

February 2005—Questions and Answers
Should We Anoint People With Oil?
James 5:14

Franklin Church of Christ Edwin Crozier February 13, 2005 PM Worship

Introduction:

One of the great aspects of Christianity is God's permission to us to grow. Part of that growth is restudying issues and reanswering questions that you may have thought you put to bed years ago. Sometimes you will find that the answers you have accepted in the past don't always fit and through study the picture becomes clearer. That is what has happened with me regarding the question we will answer in tonight's lesson. Based on **James 5:14**, some ask, "Should we anoint people with oil today?" For years I read this passage in a particular light. Then through further study, I believe I have gained a greater understanding, which I would like to share with you. As with all of the Question and Answer sermons (and all sermons in general), I recognize I could be mistaken. If you think I have missed something or misunderstood something, feel free to let me know. Let's get together and study to help one another grow.

Discussion:

- I. Why don't we anoint people with oil? My answer years ago and why it is not my answer today.
 - A. **James 5:14** talks about one of two ways to heal physical illness: miraculously or medicinally.
 1. In **Mark 6:13**, the disciples miraculously healed the sick, anointing them with oil. If James is talking about this, he was regulating a practice restricted to the time when God distributed miraculous gifts. We do not anoint people with oil because we do not have these gifts.
 2. In **Luke 10:34**, we read of the Good Samaritan pouring oil into the wounds of the beaten Jew. Anointing a sick person with oil was a medicinal treatment during those primitive times. Since our modern medicine has advanced past this primitive anointing with oil, our elders would fulfill this passage, not by anointing our sick brethren with oil, but by seeing to it that our sick brethren are able to receive the medical care they need.
 - B. But we are not discussing this question years ago. And my struggles with these views have become too great to allow me to hold on to them and be comfortable with myself.
 1. I struggled with the miraculous view because it supposes that elders in every church had miraculous gifts of healing. However, **I Corinthians 12:7-11** gives no indication that the miraculous gift of healing was given to all elders. Since miraculous gifts were granted by the laying on of the apostles' hands, how would those elders appointed by Titus (**Titus 1:5**) have this gift? Therefore, I leaned toward the medicinal view. However ...
 2. I struggled with the medicinal view because of **vs. 15**. That passage says that the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him. It does not say the Lord might. It does not say if the Lord wills. It does not say only the Lord can. Further the example of Elijah's prayer in **vss. 17-18** heightens this idea of consistent success. Yet we know that sick people die, even when they and others have prayed. That is the world in which we live. Considering this, I leaned toward the miraculous view. But my struggle with that view resurfaced and I started an endless circle between one view and another. Additionally ...
 3. I struggled with the view that it is talking about overcoming physical sickness at all, because it does not line up with other Bible texts that mention the sick. Why did Paul tell Timothy to drink a little wine for his stomach's sake and his frequent illnesses, when the better advice was to call the elders to pray and anoint him with oil (**I Timothy 5:23**)? Why was Trophimus left sick at Miletus, if he could call for the elders to pray for him, anointing him with oil and he would be healed (**II Timothy 4:20**)? Why was Paul the least bit concerned about Epaphroditus, if all he needed was to obey **James 5:14 (Philippians 2:25-30)**? So now I lean toward a completely different view.
- II. I believe **James 5:14** is about spiritual weakness not physical illness. Note the following reasons.
 - A. The term translated "sick" is "astheneo," which means to be weak, feeble or lacking strength. While it is used in the New Testament to refer to the enfeebled condition of physical sickness, it is equally used to describe spiritual weakness (**Romans 4:19; 14:21; II Corinthians 11:29; et. al.**) How would we view the passage if it asked, "Is any among you weak?"

- B. If James is referring to spiritual weakness, the passage is more consistent with **vs. 16** which clearly deals with spiritual sickness. The reader does not have to search for some shift to make sense of the verses, but rather they complement each other.
- C. If the person is not healed, the obvious fear that goes along with being sick is that he will die. James wants his readers to avoid death. But the death about which he has been concerned has been spiritual death (**James 1:14-15; 5:20**). It is natural to believe that this illness is spiritual.
- D. The concept of spiritual weakness fits better in the greater context of the book. Note how the book begins, "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: My brethren count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (**James 1:1-2**). **James** is written to people facing obstacles, hardships, difficulties and oppression. This is James' advice for responding to that. Consistent with the theme, **James 5:1-12** is clearly about responding to difficulties. Then, beginning in **James 5:13**, he asks three questions. The first two clearly follow in this same vein. "Is anyone among you suffering?" Of course they were. What should they do if they are suffering? They should pray (**Philippians 4:6; I Peter 5:7**). "Is anyone among you cheerful?" How could they be cheerful in this state? They were cheerful because they had followed James' advice at the beginning of the book to "count it all joy" (**1:2**). What were these cheerful ones to do? They were to be like Paul and Silas in **Acts 16:25** and sing psalms to God. The third question does not shift to talk about something completely different. Rather, it continues to ask about responding to hardship and trials. Not all of the brethren would pray when they were suffering and become cheerful. Some of them would be challenged, becoming discouraged and weak. Naturally, James wanted to tell these people how to overcome spiritual weakness and discouragement. Physical illness was really a slight matter compared to the real need of helping those who were slipping spiritually, which was the whole point of the book.
- E. When you look at this book as a unified whole, you begin to see that James makes parallel statements at the beginning and end of this letter. Praying for God to increase spiritual strength maintains the parallelism. Note the following parallel passages:
 1. **James 1:2** says to count it all joy. **James 5:13** asks if anyone is cheerful.
 2. **James 1:2-3** speaks of trials and patience. **James 5:10** talks about suffering and patience.
 3. **James 1:11** talks about judgment on the rich. So does **James 5:1-3**.
 4. **James 1:12** speaks of the blessedness of endurance. So does **James 5:11**.
 5. **James 1:12** tells of God's rewards on those who endure. So does **James 5:11**.
 6. **James 1:13** says not to blame sin on God. Instead, **James 5:16** says to confess it.
 7. **James 1:14-15** tells us sin causes death. **James 5:19-20** tells how to overcome them both.
 8. **James 1:26** tells us to bridle our tongues. **James 5:9, 12** gives examples of this.
 9. **James 1:5-6** encourages those who lack wisdom to pray a prayer of faith to God. Just so **James 5:14-15** tells those who lack strength to pray a prayer of faith to God.
- F. If James is speaking of spiritual weakness, then the struggles I mentioned earlier are removed. Any elder, despite his spiritual gifts or lack thereof, can pray for someone to be healed spiritually. Additionally, when the weak Christian turns to his brethren for help and prays a prayer of faith, the Lord will strengthen him 100% of the time. Finally, the advice in this verse to overcome spiritual illness is completely consistent with every other Bible passage.
- G. Finally, this view makes more sense out of Elijah's example found in **James 5:17-18**. Elijah was facing hardships and trials during the reign of wicked king Ahab. He prayed to God for help in this time and God granted his request, stopping the rain but also providing Elijah with the strength and sustenance he needed to make it through the difficult times.

