day and their first response is “praise God” and say “thank you Jesus.”

Oh, to live that way!

At times it seems kind of maddenly simplistic; they're praying when we'd be calling for an ambulance.

But I have to respect the priority that is being expressed – they understand that God is more central and important in the everyday affairs of life than anyone or anything else.

The best response is to pray while you call for the ambulance.

In every circumstance of life, we are to pray.

Now that is a great overview of how we should handle life, but in the next verses James will be even more specific.

James 5:14 “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

What about medical doctors and medicine?

The Bible doesn't often mention physicians but it does assume them.

- Matthew 9:12 “Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.
- The author of the Acts of the Apostles, the gospel writer Luke was himself a physician, who attended the Apostle Paul.
- In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul urged Timothy to use a little wine, medicinally, for his stomach and frequent illnesses.

In the Bible it isn't prayer or physicians, prayer or medicine but it is God working through it all.

Every era seems to have people who run to one extreme or the other.

Even today we have people who refuse to go to doctors, believing it is a contradiction of faith .

But most Evangelicals don't go to that extreme; we go to the other extreme.

We don't really expect **God** to do much when we are sick – our faith is more in medicine and physicians than in God.

Remember the woman, I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, who asked the other elders and me to come and pray for her?

I had more confidence that a spontaneous remission might take place, or that some new medicine might yet be discovered than that God might miraculously heal her.

Our theology says God can heal miraculously, but our skepticism says it won't happen.

What has brought us to such a sorry state of skepticism?

In 2 Chronicles 16:12 there is a description of a man who sounds like some of us:

It says, "In the 39th year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians... and he died".

I'm not going to argue that if Asa had sought the Lord he necessarily would have been healed - the text doesn't tell us that.

My point in showing you that text is that Asa, like us, apparently had more confidence in the doctors than he did in the Lord.

In the last couple of centuries there has been much more information about our bodies than ever before.

The more we understood about the "natural" process of healing the less we saw God involved.

People formerly had to pray that God would cure infections - now they just take antibiotics.

We begin to live as if God may still be necessary for the spiritual but not the physical.

But that is unbiblical thinking.

My Bible says in Hebrews 1:3 that the Lord Jesus is "sustaining all things by His powerful word. It also says the same in Colossians 1:17 "in Him all things hold together"

God is involved in the "normal" or 'regular affairs of life as much as he is in what we might call the miraculous.

Antibiotics and sanitation and all the rest medicine has to offer are all part of God's involvement in our world.

So what does James say?

James 5:14 “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Notice the sick person calls for the elders.

Maybe the sick person was too sick to go to the elders and needed the elders to come to him or her.

The suggestion here is that this isn’t a common cold or the stomach flu – though as we have seen, praying in those situations is very important

James says the elders should “anoint him with oil.”

Was the oil a form of medicine?

No, I think it was a visual aid.

It was a physical symbol.

In the OT, the oil was a symbol of a special setting-someone-apart for God.

Here the anointing symbolizes in a physical way, the special nature of this situation and the seriousness of our dependence on God.

The text says you are to call for the elders, they are to pray and they are to anoint the sick person with oil “in the name of the Lord”

Now, it doesn’t say the elders must say those exact words.

This is not Christian “abracadabra.”

In John 14:13 Jesus said “I will do whatever you ask in my name.”

We have turned that into a perfunctory conclusion to every prayer; “In Jesus’ name, amen.”

But the point is not formula; **it is recognition that the authority and power behind any answer to prayer is our God** – we are dependent on him alone.

Then James gives the conclusion of such prayers:

James 5:15 “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.

This raises several questions from us:

- What does a prayer “offered in faith” mean?
- Will this prayer always result in healing?

James seems to have added a qualification to **the kind** of prayer that will make a sick person well.

It is a prayer “offered in faith.”

Let me tell you of a startling experience I had several years ago.

A middle-aged man of our church died at work and a co-worker of his called me.

I rushed to the hospital where the body was taken so I could be with his wife and family.

After spending time praying with her, we waited until the man’s mother and siblings arrived from Fort Collins.

