

## Series on James

**The Prayer and Praise of Faith**

James 5:13-20; Jerry Truex; November 14, 2010

**A. Introduction**

Today, we continue our series on James. James has three major themes:

1. How to face trials or temptations,
2. How to respond to the poor and rich
3. How to be wise in our use of speech.

Over the last couple of weeks, we looked at how James dealt with the trials of riches and poverty. This week, we look at how James deals with the trials of illness and sin.

**B. Exhortation (5:13-18)**

James begins our passage with a general exhortation to pray and praise no matter what your circumstances.

**1. Pray and praise whatever your circumstances (v. 13)**

<p><sup>13</sup> Are any among you suffering? They should pray [<i>proseuchē</i>]. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise [<i>psallō</i>].</p>	<p><sup>13</sup> Κακοπαθεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν, προσευχέσθω· εὐθυμεῖ τις, ψαλλέτω·</p>
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Here, in verse 13, James highlights two extremes of life—suffering and joy.

**a. Let him/her pray**

On the one hand, James says, if a person is “suffering”—*kakopatheō*, a reference any kind of misfortune or hardship—then “let him or her pray.” The verb “pray” (*proseuchē*) refers to prayer in its broadest sense, from verbal to non-verbal, from chanting to meditation. The verb is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular imperative in the present tense, so we could translate that “let him or her keep on praying.”

Some types of prayer remind us that we need God’s help; other types of prayer, like meditation, help us to see from God’s perspective. Either way, prayer and meditation give us divine peace.

**Phil. 4:6-7.** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the

peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (NRSV)

**Eleventh Step:** Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with *God as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

I think of prayer and meditation as revolutionary tactics.<sup>1</sup> Prayer and meditation are revolutionary tactics to use in the combat of ordinary life. Philo, the Jewish philosopher, said that everyone is fighting a great battle. If your life feels like combat, then you need to pray or meditate. If you don't know how to pray or meditate, if you aren't motivated to pray for some reason, it's time to learn, re-learn, or get a book and read about it.

### **b. Let him/her praise**

On the other hand, James says, if someone is full of joy—*euthumeō*, a reference to being cheerful or happy—then “let him or her sing praise.” The verb is *psallō*. It means “to pluck the strings of a harp” and takes on the meaning of “singing in accompaniment of such harp-playing.”<sup>2</sup> From *psallo* we get the word *psalmos* (“that which is sung”).

By highlighting the two extremes of life—suffering on the one hand, joy on the other—James emphasizes the importance of praying and praising *whatever your circumstances*.

## **2. If there are sick among you (vv. 14-18)**

Next, James moves from the general exhortation to pray and praise to a more specific exhortation to pray and anoint those who are sick.

### **a. Instructions: Pray and anoint (v. 14)**

<sup>14</sup> Are any among you sick [weak]? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, [after] anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

<sup>14</sup> ἀσθενεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν, προσκαλεσάσθω τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας καὶ προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν] ἐλαίῳ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου.

<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 241.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 329.

### ***i. Sickness/weakness***

What kind of “sickness” or “weakness” (*astheneō*) is James talking about? Does it refer to spiritual or physical sickness/weakness? Although the term (*astheneō*) is occasionally used to refer to moral or spiritual weakness, it is predominately used for “physical weakness or illness.”<sup>3</sup>

The weakness is serious. Clues in the text suggest the person was bedridden and possibly helpless:<sup>4</sup>

1. The elders are called to the sick person
2. The elders do all the praying
3. The person is called “worn out” or “exhausted” (*kamnō* in v. 15)
4. The faith is that of the elders, not the sick person
5. The elders pray “over” the person as if the person is lying down

### ***ii. Physical healing***

So the purpose of the prayer was for physical healing. Traditional Catholic teaching interprets this verse as a reference to “extreme unction or last rites”; that is, a prayer for spiritual cleansing before someone dies. While I wouldn’t rule that out, this verse stresses physical, not spiritual, healing.<sup>5</sup>

Also, in contrast to traditional Catholic teaching, this verse does not assign praying and anointing of the sick to a priest. These tasks are given to the duly commissioned leaders of the church (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας).

### ***iii. Two actions***

The elders (our “shepherds”) are to take two actions:

1. They should “pray over the person” (προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν)
2. They should “anoint the person” (ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν])<sup>6</sup> in two ways:
  - a. “With olive oil” (ἐλαίῳ; instrumental of manner)
  - b. “In the name of the Lord” (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου); instrumental of agency), indicating the power or source of the healing.

<sup>3</sup> Paul occasionally uses the term to denote “weak faith” (Rom 4:19) and “weak conscience” (1 Cor 8:7; 11-12), but generally the term is used to denote “physical weakness” (Matt 10:8; 25:36; Lk 9:2; Jn 4:46; 5:3; Acts 9:37; Phil 2:26).

<sup>4</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 242.

<sup>5</sup> So also Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 242.

