



It's All Good  
James 5:13-18  
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## *"You Just Need More Faith!"*

The 9<sup>th</sup> Sermon in the series on Biblical Interpretation entitled,  
*The Most Misused & Misunderstood Verses of the Bible!*

I'm going to start off our time together by saying a quote for you. When I do, I want you to think of the first person that comes to your mind that you think might have said this quote. Ready? "*The greatest wealth is health.*" Now who do you think said that? For how many of you was the person you thought of a modern spiritual or new age teacher? Well, if you did that would've been a good guess but it was actually Virgil, the great Roman poet from the last century BC.

These quotes sound a lot like things spiritual leaders from today would say doesn't it? Not much appears to have changed throughout human history: it appears that the human race is on a quest to put all our stocks and bonds in our health. How much do you agree with this idea that our greatest wealth is health? My guess is that many of you think it sounds a bit ridiculous; but if you give me just a couple minutes I think I can prove to you that we all buy into this sentiment more than we want to admit.

This mentality has only been exponentially multiplied in our age. Diseases like tuberculosis which would have crippled Emerson can now be cured. Choices for health care have never been so varied. Organ transplants, respirators, cancer treatments and genetic mapping all give us the illusion that we can have total control over our health.

We can look at how much we spend on pursuing health: from 1960 to 2010, the percentage of GDP spent on health care more than tripled to nearly 18 percent. To put that in perspective, that is more than four times the amount dedicated to defense and three times the amount for education. Consumers spent an additional 100 billion dollars on fitness programs, anti-aging procedures and dietary programs and supplements. In 2012, we spent more than twice per person on health care than more economically developed countries including France, Germany and Japan.

You see, you and I live in a world that is bombarded by the pursuit of health. We live in a country where our options for health have never been greater; treatment options often look something like a buffet, and you and I are totally wrapped up in it. Most of us likely operate under something of an assumption that if something were to go wrong, modern medicine would have an answer for us. Long life is probably our expectation, especially for the young adults and youth. And it is these very assumptions which can not only give us rose-colored glasses on life, but also can distort our reading of key biblical texts.

Our passage today is one that is distorted and misread, in large part due to these kinds of assumptions. It is often used to teach that not only is your health a wonderful gift that God is just waiting to give you, but that if you only have enough faith you can reach out and take this gift for yourself. As we will see, this is a gross misunderstanding of the text, as the author James is actually teaching us about the kind of care and prayer that is to take place within the church.

So, three points this morning: **The Prescription, the Medicine, and the Cure**. As we go, in each point we'll look at the proper way to approach this text as well as common errors we have. I'll also be teasing out some application along the way.

### **The Prescription (vv. 13-14)**

This first point is an important one, but its one that is easy for us to miss. In verses 13 and 14, what we see is that James prescribes church membership as the means for care to be given in the church. In other words, church membership is an underlying assumption for James.

In verse 13 we find a contrast between two kinds of people. The first is the suffering person, the second is the cheerful person. The first is exhorted to pray, the second is exhorted to praise. But here's the thing. James isn't saying – either you pray when you're suffering, or you praise when things are going well. Rather, James is expecting that those who are cheerful are praising alongside of those who are praying in suffering within the church community. Both are happening simultaneously.

Why is that the case? Because each person needs the other. Think about it. What happens when you're in a season of blessing and prosperity, what's one of the first things to disappear from our lives? Prayer. It's the common pattern: often the more successful and blessed our circumstances are, the more our tendency is to forget our constant dependence on God. We praise him for the blessings, but do not pray and ask for his providence and blessing to continue.

You know, some psychologists will actually go so far as to say that if mental health is measured by a balanced perspective on reality, then perpetual happiness could actually be labeled as a problem. Why? Because our tendency is often to forget about the very real experiences of suffering in the world, our perspective on the world around us can almost become a delusion. We even begin to develop an expectation that blessing and prosperity from God will continue.

