

JAMES 5:13-20 | WAITING PATIENTLY FOR THE KINGDOM, PART 2

VERSE 13 –

While waiting for the Kingdom, there would be times of being **afflicted** and times of being **merry**. James gives simple instructions for each time.

VERSE 14

Those who are sick are to **call for the elders of the church**. We must remember that our premise is that **the church** as we know it (the body of Christ) had not yet begun at the time of the writing of the Epistle. Do not mistake the word **church** (ἐκκλησία [ecclesia]) to be exclusive to the body of Christ, for it is not (see Acts 7:38). The “church of believing Jews” had Peter as its chief Apostle and had local congregations (as in Damascus, Antioch, etc.). At this point in history, the group was the **sect of the Nazarenes** (Acts 24:5), also known as *the way* (Acts 9:2).

The **elders** could be, literally, the “older people,” but more likely the leadership of the church.

They are to **pray over him** and to be **anointing him with oil**, both done **in the name of the Lord**.

There are two words for *anoint* in Greek, one being for setting aside a person, place, or thing for holy use, and the other being “the mundane and common word.”¹The word used here is the “mundane” word. However, it is this word that is used in relation to healing in Mark 6:13. Much has been made to try to make this word medicinal rather than supernatural, but I am not convinced such an argument is accurate. The other Greek word is only used of an anointing that comes from God, and this anointing comes from man. For χρίω [chrio] (from which the word *Christ* comes), see Luke 4:18, John 9:6, 9:11, Acts 4:27, 10:38, 2 Corinthians 1:21, Hebrews 1:9, and 1 John 2:20,27, and Revelation 3:18). Every one of these uses is an anointing from above. To argue that one Greek word is “mundane” and thus this verse is not calling for a supernatural work does not seem supported by the evidence.

VERSE 15 –

James promises that **the prayer of faith shall save the sick**. In context, it is difficult to argue that this prayer is any other than that prayed by the elders in verse 14. The man will be *saved*, and **the Lord shall raise him up**. Here we must say that, *if the plain sense makes common sense, then we shall make no other sense!* Absolutely *any* normal reading of these words would bring one to the conclusion that the man was made well, and the healing came as a result of prayer and anointing.

¹ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995).

But in the age of grace, this has not been our experience. We know of so many who are sick, have been anointed and prayed over, and yet were not healed. Because of this, we go to great lengths to get these words not to say what they plainly say. Many a Baptist preacher could win a gold medal in *hermeneutical gymnastics*, should there be such a contest!

One of the methods of getting away from the plain sense is to try to make two different sick men in verses 14 and 15. Verse 14 is a physically sick man, while verse 15 is a spiritually sick man. Sometimes the argument is made that, since the Greek words translated **sick** in verse 14 and 15 are different words, it must be a different man. As with anointing, there is really no evidence that the different words refer to a different context. If they do, the book of James was written in a most frivolous manner.

In addition to healing, any sins **shall be forgiven him**. How, in any stretch of the imagination, can the prayers of elders from a church in our dispensation provide forgiveness? The answer is, *they cannot!* But this scenario *is not in our dispensation*. Rather, it is in the dispensation in which there was an *apostolic power of healing*, and this is made clear in John 20:21. Should we be surprised to find James 5:15 confirming that which was promised in John 20:21? Of course not. The reason that James 5:15 surprises us is because we are putting it in the spiritual context of Paul's mystery when it belongs to the apostolic, pre-Pauline ministry.

A COMMENT ON THE COMMENTARIES OF VERSES 14-15

The commentaries on verses 14-15 are shameful. Let's consider a few examples.

The New American Commentary (a Southern Baptist commentary) says that the elders should "draw very close" to the sick person. It even suggests that the Elders consider "the act of each elder prostrating himself over the sick person," giving the example of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:21-22. The author continues, with the instruction that, "the elders should pray as those who receive "more grace" from God," referring to James 4:6. Then, with baseless gall, he teaches that, "Praying as a group in such close proximity to the sick person intensifies and makes efficacious their faith for the healing."² However, the commentary backs off the efficacy of the prayer for healing (as they all must), concluding that, "Of course, not every believer receives the healing requested, and not every believer is healed in the same way as another. But all healing stimulates hope in the God who will one day remove all causes of sickness and death."³

The evangelical *New Testament* Commentary says that "Physical ailments are often related to a guilty conscience." Because of this, it is the confession of sins (in v. 16) that brings the healing.⁴

² Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 232.