The mother saw me first and asked in a demanding voice, “Where is he?” Not where is the body, but where is he?

For the next hour she and her other adult children gathered around the body of the dead man and demanded that Satan release him and demanded that God raise him up.

At one point a sister asked what Scripture she should read and the mother said, “Read anything!”

The worst moment came when after an hour of no results, the mother turned to the dead man’s wife, the woman I had gone to console, and said to her, “He’s still dead because you don’t have enough faith.”

At that point I called a halt to the whole thing and got the nurses to eject them from the room.

James is **not** saying the elders had to have a certain amount of faith as if they had to conjure up greater faith or greater passion.

Later in verse 16 James will add: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. “

The NASB translates it this way: “The **effective** prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

The KJV translates it this way: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Especially from the King James Version but even from some other translations we have gotten the impression that it is a special kind of prayer offered by a special kind of person that gets results.

But the KJV word “fervent” is simply not in the Greek text and is an addition that is uncalled for.

Even the NASB’s “effective” prayer seems to suggest another qualification of the prayer that works.

But James has already made it clear that the only qualification is faith in God – a dependence on God.

Another qualification that some want to place on this prayer is that it must be offered by a certain kind of person – a righteous person.

Then they define righteous as particularly holy.

We joke that someone’s prayers didn’t get answered because they weren’t righteous enough.

But the “righteous” person here is not one who is holier than all the others but one who is in right relationship with God.

This is not a super saint but simply a person who lives in dependence on God.

He’s not saying you can’t have any doubts or that your faith must be perfect.

He’s simply saying your dependence must be on God.

These are people who have made up their minds about God.

They recognize and believe in the providence of God – they know he is in control and they are looking to him to provide.

The issue isn’t the amount of faith but **the object** of our faith – God.

So what are we to think when this verse makes it sound as if the result we desire is guaranteed? “The Lord will raise him up.”

Will God heal every time if we pray in dependence on him?

To answer that question I want to put this issue of healing in the context of the Kingdom of God that you have been studying in your series on the Beatitudes.

In the OT God is presented as the supreme King of the universe, ruling over all.

But from the moment of Adam's sin, it became apparent that something broke – mankind now largely rebelled against the King's rule.

Not only was humanity broken from that day forward but all creation was affected.

Human beings and the world in which we live have been so altered by sin that we barely reflect the glory of God or the glory with which we were first created.

We don't live any longer in a Garden of Eden.

The Bible starts, in Genesis, with the tree of life in a setting of intimacy between God and mankind.

The Bible ends, in Revelation, with the tree of life in a setting of restored intimacy between God and mankind.

Between Genesis and Revelation, the message of the Bible is humanity's on-going rebellion and God's greater grace to restore his creation.

Starting in Genesis 3:15, God promised a reversal of the effects of sin.

In Genesis 12 Abraham was promised that through his offspring the whole world would be blessed by God.

The Prophets saw how broken the world was and looked forward to the day when sin's domination would be ended and God's righteous and benevolent rule would again reign supreme.

The Prophets likewise wrote that this life-changing and world-changing rule of God, the Kingdom of God, would be ushered in by his appointed Messiah.

Then with the NT, we see Jesus presenting himself as that "Messiah."

He came proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God – the rule of God overcoming the forces of evil which have held sway over humanity and the rest of creation for millennia.

He came teaching us to pray: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The kingdom of darkness in the world is characterized by sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like, and it ends in death!

God’s reign in the world is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control and it is life!

Jesus came ushering in the Kingdom of God **but not all at once**.

He announced what would be in the future AND how some of that future would be experienced now.

It is as if the future has invaded the present.

Paul wrote that our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

We are colonists not from some place of the past but from the Kingdom of the future.

We, who are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, are tethered to the future but living in the present.

We are future “kingdom of God” people living in the present kingdom of this world.

Now because of that there are at least two things that are true.

1. We have an almost unimaginable future (1 Corinthians 2:9) that is secured by God’s grace:

Revelation 21:1-4

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”⁴ He will wipe every

tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away...”