And what about during extended seasons of suffering and hardship? It's easy for us to begin with a feeling of dependence on God, but soon despair shadows our hearts and praise disappears from our lips. Our hearts harden, bitterness overtakes us. We forget that there is actually real hope for us in the midst of sorrow, that God does love his children and that he really does work all things for good – as Frank so aptly reminded us last week.

Which extreme do you tend to fall towards? Let me try to illustrate these two ends of the spectrum for you.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
But for all the king's horses and all the king's men,  
They couldn't put Humpty back together again.*

We can't really gather much about Humpty's life based on this nursery rhyme alone. But you know, in Lewis Carol's *Through the Looking Glass* – which is the sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* – Carol fills in some more details about Humpty's character. What we learn about him is that the whole reason he is sitting on the wall in the first place is because he has the delusional expectation that nothing bad can ever happen to him. When Alice confronts him, he arrogantly states that he could never fall from the wall, and that even if he did the King has promised to send all his horses and men to fix him. You see what's happened? He's used to nothing bad ever happening to him. He's become so delusional and arrogant about his life that he puts himself in harmful and dangerous situations with the expectation that nothing bad will ever happen to him. But of course what happens? Alice walks away and she doesn't make it too far before she hears a loud crash which shook the entire forest.

Now, the other end of the spectrum – the suffering and sorrowful person. Keeping in step with this fictional theme, do you remember the villain from *Cinderella*? The evil stepmother. Well in the live action movie which came out a year or two ago, they actually develop her character so she's not so one dimensional. When we first meet her, she's mourning the loss of her previous husband. She marries Cinderella's father, but the father is distant from the stepmother because he still mourns the loss of his first wife. The stepmother overhears the father telling Cinderella how he'll never love another woman like he loved his first wife. And so what happens? The stepmother becomes increasingly bitter and hard hearted to the point where she can't help but act out and take out her pain on Cinderella.

So you see, these are the two extremes we can fall into if we aren't in committed relationships with other Christians. For James the underlying expectation is that if you're going to live a healthy and robust Christian life, it is going to be in the context of a local church with a commitment to other believers. The cheerful person needs to be reminded to pray and depend on

God for everything, and the suffering person needs to be reminded to have hope and joy and sing praises even when it seems impossible to do so.

But this point becomes even more clear in verse 14, for there James introduces a third person, the one who is suffering with sickness or disease in particular. This is the person we'll really be dealing with now for the rest of the morning. James' exhortation in this instance is that the sick person should call on the elders of their church to pray. So this prescription for church membership is even more explicit here. When we have a serious sickness or disease, we need to be able to call on the ministry of our elders for prayer and care. So the assumption is that you and I are a member of a local church with elders to call on for our needs.

This really brings us to the first error people commonly have when approaching this passage, and that is to read this passage as an individual in isolation from the church. We ignore the context which James prescribes. And so we say, ah, ok, the words say call an elder to pray – so what that means for *me* is I should pray. Of course you should! But that's not what James is saying here is it? What we see is actually there are going to be times when we will struggle with doubt, when our faith is weak – often times of physical sickness and pain – and we need to call on someone to remind us that though our heart may fail God is our strength and portion forever.

So a couple quick points for application before we move on. Often I think we fall into the trap of thinking of church membership merely in terms of a duty, or simply as something that Christians just do to show their commitment to a church. But for those of you who are members, when was the last time you thought of church membership as a means of God's grace, as a means of caring for you in all seasons of your life? How might this aspect of church membership change the way you approach fellowship with other Christians in the church?

I also want to say a quick word for those of you hear who currently aren't members in a church. Maybe you're a new Christian, or maybe you've never understood the importance of church membership. I understand that there is a season if you're in transition or moving or what have you to make sure a church is a good fit long term and all of that. But for those of you who have been around awhile and haven't yet taken that step of membership, I'd urge you to consider that this is something God has designed for our good. If it hasn't already happened yet – a day is coming where you'll need to call on the elders and the ministry of a local body.