³ Ibid. Pg. 236.

⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of James and the Epistles of John*, vol. 14, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 177.

A Calvinist commentary deals with these verses by saying, in effect, *ignore what this says because God will do what God wants to do*. Here are the words of Roger Ellsworth:

The promise seems to be a blanket guarantee that healing will be granted each time the process is followed. The problem, of course, concerns those many times when the process has been followed, and there has been no healing. When such instances occur, the usual explanation is that we have failed to have faith. We assume that faith is ours to work up and that we should be able to do so at any moment. If healing does not come, it is our fault. We haven't worked up the faith. But the Bible says faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). When it is his will to heal, the Lord grants the persuasion that he will grant the healing and enables the elders to pray 'the prayer of faith'. Kent Hughes explains: '... the prayer of faith is not something we can manufacture by saying "I believe, I believe, I believe, I really believe, I truly believe, I double believe!" It is a gift from God' (italics are his). Hughes then shares these words from John Blanchard: 'The "prayer offered in faith" is circular in shape; it begins and ends in heaven, in the sovereign will of God.' It comes down to this: the sick person is to call for the elders, the elders are to anoint and pray, and God will do as he pleases.⁵

It baffles me how a person can claim to trust the Word of God yet be dismissive of its instructions under the guise of God's sovereignty.

Finally, the dispensationally oriented *Bible Knowledge Commentary* fails to dispensationally remove these verses from our experience, and refuses to take a literal reading of the text, spiritualizing the words, as follows:

James was not referring to the bedfast, the diseased, or the ill. Instead he wrote to those who had grown weary, who had become weak both morally and spiritually in the midst of suffering. These are the ones who should call for the help of the elders of the church. The early church leaders were instructed (1 Thes. 5:14) to "encourage the timid" and "help the weak" (asthenōn). James said that the elders should pray over him and anoint him with oil. It is significant that the word "anoint" is aleipsantes ("rub with oil") not chriō ("ceremonially anoint"). The former is the "mundane" word and the latter is "the sacred and religious word" (Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, ninth ed. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950, pp. 136–37). "Therefore James is not suggesting a ceremonial or ritual anointing as a means of divine healing; instead, he is referring to the common practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor, refreshment, and grooming" (Daniel R. Hayden, "Calling the Elders to Pray," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138. July/September 1981: 264). The woman "poured" (aleiphō) perfume on Jesus' feet (Luke 7:38). A host "put oil" (aleiphō) on the head of his guest (Luke 7:46). A person who is fasting should not be sad and ungroomed, but should "put oil" (aleiphō) on his head, and wash his face (Matt. 6:17). Thus James' point is that the "weak" (asthenei) and "weary"

⁵ Roger Ellsworth, *Opening up James*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2009), 161–162.

(kamnonta) would be refreshed, encouraged, and uplifted by the elders who rubbed oil on the despondents' heads and prayed for them. For the fallen, discouraged, distressed weary believer, restoration is assured and the elders' prayer offered in faith will make the sick person (lit., "weary one") well (i.e., will restore him from discouragement and spiritual defeat), and the Lord will raise him up. That the restoration is spiritual, not physical, is further clarified by the assurance, if he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Many physically ill Christians have called on elders to pray for them and to anoint them with oil, but a sizable percentage of them have remained sick. This fact suggests that the passage may have been mistakenly understood as physical restoration rather than spiritual restoration.⁶

All of these commentaries make the same mistake: they fail to rightly divide! Taking these verses as "to the church," they must apply them to the church. To do so they must be charismatic, or spiritualize the verses and downgrade the plain meaning, doing a disservice to language itself. How much better to learn *right division* and take the words *literally* by taking them *in context to the stated recipients* (James 1:1).

THE CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION OF VERSES 14-15

We would be remiss if we failed to mention that these verses are used to justify the so-called *Last Rites* of the Catholic Church, also known as the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. To their credit, they take the passage much more literally than the evangelicals, claiming that either healing or (ultimately) resurrection will occur as a result of the prayer of the priest. However, they (like virtually all Christendom) apply James to the body of Christ. In doing so, they are on a fool's errand to interpret the passage.

⁶ J. Ronald Blue, "James," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 834–835.