

Proposition: *Whether suffering or not, Christians should be prayerful people (for ourselves and for each other), especially when sickness or sin are involved, because God delights in restoring life to those who are broken spiritually and physically.*

Introduction – We are finishing our study of the book of James. James is concerned with right belief, but more importantly that we do the right thing based on a right belief. We’ve learned that James is like the book of Proverbs—it is highly practical. That is why it is such a popular book among Christians. James concludes his message to the Church in this letter by teaching on the most practical of topics: prayer, particularly the prayer for healing.

A. Are You Sick? God Answers the Prayer of Faith (vv 13-15a).

1. No? God still answers prayer regarding your suffering.

Those who are suffering trials are experiencing *external* troubles. James uses the word “suffering” to link this passage to the previous one (Jas 5:10), where the prophets serve as examples of those who suffered.

2. Not suffering or sick? Then praise God in song.

Those who are joyful, happy, and cheerful should sing songs of praise, which are a form of prayer to God (1 Cor 14:15). Notice that suffering and the lack thereof both tempt us to spiritual apathy. When we are suffering, our devotion to God tends to shrivel because we think God has abandoned us. When we are doing well and cruising happily along, our spiritual life tends to dry up because we think we don’t need God.

3. Yes, a little? Then pray since God really does heal.

Those who are sick are experiencing *internal* troubles. God heals supernaturally and naturally, instantaneously and gradually, with and without medicine. God is sovereign and chooses to heal or not according to his perfect will.

4. Yes, very sick? Then call for your church elders to pray over you.

(1) What kinds of sickness does James have in mind that requires summoning the elders of the church? Probably severe sickness that prevents the person from worshiping in community. (2) What is “anointing oil”? It was used for medicinal purposes in the ancient world (cf. Lk 10:34), but since the elders apply the oil, its primary significance is probably a symbol of the healing power of the Holy Spirit. The oil applied to the sick symbolizes that the person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care. (3) Why should I call for the elders—can’t I just pray for myself or ask my family and friends to pray for me? It is appropriate that the elders do the anointing because it signifies their divine authority to anoint and pray for the sick under their care. James says it is the men who hold the particular office of elder who are to anoint and pray for the sick. (4) How can James be so certain that God will heal and raise the sick up? While this question is difficult considering James’s choice of words, I suggest that it is possible for truly faithful prayers to be offered which the Lord may choose not to answer as we request. Such prayers should always include explicitly (or at least implicitly) the notion that we desire God’s will to be done, and not our will if it is God’s purpose to not heal. Also we must remember that James urges patience in suffering (Jas 5:7-12). (5) Shouldn’t I just visit the doctor since that is the way God most often chooses to heal today? All healing, whether it comes through the means of prayer (with or without anointing oil), or modern medicine, is the work of God’s Spirit. No one should ever seek healing from a doctor or drugs without also seeking healing from God through prayer. God is the one who saves the sick and raises them up!

B. Are You Sick and also Sinning? God Hears the Prayer of Repentance (vv 15b-18).

1. How are sin and sickness related?

James does not teach that sickness is always caused by sin (cf. Job 6:28-30; Jn 9:1-3), but that it *may* be caused by sin (cf. 1 Cor 11:29-30). James says that the elders should pray for the sick, and that if there is sin involved, then the sick person should confess his sin and thereby be forgiven. It is possible that James links sickness and sin because Jesus often healed people physically and forgave their sins. Examples of Jesus healing people and the Bible's teaching about his role as the suffering Christ are the best indicators of how sin and sickness are related. Jesus' healings served as signs that point from physical to spiritual brokenness.

2. What kind of confession does James have in mind?

Not the kind of admittance of sin to a friend, or in a small group with other believers, or to a priest so as to clear one's conscience. The biblical pattern of confession and repentance is the one who sins must confess to the offended person(s).

3. Errors to avoid.

(1) Do you have to be extraordinary like Elijah for God to answer your prayer? No, James says that Elijah was just like us, implying that God hears the prayers of ordinary and extraordinary believers. (2) If God chooses not to heal, it does not necessarily mean the sick one (or the prayer elders) don't have faith—although that is a possibility. (3) Some Christians think that James teaches there is a particular kind of prayer (a "prayer of faith") that will surely bring physical healing. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church uses this verse to support its sacramental doctrine of "last rites" or "extreme unction" as prayer for the dying. Contra the RC interpretation, the anointing and prayer for the sick in James is for healing, not in preparation for death. Contra the "prayer of faith" interpretation, the righteousness and faith inherent in the elders are the necessary ingredients for a faithful prayer, not the form of words. (4) Confession of sin is not optional!

C. Is Your Brother Sinning? God Honors the Work of Restoration (vv 19-20).

1. The action point of the entire epistle.

James has been addressing Christians who are being led astray, who have wandered in some way from the truth. Now James reminds believers to turn their wayward brother back to the truth to rescue him from eternal death and cover many sins. Rather than condemning your brother, seek to restore him.

2. A matter of life and death (spiritual and sometimes also physical).

James says it is important for all of us to be engaged in the oversight of souls. It is vitally important in the sense that it is literally a matter of life and death. When you lovingly confront a fellow believer caught up in sin, it is the primary means whereby the Holy Spirit brings conviction, confession, repentance, and forgiveness. The sense of "cover" in v. 20 is that love covers over all wrongs (cf. Pr 10:12; 1 Pet 4:8). James is reminding the faithful that it is our privilege to be fellow workers with God as he seeks the repentance of sinners.

Conclusion – It is certainly a biblical idea that the one who turns a sinner from his error will experience blessing (Ezek 3:21; 1 Tim 4:16). But I think James is reminding us that when you turn a sinner from his error, it is most importantly the *sinner* who experiences God's blessing by escaping judgment. It is fitting that James closes his letter written to churches (not just individual believers) by exhorting us to be doers of the word and to be deeply concerned that other believers are doers as well.