



“On Divine Healing” (James 5:13-16a)

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Today for the ministry of the word our text is easily one of the most interesting in all of the New Testament. It begins the concluding section of epistle of James. This final section is all about prayer. But couched in it in the center of this paragraph is a set of directions that has been used, overused, and abused as few passages have in the history of the church, and that is where we will be focusing our attention today, in a paragraph on divine healing. In the interests of time I'm going to take us directly to the text. Please follow along with me in your outline, or your personal Bible, or your iPhone or whatever you can lay hands on. We begin at James 5:13.

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 5:13-16A

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

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. 15 And the prayer of faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

Q's & A's ON JAMES 5:14-16A AND DIVINE HEALING: THE LARGER PERSPECTIVE

So many points of interest are found in these brief verses that I've decided I can do it the best justice by answering a series of questions about it. These are questions that occur to just about everybody who reads the passage. I have asked them myself, and have heard them asked of me many times through the years, beginning with this one...

Is this an invitation to participate in the common practice of healing meetings?

Healing meetings have been around for a couple of centuries, especially in the USA. They've never been popular in Europe, where Christianity has for centuries been intertwined with national governments, and thus is heavily regulated. But since about 1800, great venues have been rented, and highly

visible healers have invited people to come and be healed, or to come and watch other people be healed. Often this passage has been invoked to support such practices.

Having said all that, it is apparent to me that James 5 says nothing whatever about healing crusades or public healing meetings. Many reasons support my view here, but I will give you the three that most impress me. First...

In James 5, the initiative lies entirely with the sick person.

No healer calls the meeting; the sick person calls the meeting, and it has to do with him alone. It is a private meeting between him and not even the congregation of his church, but only his elders. If he doesn't call the meeting, there is no meeting. He is ill, and he knows that God can do something about it, and here he is encouraged to call the people in the church who are responsible for the oversight of his soul. They pray for him and the event itself is over. No arenas need to be rented. This consideration alone, in my judgment, eliminates any discussion about it supporting a healing meeting. That just isn't the context here.

Second...

James 5 is not all God has to say about healing.

God heals frequently without regard to this procedure at all. Sometimes individuals pray to God for their own healing, and they are healed. Sometimes friends or relatives or the whole church prays, and they are healed. The one thing that is entirely missing from the New Testament is the whole notion of healing meetings, which seem to have been perpetuated as a form of income for people who claim to be healers. In that respect such meetings have achieved their goals. The effectiveness of large public meetings as true healing occasions is much more uncertain.

Thirdly...

Faith healers routinely charge for their services

They do this through offerings normally, though sometimes tickets are sold. Between those who come to be healed and those who come to watch the healings, large numbers often create large incomes for the healers. It does seem to many of us that such practices do contrast clearly with the healings of Scripture. There is no record that Jesus or any of his apostles charged for their services, or that anyone with the gift of healings ever did so. They were happy to offer their gifts in the name of the Lord for the benefit of suffering people and as a form of their own praise and worship to God.

So, on to a second and perhaps more useful question...

Is the procedure described here still valid to use today?

Is it proper for a sick Christian believer to request the presence of his elders, to accept an anointing on him and prayer for him with a view to his recovery? There is nothing in the text or in modern conditions that argues against it, and for that reason it is common accepted in conservative circles that the answer to this question is "Yes." In the absence of reasons to set it aside, its presence in James puts the burden of proof on those who regard it as useless or improper for today.

One does occasionally hear offered in support of this answer that James 5 is properly understood as God's permanent and ongoing procedure to address sickness that supersedes the great age of miraculous healing that marked the New Testament era. But with this I really cannot agree. If my analysis of the date of this letter is accurate, James was written right in the middle of the era of miracles. Paul was doing miracles in Cyprus and Asia Minor at the time of the composition of James as the gospel was expanding into Gentile territory. So James is actually living in a day of miracles (AD 35-45), yet the personal presence of a gifted healers could not address all the ill people in the church at large, especially to many scattered local churches such as James is writing. This process was just one way to make healing accessible to people in the churches, and James offered it to them.

Next...

Do we use this procedure at CBC?

Yes, we do, and have from the beginning of our church in the early 70s. I've lost track of the number of times that the elders have been called on to do this, and we have responded in every case as far as I can recall.

One of the most common questions about James 5 is our next one...

What is the meaning of the oil in the procedure?