### **The Medicine (vv. 14-16)**

Ok, so we've seen that for our good and care, James prescribes and assumes church membership. In the following verses James really elaborates on what kind of care should be given for someone who is sick – like a good doctor, he gives us medicine for our ailments. And so, in verses 14 and 15 we read that the medicine we need is twofold: consecration and prayer. Let's look at each of these briefly.

In verse 14 James says that when we call on the elders they should anoint us with oil. Now, many of you probably know that in these times oil was often used for medicinal purposes. However, that isn't what is going on here. Oil was also used as a means of consecration. This is just a fancy word for setting aside someone or something for holy purposes. Kings and priests

were often anointed with oil to signify that they had been set apart by God for a special and holy purpose. So the first thing we need when we have a serious sickness or disease is for the elders to anoint us with oil. And this signifies to us that we are asking God to set us aside for special attention, for special care and for him to look upon us with grace and mercy in our time of need.

The second thing James says is we need to be prayed over. I'm looking at verses 15 and 16 now. This is where things get messy and we need to spend some time working a couple issues out. James says that the elders should pray over the one who is sick, and that the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. Then he throws a wrench in the whole thing by telling us that if we confess our sins in order that we may be healed. So, let's work through these two verses.

There is a temptation for us to read these verses and dismiss the emphasis of the text by saying that James is merely talking about spiritual healing here. However, if you want to make that work you have to play a kind of exegetical hopscotch with the text. James uses two words here in verse 15, that the prayer of faith will 1) save the person and 2) raise them up. Now these two words could refer to a kind of spiritual salvation or healing, and certainly in other places in the Bible they do. However, we should never give words more emphasis than their context requires. In dealing with the topic of sickness, it is pretty clear that James is talking about being saved from the illness and being raised up from their bed and restored to physical vitality.

Does God still physically heal us today? Yes and amen! Is that what James is talking about here? It appears so. But this raises a bit of a problem for us doesn't it? On the surface it may seem that James is telling us we are guaranteed healing if we have enough faith, or that if we are sinless we will be given perfect health. But is this really what James is teaching? Let's take a step back and consider the context.

First look at the end of verse 15. James says, "IF a person sins, he will be forgiven." The "if" here is significant. You see, James isn't saying that in every situation our illness is caused by sin or lack of faith. He is saying that through prayer and confession, *IF* we have committed sins we will be forgiven. So you see, even in the immediate context there is not a direct relationship between sin and sickness.

But let's take a step back and get a birds eye view of the book of James. Remember in chapter 4, James tells his audience that they do not have because they do not ask. What is he talking about? He's referring to prayer! He goes on and says, when you do ask you don't receive what you pray for because you do it for selfish gain. So you see, the situation James is writing to isn't a group of people who have a solid discipline of prayer and need to be encouraged to have more faith. No, it's a group of people who aren't praying at all and need to be reminded that prayer is effective *when it is prayed for in accordance with proper desires and the will of God.*

And this is really what the whole message of the Bible teaches isn't it? Let's go even higher now and get the 30,000 foot view of the entire canon. Sometimes we see in the Bible there is a direct relationship between sin and illness. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul tells us that some people have died because they have remained unrepentant about their sins yet continue to take the Lord's Supper. In Mark chapter 2, when Jesus heals the paralytic, there is a direct relationship between his healing and the forgiveness of his sins. But this isn't always the case!

Remember the book of Job. We know that he was a righteous and sinless man, yet he suffered tremendously. In John 9 when Jesus heals the blind man, he explicitly says that neither the man nor his parents sinned and caused his blindness.

So you see, neither James nor the summary of biblical text teaches that there is *always* a direct relationship between sin or lack of faith and our health. Sometimes there is, sometimes there isn't. This is why we must understand that the prayer of faith is one which has the wisdom to petition the Lord for healing, confess our sins, all the while acknowledging his sovereignty and his will in all things.

