



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Elders Anointing While They Pray

James 5:14

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Introduction

1. Once, while visiting an area congregation which did not have elders, I was approached by a brother whose wife was seriously ill. He asked if the elders where I served visited the sick to pray over and anoint them. He had James 5:14 in mind, about which we wonder:
 - a. What was the nature and significance of the anointing?
 - b. Would James have expected that the practice continue to the present?
 - c. Was the brother justified in wanting to apply it to his case?¹
2. As we continue studying the text that Dan McCartney correctly said “is remarkably full of difficult problems” (McCartney, 251), we want to discern James’s meaning and how it applies.²

Body

I. The Command Given to Elders Here.

- A. We must not lose sight of the fact that the sick person is commanded to call for the elders who are commanded to “pray over” (προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ *proseuxasthōsan ep’*) him.³ The anointing (a participle) is to accompany the praying.
- B. They are “spiritual leaders . . . recognized for their maturity in the faith” (Moo, 238).

II. Summary of Interpretations Offered to Explain James.⁴

¹ Lest we become overly concerned with the specific questions about anointing, we should note that James’s main idea is clear. In the larger context of his letter, the sickness/weakness in view is another of the trials to which he has referred throughout (cf. 1:2-4; etc.). All trials are to be met by faith, defined by James as trust based on a knowledge about God that leads one to be unreservedly steadfast in obedience regardless of the trials faced (cf. 2:14-26). Thus, whatever the details, James’s concern is for spiritual faithfulness and growth. Even if we assume a concern only for physical illness in this text, that is the main point we should keep in mind as we study this passage.

² I am following the summary of the issues surrounding this text by Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 237-242. For other good treatments, see the bibliography at the end of the outline.

³ “Since the elders are summoned to the sick person, we may assume that the sickness is serious enough to restrict the mobility of the sufferer. The same conclusion might be suggested by James’s use of the preposition *over* after the verb *pray*. Only here in biblical Greek does this combination occur, and it might picture the elders standing over the sick person. However, it might also be shorthand for laying hands on the person during the praying (see Matt. 19:13)” (Moo, 238).

⁴ I am using Moo’s breakdown of these interpretations. McCartney, 253-254, enumerates ten possible meanings, but notes that several can be combined. Thus, he covers the same basic issues as Moo.

A. A practical purpose.

1. Medicinal: oil was widely used in the ancient world as a skin conditioner and as a medicine (cf. Luke 10:34).
 - a) It was said to be useful “in curing everything from toothache to paralysis” (see the second-century physician Galen) (Moo, 239).
 - b) If James intends this, the elders were to go to “the bedside of the sick armed with both spiritual and natural resources” (Moo, 239).
2. Pastoral: suggesting that James intended anointing “as an outward, physical expression of concern and as a means to stimulate the faith of the sick person,” a “prop” of sorts (Moo, 239).

B. A religious purpose.

1. Sacramental.

- a) “On the basis of this text the early Greek church practiced what they called the *Euchelaion* (a combination of the words *euchē*, “prayer,” and *elaion*, “oil,” both used in this text), which had the purpose of strengthening the body and soul of the sick” (Moo, 239).
 - (1) The Western church continued the practice for centuries, also using oil for anointing on other occasions. Later, “the Roman church gave to the priest the exclusive right to perform this ceremony and developed the sacrament of extreme unction (in A. D. 852). This sacrament has the purpose of removing any remnant of sin and of strengthening the soul of the dying (healing is considered only a possibility)” (Moo, 239).⁵
 - (2) The obvious problem with this view is that James “recommends anointing for any illness and associates it with healing rather than the preparation for death” (Moo, 239).⁶
- b) That said, James may have intended the oil to be a means of “conveying” divine power (e.g., the Lord’s supper), “a physical element through which he works the grace of healing in the sick believer” (Moo, 240).
2. Symbolic, in line with the frequent use of it to consecrate people or things for God (cf. Ex. 28:41; Luke 4:18 [= Isa. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [= Ps. 45:7]). If this is in James’s mind, he would be telling the elders to anoint the person to show he is set apart in prayer for God’s special attention.

III. Discerning James’s Meaning.

A. James’s choice of words for “anoint” may shed some light on his intent.

1. The word he used is not *χρίω* (*chriō* - see Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9), but *ἀλείφω* (*aleiphō* - see Matt. 6:17; Mark 6:13; 16:1; Luke 7:38, 46; John 11:2; 12:3).
 - a) The word *ἀλείφω* is used 20x in the LXX, seven of which refer to rubbing whitewash on a wall (all in Ezekiel 13:10-15; 22:28).

⁵ Moo adds: “The Council of Trent (14.1) found this sacrament ‘insinuated’ in Mark 6:13 and ‘promulgated’ in Jas. 5:14. Since Vatican II, the rite has been called ‘the anointing of the sick.’”

⁶ McCartney also notes that this text was not associated with preparation for death until the Middle Ages and that James’s context is not concerned with “imminent death” (p. 254). He also references P J. Hartin and R. E. Brown as “Roman Catholic scholars [who] have difficulty supporting the sacrament of extreme unction by way of James 5” (p. 253, note 6).