Critics like to point to the oil as a reason to discredit the whole passage. "This instruction was given in a primitive age," they like to say. ("Primitive" is a word critics like to use a lot. As far as they are concerned, if its primitive, it can't be valid.) "People were more gullible then, and they thought that there was magic in the oil itself," they say.

I find it hard to believe that people in the first century were more gullible than people today, but neither then nor now is the Christian faith a variety of magic. We don't have magic words and mumbo jumbo in Scripture. The oil does nothing by way of therapeutic accomplishment. The kind of oil is not even specified. It is fine, as far as the passage is concerned, to use olive oil or salad oil or whatever kind is on hand. So why include it in the instructions at all? What is the purpose of it? There are two answers to this question at least. First...

It is a reminder to the ill person that God is central to the process

Oil is frequently associated with the Holy Spirit in Scripture. A personal symbol of the true God is added to the ill person. He is not alone in his illness. God has placed a mark on him through the application of a familiar symbol. Then, secondly...

It is a reminder to elders that God is the one who accomplishes the healing.

The elders don't heal. The oil doesn't heal. God heals. The sick person is anointed with oil in the name of the Lord. God raises him up. If he has committed sins, God forgives them. There is no room to doubt here. This is divine healing. God does it.

Leading from this, the next question has to be...

Is the use of medical means excluded by the procedure?

That is, if you are ill, do you have to choose between seeing your doctor on the one hand and calling for the elders and using this procedure on the other?

There is nothing in the text that encourages us to think that medical means are excluded either before or after the procedure. God uses medical means quite often to accomplish his purposes.

And it is important to notice that there is not the slightest hint in the passage that this sort of healing takes place instantaneously. Time may pass between the procedure and the healing. That is unlike the healings recorded in the gospels and Acts, which were all basically instantaneous, often performed in front of groups of skeptical people who would be impressed by nothing less. Here there are no skeptics. A sick person who believes God's word and elders who believe God's word are content to let God heal any way and in any time frame that he chooses.

It is probably true to say that God heals most often through the application of medical means. Gifted people study the human body, they think God's thoughts after him, and they learn how to use the body's built-in healing powers that God made a part of all of us. Doctors really never heal anybody. They don't have that ability. Only God heals. One famous medical practitioner was fond of saying, "I dressed the wound; God did the healing." Knowing how to dress the wound properly, of course, is very important. But in the end God heals, with or without intermediaries.

My experience is that most of the people who have called on our elders have already used medical means to do what can properly be done that way, and healing has not yet taken place. So engaging in this process is often a recognition what the medical arts cannot necessarily do by themselves God can always do. He can heal with medical means or without them. And for the same reason the illness in view is typically serious by the time the elders are called on.

But easily the hardest question here is the next one...

Is healing guaranteed by the use of the procedure?

This question is usually stimulated by observing the language of verse 15, "*The prayer of faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*" That sounds pretty definite. And yet the answer to this question is "No." Not everybody who calls for the elders is healed. So why not? At least three reasons, I think, can be adduced on this point, beginning with...

Prayer is at the heart of the procedure

To ask the question is almost to answer it. Healing is in response to prayer. God answers prayer according to his will, and that means that the answer is always up to him. All churches who do this process have noticed that God does not always heal as a response. We have seen remarkable healings after this procedure, but healing doesn't always take place. I studiously avoided saying, "It doesn't always work," because that is how the question is usually asked: "Does it always work?" That language really misconstrues what is happening in James 5. It suggests that the important players in the effort are the elders and the sick person and that the elders must be careful to follow the exact procedure. Did they use the right oil? Did they put enough on? If they had done it differently, would the person

have been healed? That's not what this is all about. There are two other *implicit* conditions here that are often overlooked and that explain why healing does not in some cases take place. For starters...

A prayer of faith is required

That is, a prayer of faith by the elders. Did you notice the expression is singular? It is "the prayer of faith," not "the prayers of faith." No matter how many elders pray, their prayer is regarded by God as one prayer. They speak with one voice in their leadership of the church; they pray with one voice for the sick person, agreeing on their request for healing; and they pray with one voice as the corporate voice of the believing community before God. And sometimes, for whatever reason, the prayer offered is not offered in full confidence of the Lord's healing. But why that sometimes happens is another sermon for another day.

And it raises an issue that I haven't addressed yet: why the elders? Can't other people pray for a sick person as well or better than the elders? Why not, "Let him call for several members of the congregation?" Isn't it undemocratic to prefer the prayers of officers over the prayers of congregation members? Well, for starters the church is not organized as a democracy but as the expression of a monarchy. Jesus is its true and only Head. The corporate, prayerful voice of recognized elders merely form the vehicle for getting to the will of the Head for the congregation.