III. But what about anointing with oil? How does that fit in this picture?

- A. The anointing with oil is part of the picture that James presents. Just as he uses the physical concepts of sickness, death, healing and raising up to describe a spiritual state, he uses the picture of anointing with oil to describe the spiritual medicine that elders will supply as they strengthen those who have called them for help.
- B. Along with the numerous allusions in this book to the Old Testament, I believe we find one in this passage as it talks about being healed spiritually and covering a multitude of sin. In **Jeremiah 30:12-17**, God speaks to Judah. Because of her multitude of sins, she had no one to apply healing medicines or to help strengthen her. However, God would heal her. This is a

picture of a spiritual problem and the spiritual prescription, but it is described as a physical illness, with physical medicine. Just so, James provides a similar picture for the weak Christian. While we are like Israel in that we need God to raise us up and heal us of our infirmities, making us whole, strengthening us, we are unlike Israel in that we have friends who can help us. We have brethren who can apply healing medicines and anoint us with oil, strengthening our souls.

- C. The command, therefore, is not to pour oil on anyone's head, an action that would provide no benefit or spiritual strength. The point is that when a brother is weak, he should call on the elders and they should strengthen him. To make this passage about pouring oil on someone's head is to miss the point. That view reduces this passage down to something pointless and robs this passage of its strength. The point of this passage gives great help in time of distress and discouragement. Pouring oil on someone's head does not.

IV. What do we do if we are spiritually weak?

- A. We have demonstrated that James is not talking about physical sickness but spiritual weakness. We have demonstrated that James is not prescribing pouring oil on someone's head but rather figuratively demonstrating that the elders' job is to strengthen the weak, applying the spiritual medicines needed. If we stop here, then our look at this passage was really pointless. No doubt, we understand it better. Yes, we can defend against those who would misuse this passage. But we have nothing that we can really take with us to help us face the hardships, trials and difficulties. So, what are the lessons we learn from this passage to help strengthen the weak?
- B. When you see yourself slipping into weakness and discouragement, do not think it will fix itself. Do not wait for someone else to notice. Do not isolate yourself from your brethren. Call the elders to pray with you immediately (**vs. 14**). Call them to strengthen you and provide a spiritual regimen that will help you count it all joy. Notice the responsibility here; you are to do the calling.
- C. Your prayers with the elders must be ones of faith (**vs. 15**). That is, they must follow the teaching James gave in **James 2:14-17**. Your prayer does no good if you are not willing to follow it up with action.
- D. Of course, if your spiritual weakness and discouragement has led you to sin, then you need to seek forgiveness as you pray (**vs. 15**). God will forgive if you ask Him (**I John 1:9**).
- E. While the first admonition was to call for the elders, the exhortation to strengthen the weak is actually given to all of us. If we are going to overcome weakness, we need to confess our transgressions to one another (**vs. 16**). We should not hide them from one another, all that does is breed more weakness and lead to more sin. This is not about "coming forward," but about us working with one another individually. The fact is, until we open up to one another about our struggles, weaknesses and sins, we will always fall in the face of them, because we will be facing them alone. As soon as we allow our brethren to start applying the healing medicines, God will heal our wounds and raise us up, strengthening us.
- F. When you pray with the weak, your prayer must also be one of faith (**vs. 15**). That is, to paraphrase James in **2:15-16**, "If a brother or sister is weak and discouraged and one of you prays for them, 'God of peace, provide them with strength and encouragement,'" but you do not give them the things which are needed for their spirit, what does it profit?" Too often we say a prayer and then tell our brethren to call us when they need us. Then we go on our way leaving them still spiritually beaten, battered, wounded and weak. Don't just say a prayer, do something!
- G. Finally, be on the lookout for your brethren. We need to see if they are being drawn away by sin. If they are, then we must turn them back (**vss. 19-20**). Do not allow them to continue in sin, to do so would be like holding the cure for cancer but never giving it to your friend who is dying with it. When you turn them back, you have anointed them with oil and saved them from death.

Conclusion:

As **Hebrews 12:12-13** says, we must strengthen the weak and help the lame to heal. Do you have weakness and sin in your life? Then do something about it today. Call the elders to let them know about the problem and get their prayers and help. Talk to your brethren, confessing your sins to one another and praying with one another. Pray to God for strength and forgiveness. Do not follow the path of discouragement, weakness, sin and death. Rather, resist the devil, cleanse your hearts, purify your minds, humble yourselves before God and your brethren.