What we often refer to as “heaven” is actually the new earth that God will recreate (2 Peter 3:7,13).

And on that new earth we know, from God’s promises, it will be a radically different experience for us than now.

- There will be peace with God – no fear of alienation.
- Our relationships will be whole and healthy because the fruit of the Spirit will not be sporadic in us but consistent.
- The heartaches we know now will then be impossible.
- In Romans 8 the implication is that even the physical earth and universe will be restored to greater glory.
- And, more to the point about healing, our bodies will be resurrected, immortal and incorruptible.

2. The second thing that is true is that some of that future blessing of the kingdom of God, God’s complete and uncontested rule, is experienced even now.

When the Kingdom of God is completely fulfilled on the new earth, at Christ’s return, we will experience **a perfect peace with God** untroubled by circumstance and doubt.

The amazing truth is that that future complete peace even now invades the present so that we may know a great measure of that peace with God.

We call it a growing trust and intimacy with God.

It is also true that when the Kingdom of God is completely fulfilled on the new earth, we will experience **a perfect peace with each other.**

And the amazing truth is that that perfect peace with each other even now invades the present so that we know a measure of that peace through forgiveness, reconciliation, kindness, and genuine fellowship.

We call it a growing fellowship of believers.

I give you those two illustrations of how the future and present are connected in order to help you see the same regarding physical healing.

The Bible teaches that when Jesus comes again our mortal bodies will be resurrected immortal and incorruptible.

We believe that physical health and wholeness will be ours in the resurrection of the body. 1 Corinthians 15

When Jesus was here healing people he was demonstrating the power of the Kingdom of God **that will eventually overcome all** the devastating effects of sin – including disease, debilitation and death.

Likewise today when God heals people he is giving us a taste of what is to come.

That healing may be by the immediate intervention of God, what we call a miracle, or the mediated intervention of God through medicine.

But in either form it is, in part, the future wholeness, invading the present.

What we are experiencing now in this life, by God's grace, is what some call the "already but not yet" of the Kingdom of God.

Perfection of our hearts, our relationships and our bodies waits for the coming of Jesus and the resurrection, but we are not there yet!

But already we are experiencing partial blessing of the Kingdom that is yet to come.

- I expect that God will work his grace in me to make me more like Jesus but I accept ,because of my sin nature and a sin-sick world, that it will not be complete until the return of Christ.
- I expect that God will work his grace in us all to make us love one another but I accept that it will not be complete until Jesus comes again.
- And I expect that God will often, even usually, heal our bodies but I accept that it will not be complete until the resurrection.

I don't wonder why God doesn't heal us every time we are sick anymore than I wonder why he doesn't make us all instantly sinless or instantly harmonious in our relationships with each other.

But what I learn from James and the rest of the Bible is that while I must accept the limitations of life before the resurrection, **I can expect God's Kingdom blessings in part even now.**

And so we pray; we pray expectantly and acceptingly at the same time.

But our faith is not in faith, it is not in a particular answer, and it is not faith in the kind of prayer we pray; our faith is in God to do his perfect benevolent will.

There is much more that is important in these verses in James 5 than I have time to deal with today.

In some notes your pastor has agreed to post on your church website I try to deal with those other issues.

So, do we pray for physical healing? Yes!

God has demonstrated in Scripture and in more recent church history that he often chooses to heal, sometimes directly through what we call a miracle and more usually, as I already said, indirectly through other means such as medical intervention. We know "every good and perfect gift is from above."

Just as we expect him to help us grow spiritually so we can expect him to provide for our physical needs.

When I pray "give us this day our daily bread," I mean it and I expect God to provide!

And at the same time, I ought not to be shocked if in his greater wisdom and benevolence he chooses not to.

Because my faith is in him not in my circumstances.

We live **expecting** that we will already experience some of the blessings of the Kingdom that is yet to come.

And we **pray** because we know prayer is a means that God ordained whereby he would act on our behalf whether for spiritual or physical blessing.

And we live **accepting** his will because we trust him!

Expectant and Accepting!