



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Sickness and the Prayer of Faith

James 5:14-15

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Introduction

1. People like his letter because of how James connects with some of the most real of life's issues. Nowhere is this more pronounced than when James talks about sickness and prayer.
2. That gets our attention because we know about sickness. We've been sick. We've seen loved ones fight sickness. We've cried over little children battling horrible diseases – and been both tearful and angry when people who've touched our hearts lost their battle.
3. It's not just the physical discomfort. Sickness confronts us with our mortality and sense of self. It reminds us there really are things we cannot conquer, even in our advanced world.
4. So, we are glad to hear that "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up" (Jas. 5:15). But, then reality — and questions — confront us again.
 - a. What exactly did he mean? Why don't some for whom we pray get well? Was it bad prayer? Or bad faith? Or – and this is worse for believers – did James get it wrong?
 - b. What does sin have to do with sickness? When I'm ill, is that because of something I did? But, what about those who are worse than I am? What about the children?
 - c. And what did James mean when he said to call for the elders who are to anoint the sick person while they are praying over him or her?
5. We will look at the last question later. Here, we will focus on James's main idea in vv. 14-15 and try to discern what assurance we can derive from it.

Body

- I. Sickness as a Trial.
 - A. In his article, "The Theology of Prayer in James," Richard Wells observes that, "Illness calls for prayer only because it tests the soul."¹
 - B. Wells reminds us of James's larger point, that prayer is also part of the life of unwavering faith that seeks God's will, lives his way, and endures no matter what.
 1. Trials set the tone for the book (1:2-4).

¹ C. Richard Wells, "The Theology of Prayer in James," *Criswell Theological Review* 1.1 (1986): 106. As it appears at http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NTeSources/NTArticles/CTR-NT/Wells-PrayerInJames-CTR1.htm. Accessed January 9, 2012.

2. Obedient faith that never wavers in following God's way is the theme of the book (1:5-8; 2:14-26; 5:1-11; etc.).
3. We would expect James to stay focused on those larger concerns through the end of his letter, including what he says about sickness and prayer.

II. Sickness in An Eternal Context.

- A. James's vocabulary in vv. 14-15 leads us to ask whether he speaks of physical or spiritual illness and restoration.²
 1. Comparing the ESV and NASB in v. 15 illustrates.
 - a) ESV: "And the prayer of faith will *save* the one who is sick, . . ."
 - b) NASB: ". . . the prayer offered in faith will *restore* the one who is sick, . . ."
 - c) The word translated save/restore is σώζω (*sōzō*), usually "save", but also "heal" (see Matt. 9:21-22).
 - d) Which did James mean? Did he mean both? Is it significant that he used σώζω four other times, always in the sense of spiritual salvation (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20)?³
 2. The same question can be raised about other key words here.
 - a) "Sick" (ἀσθενέω, *astheneō*, v. 14) is literally "weakness." It's usually used of physical illness, but sometimes of spiritual weakness (cf. Rom. 4:19; 8:3; 14:1-2).
 - b) "Sick" (κάμνω, *kamnō*, v. 15) is used elsewhere in the NT only in Heb. 12:3 for discouragement; but the word has the meaning of being sick.
 - c) "Raise up" (ἐγείρω, *egeirō*, v. 15) certainly fits the idea of someone getting up from his sick bed (e.g., Mark 1:31; 2:9, 11-12), but also fits the idea of resurrection (e.g., Mark 5:41; 6:14, 16).
 - d) "Heal" (ἰάομαι, *iaomai*, v. 16) is also used in two ways (cf. Matt. 8:8, 13; 13:15).
- B. A closer look at *who* is commanded to act in vv. 14-15 also suggests the possibility of a broader idea, pointing to the spiritual community.
 1. The person who is "sick" (ἀσθενέω) is commanded to call for the *elders*; they are the ones who are commanded to pray.
 2. Therefore, it is the *elders'* prayer that saves/restores and raises up the sick.
 3. It is also significant that they are "the elders of the church" (ἐκκλησία, *ekklesia* — only here in James) and that the confessions and prayers in v. 16 are mutual (plural pronouns and verbs).
- C. Notice, too, that James weaves in the ideas of sin, confession, and forgiveness.
 1. The reference to sins and forgiveness in 15b reflects the typical Jewish way of connecting sin and sickness (cf. John 9:1-3), but the connection is not absolute.
 - a) James does not say all sickness is from sin, but that *if* (κἄν, *kan*) some does result from sin, the same "prayer of faith" will result in forgiveness.

