

FAQ about the Practice of James 5:13-18

Here are my best answers to common questions about “the prayer of faith that heals the sick”
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James 5 ¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. ¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (NIV, 2011)

{Mark 6:13 [The Twelve disciples] drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. (NIV, 2011)}

1. Who should initiate the prayer for healing?

The onus is placed upon those who are sick to “call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord” (v.14). Of course, this does not prevent the Elder’s from acquainting and instructing people with the practice of James 5:13-18 as a live option within the local church.

2. Why should the sick person (rather than the Elders) initiate the prayer for healing?

A personal request is important, presumably because it represents an expression of faith and obedience to God’s word. Also, perhaps it ensures that there’s a level of urgency on the part of the sick person. This would be especially important in the case of sickness due to sin.

3. How sick does one have to be before Jas. 5:13-18 is practiced?

In context, the summons implies that the sickness is dire and the person is confined to a sickbed or sufficiently unable to go to the Elders. The word “sick” used in v.14 is often, although not always, applied to critical illness. For example, it’s used of the centurion’s son who was “about to die” (Luke 17:2)

and the nobleman's son who was "close to death" (John 4:47). It's also used three times in John 11 to describe Lazarus' serious pre-death illness, and it's used twice of Epaphroditus when he "almost died" (Philippians 2:26-27). Plus, it's because of the expression, "the Lord will raise him up," in v.15, that the illustration James uses to make his point presupposes a sick-bed experience.

However, probably James has a worst case scenario in mind. It's doubtful that he intends to establish a strict and necessary criterion because elsewhere, for example, this word for "sick" is used of Timothy's frequent stomach troubles (1 Timothy 5:23). We know this much for sure: the candidate for "the prayer of faith" is described as someone who is "sick" (in vv.14-15 the Greek word implies weakness or infirmity) and someone who is "in trouble" (v.13; the NASB describes the candidate as "suffering"). Presumably, the severity of the sickness, as it relates to body or mind, will partly depend on the sick person's self-estimate; hence, the wisdom in waiting for them to summons the Elders.

4. Who exactly should go to pray for the sick person?

Assuming, under the free reign of the Spirit, that the spiritual "gifts of healing" are functional in today's world (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30), it's interesting that James does not advise sending for someone with such gifts. Instead, for James, this is a ministry entrusted to the body of Elders/Pastors in a local church (v.14). Who best to pray for, counsel, and inquire about the hidden sins of the sick person than the shepherds of the flock?

However, the expressions "to each other" and "for each other" in v.16a bring into play *all* believers. James' horizon lifts from the specific case of Elder entrusted prayer (vv.14-15) to corporate level prayer (v.16). If God chooses to chasten His people with sickness and offending brothers and sisters are confessing their sins to offended brothers and sisters in the church at large, then their own confession and prayer is expected to bring healing (this is the only New Testament command for reciprocal confession of sin). Therefore, it appears that James sees an ongoing church-wide practice *under the responsibility* of the Elders/Pastors. Most importantly, whether those who pray are Elders or non-Elders, the prayer for healing must be offered "earnestly" by "righteous" men and women (vv.16-17). Therefore, while the Elders will likely take the lead in this prayer for the sick, the participation of others is welcome and fitting. Presumably, if a congregation carried out reciprocal confession and prayer (when applicable), the summons for the Elders might often be averted.

5. How important is the oil?

The whole context of James 5:13-18 focuses on prayer. Grammatically, the oil is subordinate to prayer. So the anointing is secondary and must not overshadow the praying which is primary.

6. What is the significance of the oil?

There is no magic or sacramental power in the oil. The anointing with olive oil assures the sick person that he or she is being singled out or set apart for a specific purpose. Almost certainly, the oil represents the presence of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 61:1; Zechariah 4:2-6) signifying an awareness of the Spirit's presence and power. For if healing is to occur it will be accomplished by the Spirit of God.

7. How does the actual procedure work?

Evidently the Elders (and others) draw close to the bedside or couch or chair, and they pray directly over the person in question anointing him or her with a personal touch of oil while invoking the name of the Lord (v.14b). This invocation is not superstitious but it is a recognition that all the power, authority and credit for any healing that may come is attributed to the Lord Jesus Christ.

8. What's the connection between sin and sickness?

It is possible that God may send sickness as a disciplinary measure. Such is the case in James' illustration. However, the conditional clause "if they have sinned..." (v.15) reminds us that not all sickness is a direct result of sin. There are clear biblical examples of sick people who did not have sin-generated sickness. To illustrate, on one occasion, Jesus disclaimed sin as the cause of a man's congenital blindness announcing his explanation: "this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:1-3). Also, it is apparent that Epaphroditus was sick because of his tireless activity in the work of the Lord (Philippians 2:30). And Gaius had been physically unwell yet John says he was spiritually healthy (3 John 2). Nevertheless, perhaps we're far too quick to ignore the possibility of sin as the cause of sickness in spite of biblical examples: Gehazi received leprosy because of his greed (2 Kings 5); Miriam received leprosy because of disobedience and later on received healing due to her repentance (Numbers 12); Jesus said to the paraplegic man of 38 years, "stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14); and in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, because of their abuse of the Lord's Supper, some in the church of Corinth were sick and others had even died as a direct result of the judicial and remedial chastening of God. Therefore, before praying, Elders ought to ensure that the sick person is questioned (not interrogated) for any known sin and urged towards confession and repentance. This will require great love and perhaps spiritual counsel including the assurance that genuine penitence means divine forgiveness.

