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Praying and anointing: A look at James 5:14–16

A group of experienced ministers was discussing their role in the healing ministry of their churches.

"I had this sick parishioner," one began, diffidently. "The family asked me to anoint her. I did, but two days later she died. What did I do wrong?"

A mumble of commiseration showed that everyone in the group had experienced similar situations of apparent defeat. Some, it seemed, even questioned the point of anointing the sick. In this matter, ministers are not alone. A dedicated Christian physician was asked to pray for a seriously sick family member, which he willingly did. In the midst of his prayer, and to the horror of both the physician and the assembled family, the patient died.

"I'll never pray for a patient again," he uttered.

David Levy, a Christian neurosurgeon, developed the policy of praying with his patients before surgery. He had some amazing outcomes. But he admits honestly, "Early on, when I first began to pray with patients, God seemed to answer all my prayers and reward me and my patients with success. I began to think that perhaps I had found the key to perfect surgical outcomes. I even began to think that if I prayed I could control the outcome and would never have a failed surgery again. Boy, was that the wrong prognosis."¹

How then are we, as Christians and especially ministers, to understand what James wrote about praying for, and even anointing with oil, those who are sick?

Prayer

James's admonition to pray for the sick is in the context of the general prayer of faith. Douglas Moo notes: "Prayer is clearly the topic of this paragraph [James 5:13–18], being mentioned in every verse."² There was nothing new about apostles exhorting people to pray when they experienced difficulties or sickness. Paul does so repeatedly (see Rom. 15:30–32; Eph. 6:18–20; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2–4; 1 Thess. 5:17). Few Christians, then or now, would question the efficacy of prayer that James extols in verse 16.

James indicates that the *prayer* of faith will *save* the sick person. *Save* has a double meaning, as the Greek *sōzō* can be used for both physical and spiritual salvation.³ James acknowledges this dual meaning when he mentions forgiven sins. But it is not the prayers of the sick person, or even that of the elder, that bring physical and spiritual healing; rather it is the name of Lord that brings the relief. If, therefore, the saving of the person, whether physically or spiritually sick, is the work of God, then why are anointing and confessing added to prayer?

Confessing to one another

I remember the anointing of a seriously sick man who had been rather free in his criticism over the years. The congregation was surprised by his request to be "publicly" anointed. The church was crowded, perhaps because he was well-known but also perhaps because few people had ever had the opportunity to witness an anointing service. Immediately after his anointing, this man expressed his wish to be forgiven by people whom he had hurt. In the 18 months that remained of his life, some wonderful reconciliations occurred, most surely through the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Those reconciliations were not just between the sick man and others; the whole church began to think of relationships in a different way.

Though efficacious prayer is the focus of this passage, James states that confessing sins to one another will bring healing (James 5:16). This is the only passage in the Bible that explicitly advises Christians to confess one to another, suggesting the importance of the whole community being involved in mutual confession, bringing health to the group.⁴

A significant shift exists from the *him* of the sick person to the *you* of the group. This recognizes the extreme importance of offering the sick, their family, and their friends opportunity

to forgive those who may have harmed or offended them. Dr. Levy notes personally that the gnawing pain of an unforgiven hurt caused harm: "When I first began praying for patients, I had no idea that it would lead me to discover the power of forgiveness. I became convinced that one of the greatest thieves of joy and health is the unwillingness to forgive the people who have hurt you."⁵ The important connection between forgiveness and health is also well documented in monographs such as Dick Tibbits's *Forgive to Live*.⁶

The importance of forgiveness as a group activity seems to have faded from the practice of prayer, whether for

and His disciples. "And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two. . . . So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and *anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them*" (Mark 6:7–13).⁷

The Gospels are filled with spectacular stories of restored sick, large numbers of people receiving physical healing. Although Jesus came to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21), He spent more time healing the physically sick than He did preaching sermons leading to spiritual healing.⁸

Also, when the disciples were sent out two by two to proclaim the gospel,

treatments would be presumption, not faith. This comes in marked contrast to the emphasis of many current healing ministries. The range of healing treatments has increased dramatically since apostolic times, but the principle of making full use of God-given healing resources still applies.

The sick should not be abandoned to scientific medical care, however, without attention to their spiritual needs. We find this illustrated by a disquieting Old Testament story. King Asa of Judah, toward the end of his 41-year reign, was "diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought

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the sick or for others. Perhaps, for the health of both the suffering sick and the church, the time has come for a revival of forgiveness.

Why anointing?

All this, though, leads to the question, *Why add anointing to prayer for the sick? If prayer is so effective and confession and forgiveness lead to healing, why must anointing be added?*

The practice of anointing the sick has roots in Jewish history and the practice of Jesus, and these roots elucidate two important reasons for adding anointing to efficacious prayer.

The first reason is that oil represents healing therapies. James's admonition to anoint the sick did not initiate the practice, but we find that this concept was founded on the example of Jesus

they may have not only performed healing miracles but also used simple healing remedies illustrated by anointing oil. We find the importance of oil as a therapeutic agent illustrated in the parable of the good Samaritan, who treated the wounded traveler with oil and wine (Luke 10:34). In the ancient world, oil was regarded as useful to cure almost everything⁹ and would be understood as a remedial substance at the time of Jesus and the apostles. Thus James seems to be urging elders to come to the sick armed with both prayer and medicine.¹⁰

If the anointing oil represents available therapeutics that should be offered the sick, then James says the use of medical treatments should accompany the prayer of faith. To pray for the sick without using appropriate available

help from physicians" (2 Chron. 16:12). Medical help without "seeking the Lord" is not endorsed. Pastors are therefore an important part of the healing team and should not see their work for the sick as separate from medical care.