<sup>6</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 331 argues that the aorist participle indicates the anointing precedes the prayer; but, Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 243, n. 21 argue that the aorist participle, when it appears later in the sentence than the main verb, can indicate simultaneous action.

#### iv. Anointing with oil

What was the purpose of “anointing with oil”? There are two interpretations.

1. The “oil” was used medicinally (cf. Lk 10:34 and Mk 6:13); prayer corresponds to God’s action, anointing corresponds to the doctor’s.
2. The “oil” symbolized God’s presence and care. The anointing symbolized “that the person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care.”<sup>7</sup>

“The anointing mentioned here is not done with a certainty that God will heal, but with the certainty that God cares.”<sup>8</sup>

- To pray with the certainty that God will heal is presumptuous; prayer is simply an appeal to God and, “if the Lord wills” (4:15), the person will be healed.
- To pray with certainty that God will heal conflicts with one of James key themes; namely, Christians are to endure trials and temptations, because it can be used for character formation (Jam 1:3-4).

#### b. Promise: The prayer of faith (v. 15-16a)

Next, in verses 15-16, James indicates the outcome of this type of prayer.

<p><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.</p>	<p><sup>15</sup> καὶ ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως σώσει τὸν κάμνοντα καὶ ἐγερεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος· κἂν ἁμαρτίας ἢ πεποιηκῶς, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ. <sup>16</sup> ἔξομολογεῖσθε οὖν ἀλλήλοις τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ εὐχεσθε ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων ὅπως ἰαθῆτε.</p>
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#### i. Prayer of faith

What is the prayer of faith (ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως)? The grammar (taking τῆς πίστεως as a qualitative genitive) suggests it refers to prayer spoken in faith or from faith.<sup>9</sup> The best explanation may be James 1:5: A person “must ask in faith without doubting,” although everything we ask for remains contingent on God’s will (Jam. 4:17).

The prayer of faith has three results. The sick person will be:

1. “healed/saved” (σώζω)
2. “raised up” (ἐγείρω)
3. “forgiven” (ἀφίημι)

<sup>7</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 242.

<sup>8</sup> David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 306.

<sup>9</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 332.

### **ii. Healed/saved (sōdzō)**

First, the person will be “saved or healed.” The verb, “save” (σώζω), can mean “to save, heal, rescue, and liberate.” Usually, the word “to save” (*sōdzein*) refers to eschatology and the salvation of believers (e.g., Jam. 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20), but it can also refer to physical healing (Matt 9:22; Mk 5:34; 10:52; Lk 7:50; 8:48; Jam. 5:15).<sup>10</sup>

### **iii. Raised up/resurrection (egeirō)**

Second, the person will be “raised up.” The verb, “raise up” (ἐγείρω), is language often used for the resurrection, whether for Jesus or someone else. At the same time, in the NT, “to raise” (*egeirein*) someone is used to describe people who have been healed:

- the paralytic (Mark 2:9),
- the man with the withered hand (Mk 3:3),
- the synagogue official’s daughter (Mk 5:41),
- the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:14),
- blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:49), and
- Lazarus (Jn 11:29).

The point is, James is primarily referring to physical healing and rising up, but he could also be suggesting an eschatological healing and resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

### **iv. Forgiven (aphiēmai)**

Third, the persons will be “forgiven,” if the persons has committed sins. In verse 16, James switches the verbs to “you plural”—he is now addressing not one person, but the community:

- You (pl) confess (ἐξομολογεῖσθε) your sins to one another
- You (pl) pray (εὐχεσθε) for one another
- You (pl) will be healed (ἰαθητε)

James is addressing the assumption that sin might have caused the sickness and so he says the healing might require God’s forgiveness as well.<sup>12</sup>

James does not directly attribute sickness to sin. He uses a 3<sup>rd</sup> class conditional—“and if” someone’s sickness or weakness was caused by sin, there is a remedy—God will forgive.

<sup>10</sup> In James, only one time (Jam. 5:15) of five (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:15, 20) does *sōdzō* refer to physical healing.

<sup>11</sup> God is able to “raise the person up” from sickness, and thus “heal” the person of physical illness AND able to “raise the person up” by resurrection and thus “save his soul/life” for eternity. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 333.

<sup>12</sup> The OT (e.g., Deut 28:58-62; Ezek 18:1-29; Prov 3:28-35) and rabbinic tradition (e.g., *m. Shab.* 2:6) link sin with sickness. In contrast, John 9:1-3 denies the connection. Still, Paul connects sin & sickness (1 Cor 11:29-30).

Why is confession (ἑξομολογέω) to one another important?

If we understand “sin” as behavior that harms oneself or others—we can see sin damages the social fabric—then we can see that admitting sin would be important for healing the individual and the community. This reminds me of the Rule of Christ in Matthew 18, which encourages people to go to each other to resolve conflict and thereby preserve the community.

Alcoholics Anonymous understands the connection between admitting wrongs and healing relationships.