9. Don't you have to have a superhuman power or a special gift or a special unction to pray for someone's sickness?

No, because while James' readership would have lionized Elijah as the quintessential prophet with star-powered heroic qualities, James employs the

rhetoric of shock value by asserting Elijah's ordinariness: "Elijah was a human being, even as we are" (v.16a). What's the point of this newsflash? The power of prayer is within the reach of every single believer! We are just like Elijah when we learn that God transcends our human capacities! Furthermore, those who pray and anoint with oil ought to do so "in the name of the Lord" (v.14b). Because all power and dominion resides in the Lord to act in miracle or medicine, we pray in the strong name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is clear that if healing occurs, it is in totality the Lord's doing and never that of the person who prays. Elsewhere James reminds us that every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Creator-Father's hand (1:17).

10. Exactly what kind of praying is required to miraculously heal the severely sick? Is the "prayer offered in faith" a special kind of prayer?

No, it is no different than any other kind of prayer, for there can be no Christian prayer where there is no faith. In the book of James effective praying is a matter of unwavering reliance on God (1:6-8). So we are not to think that this intercessory praying for healing requires a special technique or formula. Nor should we misunderstand it as a prayer to be prayed only by so-called miracle workers or televangelists. The prayer of faith in the larger context of the book of James is contrasted to doubt (1:6) and double-mindedness (1:8; 4:8). Those who pray from a righteous (v.16b) and earnest (v.17b) heart will pray believing that healing will result because God is able to do it. Again, when James mentions Elijah, the Jewish poster boy for miracle working prayer, the emphasis is not on his superstardom but God's power in response to both righteousness and intensity in praying. Cut out of the same mortal cloth as us, Elijah modeled what we must learn: prayer begins where human capacity ends.

11. What are we to make of the qualification of righteousness for those who visit the sick to pray the prayer of faith for healing?

While the efficacy of prayer is rooted in God's power alone, James requires that those who pray possess a certain intensity and morality. The reason why James says, "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (v.16b), is because sin can obstruct prayer (cf. James 4:3). There is a direct link between a Christian's practical right-living and his or her prayer requesting. If we regard iniquity in our hearts the Lord will not hear us (Psalm. 66:18; cf. Proverbs 21:13; Isaiah 59:1-2; 1 Peter 3:7). But if we are living out practical righteousness our petitions can move the mighty hand of God. Therefore, Elders and others who will pray over the sick person ought to prepare themselves for their shepherding care and intercession by examining themselves and confessing all known sin (perhaps fasting too) before the visit takes place.

12. Isn't James making an unqualified promise of 100% success ("And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up" [v.15])?

This statement is similar to so many other biblical promises regarding prayer. Often Biblical writers, without intending to provide an exhaustive handbook on prayer, will elevate one aspect of truth regarding prayer. The interpreter must be careful not to absolutize one truth to the exclusion of others. Sometimes certain qualifications are added, and, as in James 5:15, sometimes not. For example, Matthew 21:22, Mark 9:23 and Luke 11:9-10 all seem to say in effect, "Ask for anything by faith and you'll get it." On the other hand, other texts use the same optimistic language but add various preconditions. For example, in John 14:13-14 the asking must be done in the name of Jesus (i.e. in harmony with His character), and whenever Jesus answers the request it must serve to glorify His Father (v.13b). In 1 John 5:14 the asking must be "according to [God's] will" and in John 15:7 the one making the request must abide in Jesus and Jesus' words must abide in him, etc.

So in the references that seem to be unconditional, like James 5:15, the conditions are unexpressed for an important reason: in order to lay unmistakable stress on one facet of the jewel of prayer, namely, prayer's potential POWER. Therefore, while "the prayer offered in faith" completely hinges on God's will (see James 4:13-17), James is emphasizing the unmixed expectation of those who pray, and all because *prayer is as effectual as God is omnipotent*.

13. What if the sick person prayed for isn't healed?

At the end of the day, God may heal miraculously but sometimes the grant of healing is not His will. Interestingly, Paul who had a spiritual gift of healing left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). And, on the assumption of a physical malady of some nature, although the request was issued three times the Lord did not heal Paul of his own "thorn in the flesh" in order to restrain his conceit and train him in the sufficiency of divine grace (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Plus when Epaphroditus "was ill and almost died" his healing was spoken of as a "mercy," not something he had the right to demand (Philippians 2:27). Nevertheless, it seems to me that the prayer of faith for healing (in James 5), while tacitly deferential to God's will, is a prayer so singularly earnest and surrendered to God's omnipotent ability that any outcome less than what was prayed for will be a complete surprise!