

Effective Prayer... for the sick!

James 5:16

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Introduction:

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

We often quote this passage without I believe fully realizing the implications both contextually as well as historically. This passage in its context deals with those who are sick in the church. **V14** says,

Is anyone sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. V15 says, And the prayer of faith will save (heal) the sick.

Prayer for healing was normative in the life of Israel. She had her healing prophets who carried their anointing oil everywhere with them **2 Kings 4:1-7**. Even kings were expected to seek the Lord for healing before they sought physicians e.g. Asa. **2 Chron. 16:12,13**.

Historically it was normal even in Judaism for a sick person to go to the Rabbi whose duty it was to anoint with oil and pray for the sick to be healed. Anointing accompanied the prayer for healing. The early church had a devotion to its sick and regularly prayed for both the sick as well as the demon possessed. Justin Martyr (100-165AD) records that many demoniacs were healed by the Christians when all other exorcists had failed. Irenaeus (120-200AD) writing in the latter part of the second century of the church tells us that the sick were healed through the laying on of hands. Tertullian (160-222AD) in the third century tells us that the Roman Emperor, Alexander Severus, was healed through anointing and the hands of Torpacion a Christian. In appreciation it is recorded that Torpacion was granted a place in the palace until his death. In the *First Epistle of Clement* the prayer of the church is "Heal the sick; raise up the weak; cheer the fainthearted." That should be its ministry today!

Right until the ninth century prayer and unction or anointing for healing was an integral part of the life and ministry of the church. It wasn't until the sacrament of 'extreme unction' was introduced into the Roman church in 852 AD that anointing switched from healing and was associated with preparation for death. What a demonic deception!

Having established that healing continued in the early church let's consider the context of what James is writing here.

1. Is sickness associated with sin?

The Rabbis taught that all sickness and suffering was the result of sin. Rabbi Alexandrai said, "No man gets up from his sickness until God has forgiven him all his sins." Rabbi Ammi says, "There is no death without sin and there is no suffering without iniquity, suffering is always the consequence of sin. Now we understand why James is addressing the sin question first. He was a Jew.

Jesus also worked within the Jewish context. This is why we see him saying to the man sick with the palsy*your sins are forgiven you...***Mark 2:5**.

The emphasis here is that the first thing that we need to be sure about when we come to ask for healing prayer is, "Are we living in obedience to the Lord and is there as a consequence any sin in our lives?" We must all ask this question.

We are also frequently reminded as we come around the communion table to celebrate and remember Jesus' sacrifice that we need to examine ourselves. This is necessary so that we do not eat or drink in an unworthy manner.

1 Cor. 11:28-30 *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*

We see that one cause of sickness and death mentioned here is that of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. So what does not discerning the Lord's body mean? This may be interpreted to mean that:

- i) The person eating has no respect for the cost of the sacrifice that Jesus has made and therefore has no respect of the emblems OR
- ii) That the person has no respect for the body of Christ- i.e. the church! This could be evidenced by the division Paul addresses in **Chapter 12** or by bitterness, unforgiveness, contempt, hatred or the lack of care that a person may have to another person in the body. We know for instance that some of them were eating and drinking before they came to share the corporate table **v.33**. therefore not being attentive to the needs of the less fortunate in the body.

Obviously, the first thing that needs to be examined when it comes to effective praying for a sick person is, is there any sin. Although as Christians today we know that the sin issue is dealt with when we received Christ as Lord and saviour we still need to ask the question in relations to habitual unrepented sin. With the above scripture I should say that the converse also applies; if we eat of the table in a worthy manner....expect that you might be healed if you have a sickness...!

2. How important is confession to effective prayer?

V16. *Confess you sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed..*

James makes a definite connection between confession and healing. Confession is both to God as well as to man. Any sin committed against man is a sin against God because man is created in the image of God. No doubt it is easier to confess your trespasses to God than your fellow man but when we have sinned against a brother or sister that relationship needs to be repaired as well. Hence confession becomes a pathway to healing, healing the relationship with God as well as our relationship with our fellow man.

The Moravians and early Methodists practised confession to one another regularly so that they might be healed. They would gather two or three times a week to confess their faults publicly and to pray for one another for healing. It did get a little out of hand at times for public confession can sometimes turn into public accusation which certainly isn't in the spirit of what James intended here. We can say that this is one mechanism which should not be overlooked as we pray for healing.

3. What is effective prayer?

First of all we note that effective prayer is marked by both righteousness and the fervency of the person that is praying **V16b**. *The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

James goes on to show that Elijah was such a character and states that it was through his prayer that the heavens were closed up for three and a half years. A study of the OT (**1 Kings17;18**) does not tell us that it was as a result of Elijah's praying that the drought came. It was assumed by the Rabbis that he caused it because when he proclaimed it as a prophet he said....

1 Kings17:1 *And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word."*

Standing was the Jewish attitude to prayer so for the Rabbi, Elijah is making a reference to his praying when he said, "before whom I stand."

Whether that is the case or not, the principle still stands. Praying still changes the circumstances of men and that depends upon our righteous standing before God and our fellow man. Effective prayer is fervent, not marred by sin, and produces the desired result.

Questions

1. What do you understand from the *First Epistle of Clement* about the ministry of the early church?
2. Why did Jesus deal with the sin question before praying for the sick?
3. What does Paul say about those who fail to discern the Lord's body around the communion table?
4. Why do you think that there is an important link between confession and healing?
5. What should we be careful of in public confession?
6. What is effective prayer?