- (1) Nine times, the word refers to rubbing oil on the face or body to beautify or cleanse (e.g., Ruth 4:3; 2 Sam. 12:20; Est. 2:12).
- (2) Four times, it has a ceremonial significance, three of which (in two verses) obviously denote the setting apart of the priests for service to God (Ex. 40:15; Num. 3:3; see also Gen. 31:13).⁷
- b) “Significantly, neither word is used with reference to medicinal purposes in the Septuagint” (Moo, 241).
 - (1) The word *χρίω* is used as in the LXX pattern throughout the NT, “always as a metaphor for consecration (Luke 4:18 [= Isa. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [= Ps. 45:7])” (Moo, 241).
 - (2) James’s word, *ἀλείφω*, is also usually used as in the LXX, “designating a cosmetic or hygienic anointing (Matt. 6:17; Mark 16:1; Luke 7:38, 46 [twice]; John 11:2; 12:3)” (Moo, 241).⁸
2. How does this help us understand James 5:14?
 - a) One could argue that *χρίω* would have served well if he intended only a symbolic significance, since it’s typically used that way.
 - b) On the other hand, *ἀλείφω* fits best if James wanted to refer to an actual physical act of anointing.
 - c) Keep in mind, however, that neither word has medicinal significance in Scripture (unless found in Mark 6:13 and James 5:14; but to assert that is to beg the question).⁹
- B. Moving closer to understanding James.
 1. The typical use of “anointing” (both *χρίω* and *ἀλείφω*) points strongly in the direction of a more symbolic meaning of a physical action.
 2. One reason for saying this is the weakness of the other views.
 - a) We have already noted the problems with the sacramental view, especially the extreme form that reserves anointing for imminent death and limits it to one person in the priestly office.¹⁰
 - b) The medicinal view also has several problems.
 - (1) Evidence is lacking that anointing with oil was used for *any* illness (Moo, 241).
 - (2) Why mention only one remedy when different maladies would be faced (Moo, 241)? Indeed, “oil is a treatment for wounds, not ‘sickness,’ . . .” (McCartney, 254).

⁷ Summarizing the LXX evidence, McCartney takes a somewhat different approach than Moo’s, noting that *ἀλείφω* “normally means ‘to rub,’ and only occasionally is used in the Greek OT to refer to consecration (Exod. 40:15; Num. 3:3).” However, he goes on to acknowledge that “there are, nevertheless, a number of possible meanings to this anointing” (McCartney, 253).

⁸ Moo adds, “It is possible, however, that the word has some symbolic overtones in the account of Jesus’ anointing (John 11:2; 12:3)” (Moo, 241).

⁹ Luke 10:34 uses “oil” (*ἐλαίον, elaion*), but “pouring,” a virtual synonym for anointing, translates *ἐπιχέω (epicheō)*, a different word from either of the words discussed above.

¹⁰ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell remind us “the call from the sick person is not to a priest (or any solitary church leader), but to the elders who represent the entire local Christian community” (*James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 242).

- (3) Why call the elders of the church if the purpose is solely medical? Surely, others would have already given medicine if that was the sole requirement (Moo, 241).¹¹
- (4) That the anointing was “in the name of the Lord” makes it “clear that something other than simply the application of medicinal unguent is in view” (McCartney, 254).¹²

C. It is best to see the anointing as a physical action with symbolic significance.

1. That fits the typical use of anointing in Scripture while also taking into account the physical action that seems to be more associated with ἀλείφω (*aleiphō*).
2. In anointing the sick person as they pray, the elders symbolize that the person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care.

IV. Some Additional Observations.

A. Remember, the emphasis is on praying; anointing is secondary to that.

B. The sick should call for the elders of the church to pray.

1. This is different from calling on “the priest” or the defacto priest/clergyman.
2. But, the text commands the sick to call for the elders, not for them to simply go to the sick.

C. What about the anointing today?

1. Moo takes issue with Calvin, Luther, and others who think that the anointing was to be limited to the apostolic age; if it’s more about setting apart a person for God’s attention and care, there’s no reason for such a restriction.
2. But, he also cautions that “the fact that anointing a sick person is mentioned only here in the NT epistles, and that many healings were accomplished without anointing, shows that the practice is not a necessary accompaniment to the prayer for healing” (Moo, 242).
3. This may be a case where the main thing is intended to be continued over time, but the specific manner of doing it can be different.
 - a) In other words, calling for the elders to pray – especially in cases where the sick person cannot get out and about – is still expected.
 - b) Whether or not one anoints with oil to do the setting apart is, I believe, a matter of judgment.

Conclusion

1. Was the brother who sought elders to pray over his wife biblically justified in doing so? I believe so. This is a practice that in many places needs to be restored.
2. But, not for the sake of form. The point – as the later example of Elijah will reinforce (5:17-18) – is to appreciate the power of petitionary prayer on the part of the church’s spiritual leaders.

¹¹ Moo cites Sirach 38:1-4 to show the great respect Jewish thought had for physicians: “Honor physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king. The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired. The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them” (NRSV).

¹² Moo, 241-242, adds an argument against the pastoral view: although it can fit within the consecration view, it doesn’t fit with “the prayer of faith” idea in James which seems to have more to do with the person praying or fervency of the prayer than with the idea that the anointing somehow conveys faith into the sick person.

And that point pushes us inevitably back to the question of whether we trust the God who hears those prayers above all else.¹³

3. 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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¹³ Richard Bauckham's comments on this point bear repeating: "Prayer has always been difficult, but the difficulty of prayer in the modern western world has its own specific profile. The fundamental reason why prayer became difficult in the modern period was humanity's modern self-image as those who, especially through technology, have gained control over the world. Rather like affluence, this assumed position of mastery over the world has deluded modern people into trusting their own capacity to achieve all human ends and has promoted a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency to which prayer is alien. Whereas petitionary prayer is recognition of the limits of human abilities, the modern age has encouraged the sense that all problems have human solutions and that all human desires may in the end be realizable by human means, especially through the unlimited potentialities of technology. While problems and desires with which human resources can deal are constantly being created by advertising, problems which have no solutions and desires which cannot be met are suppressed" (*James*, 207).