I don't doubt that many people in the congregation might pray as well as elders in their modes of expression and perhaps even in their passionate sincerity; but there is one way in which a typical congregation member cannot pray as well as an elder. Who knows the spiritual condition of the sufferer as well as those who have the responsibility for his soul before God? For most of my time of participation on the board, the elders made it a point to devote by far the lengthiest portion of every board meeting to prayer for specific issues and for specific people's needs in the congregation. So the struggles of people were certainly a great concern. When people call for the elders, they are asking for prayer informed by knowledge, and the chances are good that what elders pray for in this meeting they have already prayed for beforehand. What is critical is this: if there are barriers to believing prayer that exist in connection with the sick person, the elders are by far the ones most likely to know about them and to be able to bring them to bear on the issue his healing. And that leads to the other implicit condition...

The illness in question may be a form of deserved suffering

As James says in verse 15, "*If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*" The *if* is a critical word, and it's not the only one. That word *sins* is important, too. "If he has committed sins." Well, everybody who makes this request has committed sins. All Christians are sinners. So committing sins in general is not what James is talking about. What he assumes we have the intelligence to realize is this: "If he has committed sins that have led to his illness; if he is suffering deservedly for sins he has committed," those will have to be addressed, too.

That is, he might be in the position of those people in the Corinthian church that had been getting drunk at the Lord's Table. (You can read about this in 1 Corinthians 11.) Some of the members of the Corinthian church were sick because of their sin, and the Lord was the one who had made them sick.

He was disciplining them for their presumption and irreverence, trying to wake them up to the horrible transgression they were engaged in. Their illness was the direct result of their personal sin.

Of course, it is the clear teaching of Scripture that not all sickness is the result of personal sin on the part of the sick person. That's why the word *if* in the passage is important. *The whole book of Job was written to refute that idea. But sometimes sin is the cause, and when the sick and sinning believer submits to this process both problems are addressed. The sins are forgiven and the sickness is healed. Of course, I think it is assumed that the ill person comes into the process willing to acknowledge his sin before the elders and the Lord. If he loves the sin so much that he wants to hang onto it, then there are real problems, and that may result in no healing and no forgiveness.*

Finally, let me address the question...

Does verse 16 argue for the practice of confessional meetings?

It certainly has been taken that way from time to time. Verse 16 says, "*Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*" People have sometimes suggested, on the basis of this verse, that the church should schedule a regular confessional meeting so that people can stand up in public with the rest of the church, or some part of it, looking on and listening (rather intently, I should think) to hear the bad things that confessing people have done. (For some reason such meetings have never caught on.) In the rare occasions when this has been tried, after a while the meetings typically turn into a sort of "Can you top this one?" contest. Inhibitions are eventually set aside, and people begin to brag. But it is highly doubtful that such was ever the intent of this verse. Remember, this comes hard on the heels of the healing procedure just described, which is quite private. Just as there are no public meetings connected with the beginning of this passage, there are none connected with its end.

Ordinarily, confession is supposed to be between just two people: the one who was sinned against and the one who sinned against him. Jesus said that if two people are alienated, the right thing to do is to go to the one who caused the problem and point it out to him in private. "*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone*" (Matt. 18:15). Give him a chance to confess in private, and if he does, you forgive him, and that is the end of the matter. The relationship is restored.

Now it is important to notice that the healing procedure of verses 14-15 is an exception to that principle. The sinner, if he is a sinner in this case, is confessing sin to people who were not directly involved in his sin, and for obvious reasons. In both cases restoration to fellowship is the ultimate goal.

In verse 16 James reminds us that it is important that we do not think the healing procedure is the only time confession is the right thing to do. He says we should address private offenses privately through confession between the people involved; resume the broken relationship, and pray together. That will mark an event of healing even more important than physical healing. The body of Christ itself is healed, two people involved are healed of enmity, and the purposes of God can go forward in the church. The circle of confession should never be wider than the circle of people who participated

in the offense. So I doubt that the elders will be scheduling any congregational confession meetings at CBC, which will make most of us very grateful.

However, the procedure for healing described here is an option available for all who are part of our church, and will receive prompt attention in each case. And whether you ever call for our elders, the wonderful option of prayer to a gracious God is always there and always available.

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