² For thorough discussion of the different views about this question, see Wells, *op. cit.*, 102ff. See also the relevant sections in the commentaries by Blomberg and Kamell (Zondervan Exegetical), McCartney (Baker Exegetical), and Moo (Pillar).

³ Bearing in mind that context is always the final determinant of a word's meaning, we should also remember that most of James's first addressees would have *heard* his letter rather than read it. Therefore, we should ask whether, after hearing how he used it in the spiritual sense in what we know as 1:21; 2:14; and 4:12, they would have heard σώζω differently, that is, in the physical sense, when they heard it again in 5:15.

- b) “Therefore” (οὖν, *oun*) at the beginning of v. 16’s focus on mutual confession and prayer indicates that vv. 14-15 have been pointing to that concern.
- D. The sense we get from James is that sickness is a potential source of spiritual crisis and that the greater concern is for one’s loyalty in faith through this trial too.
 - 1. His *primary* point of reference in vv. 14-15 is sickness.
 - 2. His use of terms that can have two meanings and references to the spiritual community with concerns that go beyond the immediate trial of sickness show that he continues to have in mind the unwavering commitment of true faith.

III. “The Prayer of Faith” and Questions About Sickness.

- A. “The prayer of faith” is the key phrase (ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως, *hē euchē tēs pisteōs*) in vv. 14-15, more the issue than sickness.
 - 1. Grammatically, it can have different senses.⁴
 - a) It can refer to “a prayer characterized by faith, a faithful prayer.”
 - b) It can refer to “a prayer generated by belief on the part of the ones praying that God answers prayer,” i.e., the idea that prayer works.
 - c) It can mean “prayer that meets with faith in the one being prayed for.”
 - 2. In light of James as a whole, all three ideas can be included with the result that “the community’s petition to God for healing is characterized by trust that God is the one who sovereignly acts on behalf of his people” (McCartney, 255).
 - a) Because the ultimate trust is in God, the prayer is faithful.
 - b) Because of the relationship with God, the community knows prayer works.
 - c) The relationship of complete trust is the very definition of the faith exhibited by the ones praying.
- B. That points us to a second important phrase, “in the name of the Lord” (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου, *en tō onomati tou kuriou*).
 - 1. This is not the “magical incantation” that makes the wish happen, but the authority that makes the urgent wish of the prayer viable.
 - 2. It points us back to the faith that “connects a person to God and characterizes a relationship with God” (McCartney, 255).
 - 3. It is the relationship of trust that gives a context for the most urgent question about prayer for the sick.
- C. Does James *guarantee* that “the prayer of faith” will always lead to physical healing?
 - 1. If that was the case, many saints would have lived longer than they did.
 - 2. To set forth a guarantee of healing would put James at odds with texts like 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 where Paul is clear that God’s answer to his prayer for relief from his “thorn in the flesh” was to refuse to remove it.
 - 3. That said, *can* “the prayer of faith” lead to physical healing?
 - a) Yes, Jesus shows us as much (cf. Mark 2:1-12; etc.).
 - b) We would hasten to add, however, that even if it does, we are not then immune (cf. Hezekiah’s case in Isa. 38).

⁴ Dan McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 255.

4. But, what we are called to is not a guarantee that God will always cure us in the short term, but rather that he will take care of us with ultimate restoration, regardless of the trials we endure.

Conclusion

1. Jürgen Moltmann once said, “Faith means wanting and willing something with all our hearts.”⁵ That is true if we understand that, biblically, faith entails a relationship where what we want and will with all our hearts is what God wants. “Your will be done” (cf. Matt. 6:10, in light of 7:7-11) is the key to all faith – and therefore to all prayer.⁶
2. So, if you’re sick, call for the elders – and the community they lead – to pray over you. Know that God can, and sometimes does, heal. But trust him even if he doesn’t, knowing that he will always give the ultimate healing and restoration we need.

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⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, Trans. M. Kohl, 139, in Richard Bauckham, *James*, 207.

⁶ Therefore, prayer, even prayer for the sick, is not “a powerful means which qualified people can use to achieve things,” but is rather evidence of a relationship in which our petitions are part of lives lived in total “reliance on God’s power” (Bauckham, 207).