Notice in verse 16 that James moves from an instance of physical sickness to a time of corporate and communal confession. He exhorts us to confess our sins and pray for one another, that we may be healed. Sometimes spiritual healing through prayer and confession will lead to physical healing. Other times, the physical sickness leads to spiritual healing. I hope its plain to see in this context that times of physical sickness and disease are always to be accompanied by times of spiritual renewal and restoration. *Always*.

I think we can see then why the prayer of a righteous person has great power. When physical sicknesses arise, it is a time for the community of a local church to confess their sins and grow in holiness together. Sickness and disease is the soil from which eternal and spiritual fruit grow and mature. As we grow and mature in righteousness and holiness, you and I will know better how to pray and discern God's will in different times and seasons.

This takes us to the next significant error we often have in approaching this text. We've already said that one error we make is to read this passage with an emphasis on the individual, as if its only about me and my buddy Jesus. This second error is related to the first. When our view of Christianity becomes all about my personal relationship with God and nobody else, it doesn't take too long before God becomes someone we can manipulate. It's not too long before we start thinking, well, what can I get out of this God character? And when that happens in a society which makes an idol out of physical health, then one of the things we most want to manipulate God for is our health. It's a perfect storm!

And before we start thinking that this is an abstract issue that is far removed for us, let me try and bring this home for you. (**Hospital illustration**).

Now, again, a quick word of application before we move on. I know a lot of times laughing or telling a joke can be a kind of coping mechanism when things get hard. I understand that. However, a lot of times in our Reformed and Presbyterian circles laughing and telling jokes can be a very insensitive way of mocking people who are trapped in very destructive and very harmful beliefs which is causing them an immense amount of grief and pain. I am guilty of this first and foremost. I just hope that we – all of us – can maybe be more concerned about this grief people are experiencing before we mock what they believe. Let us show compassion, not chastisement.

Let's summarize what we've seen so far. James assumes that you and I are living out our faith in the context of other believers. The reason for this is because in every season of life, we need each other to help us from drifting to extremes. We also need others to care for us in our moments of great physical need. It is in those moments where we are to call on others to pray a prayer of faith that seeks the will of God above all else.

But something is amiss. In one sense, we can grow in righteousness and holiness through seasons of confession and prayer, and that is what is in view here. In another sense, we know that the Bible teaches ultimately, on our own, we have no shot at becoming righteous on our own merit. Psalm 66 tells us that when we cherish iniquity, God does not hear us. In Romans 3 we are reminded that not a single person has can achieve moral righteousness. And if this is the case, then it is impossible for us to be heard by God. Unless...unless a perfectly righteous person prays and intercedes for us.

### **The Cure (vv. 17-18)**

The cure we need is the powerful and effective prayers of Jesus on our behalf.

How is that we can have confidence in confessing our sins and praying the prayer of a righteous person? Look at verse 17, it says that Elijah was a man like us. If you read his narrative in 1 and 2 Kings, Elijah was clearly a man who got depressed, he got scared, he had doubts, he sinned. He was like us, and yet God responded to his prayers by closing the heavens and then opening them again 3 and a half years later. God responded out of grace to Elijah, even though he was not perfectly righteous. Like Elijah, God responds to our prayers out of grace to us. Why?

Because there is One who is perfectly righteous who on the eve of his death prayed and asked God for another way, but this time the heavens did not respond. The prayer of the perfectly righteous man was answered in the way that all of our prayers should be. Christ heard nothing but silence. The heavens were shut, the skies darkened, and in that moment the perfect, Righteous man who prayed the perfect prayer of faith died. But this same perfectly righteous man was raised from the grave and now sits at the right hand of God praying and interceding for us.

In 1 John 1:21 we read that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. He was turned down once, but he'll never be turned down again. He has perfect and absolute knowledge, and he prays everything we would pray if we shared that knowledge. Sometimes we pray for things Christ prays for, sometimes we don't. Only when it is bad for us. But he always hears us, and he is always praying for our good, for our holiness, for our joy in him.

That is the hope we have to pray in every season, good and bad, sickness or health – that in all things Jesus is praying for our good – and the Father always hears him.