

Cure or Healing?

James 5:13-20

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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13Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17Elijah 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. 18Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. 19My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you 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.

Duane Beck, a retired Mennonite pastor, says that when he started his first pastorate right out of seminary, he preached repeatedly on the theme of discipleship. He discovered that the members of his congregation were committed Christians who had every intention of deepening their life of discipleship, but they didn't or couldn't for some reason.

As Duane got to know the people better, he began to realize that these people had blockages in their lives—unrelieved pain and suffering—which hindered their growth in discipleship.

- Some of the blockages came from losses: the loss of loved ones through death; but also, other kinds of losses, like losing a job, or a spouse through divorce.
- Some came from lost and dashed dreams: their own lives didn't turn out the way they expected; or the lives of their children were a great source of disappointment and pain to them.
- And then there were broken relationships: between members in the church or within nuclear or extended families.
- Plus, I suspect some individuals had experienced abuse of some sort.

It was in the context of discovering all this pain, suffering, and brokenness that Duane developed a ministry of healing and anointing with oil: a ministry not just directed toward healing illness and disease, although I don't think Duane ever intended to omit physical ailments; but also, a ministry of healing directed toward the healing of brokenness in peoples' lives.

Precedents: Renewal of the practice of anointing with oil

Duane, of course, was not alone. In the past number of decades, other churches and traditions have also recovered what was long a part of the church's ministry, the ministry of healing and use of anointing as prescribed by James in the text we had read this morning. If you walk into an Episcopal church today, for example, you are just as likely to see anointing for healing offered as if you went, instead, to a Pentecostal or a charismatic church. Mennonite pastors and congregations, in particular, have especially been influenced by the practice of anointing in the Church of the Brethren. I don't know that it ever died out completely in the COB, but especially in the past number of decades they have had an emphasis on renewing the practice of anointing with oil.

Jesus' healing ministry

We know that healing was one of the chief activities of Jesus, along with preaching the gospel and teaching his disciples. As such, healing was a sign that the kingdom of God was breaking in through Jesus' person and mission. However, Jesus did not heal every sick person in Palestine, and he refused to be set up as a "faith healer" or a miracle worker. (See Luke 9:11, however: he healed those who needed to be healed.)

Further, we know there is also a close relationship between salvation and healing. In fact, the words "to save" (*sozo*) or "savior" (*soter*) in Greek can also mean to heal or refers to a healer. **James 5:15 is variously translated "save the sick," "heal the sick," "restore to health," or "make the sick well." It is a form of *sozo* (to save/heal) which is used here.** Jesus ministered to the whole person, not just saving their souls, per say, but caring for their bodily and emotional needs as well. **One way of putting this is to say that what Jesus had to offer was holistic medicine.**

We also know that when Jesus sent his disciples out, two-by-two, he commanded them to cast out demons and to anoint the sick with oil and heal them (Mark 6:13). It is plausible, then, to think that what James was advocating here in James 5 was viewed by the early church as carrying on a practice which Jesus himself had instituted.

Two issues

(1) Relationship between sin and sickness—handle with care!

James points out that there is a relationship between sin and suffering or sickness. The confession of sin can lead to healing and wholeness. In this day and age, when we are discovering more and more the connection between the mind and the body, this shouldn't surprise us. Stress is known to contribute to cardiovascular disease.

Look closely: James implies that sin may be involved in disease; and when it is, confession and anointing can be healing. But it is not necessarily involved-- James 5:15: *The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and **anyone** who has committed sins will be forgiven.* Indeed, the RSV, REB, NAB, and NJB all add "if" here: *If anyone has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* (I don't know why the NRSV drops this conditional word.)

Jesus himself would caution us in looking at this relationship between sin and sickness. In raising up the paralytic man (Mark 2), Jesus said: "Son, your sins are forgiven. . . ." But when some of the authorities challenged his right to forgive sins, Jesus responded: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

But in healing the man who was blind since birth, he said (Jn. 9): "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

There *is* a relationship between sin and sickness, but it is not a simple, causative one. Not all sin leads to sickness, nor is all sickness the result of sin. **When dealing with this association between sin and sickness, we need to "handle with care."**

(2) A cure? Or healing?

Curing and healing are not necessarily the same thing. A cure rids one of a disease, healing makes a person whole.

There is a form of healing which includes a cure, but there is also a form of healing which goes beyond and perhaps excludes curing disease. Since we all die eventually, a cure merely buys us more time. Healing enhances the time we have left.

Theologian Margaret Kim Peterson says her husband, Hyung Goo Kim, had lived a very troubled life. On top of that, he got AIDS. This was at a time before there were treatments for people living with HIV. About nine months before he died he was anointed and prayed over by his church community. All the people who were important to him were there. He himself was skeptical before the anointing, partly because it reminded him of the excesses of his Pentecostal upbringing.

His anointing was a transformative experience. Peterson says he almost glowed. In the time he had before his death, he came to terms with both the life he had lived and his impending death. She says he ***“was more whole when he died than he had been an any other time in his life. It was not the sort of healing that we had hope or asked for. How could we have asked for it, when we couldn’t even imagine it? But it was real, more real that the shabby appearances that are so easy to mistake for reality....”*** **It was a healing that went beyond a cure.**

Our need for healing, especially in context of COVID, may never be greater given all the pent-up grief and pain. When people suggest we are living in the worst of all times, I’m inclined to think they don’t know much history; or they’ve forgotten the history they once knew. Still, the past year and a half, living through COVID, has been a really tough time. We need healing.

There are a variety of ways in which we can seek healing: physically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and relationally (both in our relationship with God and others). And it can be done for numerous occasions/reasons: to help deal with a loss; to prepare for major surgery; to give one strength to a person when they are going through a difficult experience; to heal personal and relational pain; to bring about reconciliation between persons; for physical healing or to aid in the process of healing; to prepare one’s self for dying when one has a terminal disease. I know of one woman who asked for anointing after she had a stroke, not to reverse the stroke, but so that she could live with grace through the consequences of her stroke.

Introduce anointing service

What are we doing when we engage in anointing? There is nothing magical about anointing: there's nothing special in the oil or in the persons who administer it. Rather, the oil symbolizes the blessings and mercy of God; and the prayers by the elders represent the intercessory prayers of the whole community

for the one seeking healing. Anointing is a focused way the community of faith shows its care for an individual who asks for it; and a way for that person to give him/her self to the loving, gracious care of a sovereign God. God is ultimately our healer; we are not the healers, although we can be agents of God's healing.

Prayer for healing and anointing service

Prayer of Preparation

God of numberless blessings, we ask for a special blessing in these moments. Bless us with a keen awareness of your presence. Be with us as we gather in the name and spirit of Christ, the great physician. Be with us to hear the thoughts expressed in words and the longings too deep for words. Be with us to calm anxiety, to forgive sin, to ease pain.

God of relentless love, you are always more willing to give than we are to receive. Open our hearts to receive you gifts of live. Amen. (*For All who Minister*, Brethren Press, 1993.)