There is a second, and even more important, reason for adding anointing to prayer for the sick: setting a person aside for the work of the Lord. Anointing had special meaning in Old Testament practice, one that would be familiar to James's Jewish Christian readers and whose import they would have grasped.

Jacob, a fugitive fleeing for his life and awed by a spectacular dream of angels moving on a ladder reaching heaven, recognized the presence of God and anointed a mere rock, in a place called Bethel, "the house of God" (Gen. 28:18, 19). This acknowledged the

presence of God and Jacob's willingness to dedicate himself to God. Anointing was *commanded* by God for the dedication of the Aaronic priests (Exod. 28:41; 29:7), who were set apart for special service. Even the tabernacle and all its furniture (Exod. 29:36; 40:11) were anointed "so that it may become holy" (Exod. 40:9). Here, anointing is associated with dedication to the *purpose* of God. Samuel, at God's command, anointed and set apart Saul as king of Israel (1 Sam. 9:16, 10:1). Saul was reminded of this anointing when sent to annihilate the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1) and was rejected because he did not appreciate that he had been set apart to do God's work. When Samuel, at God's command, anointed David, "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). Anointing indicated receiving the Holy Spirit and being set apart for the service of God.

This Old Testament understanding of anointing needs to be recognized and emphasized when applied to the sick. By appreciating that the anointed person has been given to God, to be managed as He sees fit, the outcome can be left in God's hands. Often much is made of the faith of the person prayed for or of those who are praying. If a person (or persons) has enough faith, the sick will be healed, but if a person is not healed, they carry the double burden not only of their illness but also of their alleged lack of faith.¹¹ The concept of the sick person being dedicated or given to God deals beautifully with these problems. Like Paul with his thorn in the flesh, they can trust themselves to God and His grace (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Healing for believers does come in God's timing and through various means. They may be healed immediately, through various treatments and prayer over time, or ultimately and eternally at the resurrection. Everyone who believes in the promises of James 5, and is anointed accordingly, "shall be healed" or made whole in God's way and timing. Of that truth we can be assured.

Anointing thus carries the sick person beyond the immediate distress of their illness to simple trust in God. Whether their remaining life is short or long, they can be confident that God will use them to be a blessing to others. If they are restored to health, then they remain, for the rest of their lives, an anointed person, especially dedicated to God for His use. Thus, anointing should be the choice of the sick person and no one else.

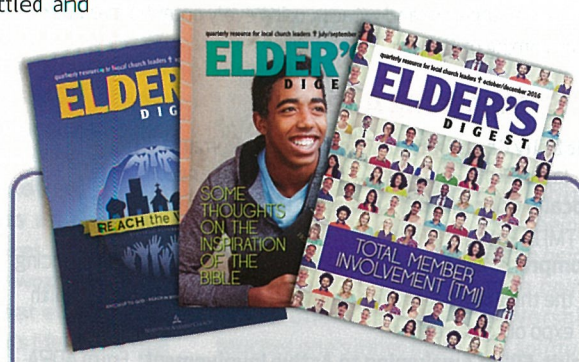
Anointing can be likened to baptism. As baptism is a public declaration of acceptance of the saving power of Jesus, so anointing is a public declaration of total dedication to the will of God for His special use. Whether God heals immediately, allows suffering to continue, or lays a person to rest in death therefore becomes immaterial. An anointed and healed person will focus not on the blessing of physical health but rather on God's salvation and how He plans to use their life. They will praise God for the evidence that He will use them for a special purpose and pray that this purpose will be revealed.

Opportunity

Pastors can use opportunities to train their church families to understand God's healing plans. Sermons on not only prayer but also the importance of forgiveness and the significance of anointing can be shared. Confusion between anointing and "last rites" needs to be cleared so that the sick, particularly the embattled and chronically sick, can experience the blessing of total commitment to God. While the physician pours out medicinal healing oil, the pastor pours out oil representing the power of the Holy Spirit and points the struggling person, their family, and the church family to God.

Anointing occasions have tended to be private, with restricted participants or observers. While privacy for very sick people is important, giving opportunity for public declaration of total dedication to God and opportunities for forgiveness would bless the whole church family. The pastoral practice of anointing the sick can be revitalized so that it will contribute to a fully committed, healthy church on fire for God. What if pastors receive so many requests for anointing that they strain to cope with the numbers? Unlikely, but has any pastor ever complained about too many baptisms? What a wonderful situation it would be to have seriously sick people, totally dedicated to Jesus Christ, become catalysts for forgiveness and revival. 

- 1 David Levy with Joel Kilpatrick, *Gray Matter: A Neurosurgeon Discovers the Power of Prayer... One Patient at a Time* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011), 166.
- 2 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 234.
- 3 James Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, rev. by John Kohlenburger III and James Swanson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1647, entry 4982.
- 4 Moo, *The Letter of James*, 245.
- 5 Levy, *Gray Matter*, 131.
- 6 Dick Tibbits, *Forgive to Live: How Forgiveness Can Save Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006).
- 7 Emphasis added. Scriptural quotes are from the English Standard Version.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), 19.
- 9 Moo, *The Letter of James*, 239.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 244.



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