**Fifth Step:** Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

**Eighth Step:** Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

The practice of admitting one’s sin is deeply rooted in Judaism, both for individuals (e.g. Lev 5:5) and for groups (e.g., Lev 16:21). There is also evidence that early Christians practiced “confessing sins” in the assembly (*Shepherd of Hermas*; *Did.* 4:14).

What is most distinct about James is that he advocates mutual confession; they are to *confess to* and *pray for* each other. The mutual transparency is startling.<sup>13</sup>

“We ought to have people close enough to us whom we allow to inquire into our spiritual state, whether formally as with a pastor or elder, or more informally as with an accountability group, partner, or mentor.” James makes it clear that Christian life should not be lived apart from community.<sup>14</sup>

James believes that prayer brings “the body together, so that when one person falls ill, physically or spiritually, others in the community may intervene redemptively. Likewise, confession is not merely a mental activity as we talk to God in our individual prayer times, but a corporate activity that involves the people we have hurt or offended.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 334.

<sup>14</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 245.

<sup>15</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 245.

**c. Basis: Personal righteousness (v. 16b)**

<sup>16b</sup> ... The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.	<sup>16b</sup> ... Πολλὴ ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη.
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The basis or foundation for powerful and effective is the righteous person (δίκαιος). The word "righteous" means upright, just, honest, good, fair, and innocent.

A "righteous person" is one that is in a just or right relationship with God, others, and oneself. In the Torah, the "righteous person" is the one who has turned to Yahweh.

**Sirach 35:9.** The sacrifice of the righteous is acceptable, and it will never be forgotten. (NRSV)

**Wisdom 3:1.** But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. (NRSV)

**Psalms 145:8...** the LORD loves the righteous. (NRSV)

**d. Example: Elijah (vv. 17-18)**

<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.	<sup>17</sup> Ἡλίας ἄνθρωπος ἦν ὁμοιοπαθῆς ἡμῖν, καὶ προσευχῆ προσήξατο τοῦ μὴ βρέξαι, καὶ οὐκ ἔβρεξεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐνιαυτοὺς τρεῖς καὶ μῆνας ἕξ. <sup>18</sup> καὶ πάλιν προσήξατο, καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ὑετὸν ἔδωκεν καὶ ἡ γῆ ἐβλάστησεν τὸν καρπὸν αὐτῆς.
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Now James gives us an example of a righteous person who had powerful and effective prayer—Elijah. James tells us that Elijah was simply a representative human being (ὁμοιοπαθῆς ἡμῖν), no holier than you or me. James makes it clear that we have the same ability to pray as Elijah.

The story he is referring to can be found in 1 Kgs 17-18. After a three-year drought (1 Kgs 18:1), Elijah predicted it would rain (18:41) and it did (18:45). Although it is not obvious that Elijah prays, it is implied (18:42).

The point James is making is that just as Elijah's prayer resulted in refreshing or healing of the earth, so the prayer of a righteous person can result in the refreshing or healing of a Christian afflicted by sickness.

**C. End (vv. 19-20)**

Finally, James ends the letter rather abruptly with verses 19-20.

<p><sup>19</sup> My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, <sup>20</sup> you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.</p>	<p><sup>19</sup> Ἀδελφοί μου, εἴαν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν, <sup>20</sup> γινωσκέτω ὅτι ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἀμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου καὶ καλύψει πλῆθος ἀμαρτιῶν.</p>
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The end of the letter is short—it's a single sentence—but James marshals at least three significant theological points.

First, Christians have the responsibility to care for other believers who have wandered (or been led astray) from the truth. For James, "truth" (ἀλήθεια) is not so much something to believe, but something to practice. He is not concerned with doctrinal correctness or orthodoxy, but the proper "way of living," or orthopraxy.

Based on what James has said in the letter, wandering from the truth or sin would include:

- misuse of the tongue,
- jealousy,
- desire for social status at the expense of other believers,
- desire for wealth by exploiting other believers,
- contentiousness,
- false teaching concerning faith and works

Second, the penalty for sin, or wandering from the truth, is death of the soul (ψυχή). Here the "death" may refer to an experience here-and-now and not some future reality.

**Matthew 10:28** Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (NRSV)

Third, whoever helps a person return to the "way of righteousness" "covers" a multitude of sins. James thinks that if someone in the congregation helps a brother or sister return to the "way of truth," then that "covers" (καλύπτω) much sin, probably an allusion to the Day of atonement when the High Priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat (Lev 16:13) in the Holy of Holies to cover or atone for the sins of Israel. So the phrase, "cover a multitude of sins," means "forgive a multitude of sins."

**D. Reflections**

To recap, James has concluded his letter and suggested the following things for our community:

1. We should pray and praise no matter what circumstances we are in, we need to direct our attention toward God.
2. We should pray for and anoint those who are sick or weak, knowing that God is cares for them. God will heal them and raise them up; if not in this life, then in the future eschaton.
3. We should confess or admit our shortcomings to each other, which has a healing effect on individuals and the entire community.
4. Our lifestyle or manner of conduct matters. We should walk in the way of righteousness. If someone wanders from that path, we should gentle and humbly try to get him or her to return to the path.