

WHEELERSBURG BAPTIST CHURCH

Life Application Sunday School Class

The Book of James – Session 18

May 26, 2002

READ James 5:13-20

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him 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 him up. If he has sinned, he 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 man is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man just like us. 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, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

This passage of scripture has some amazing things to say about the means God has provided to bring wholeness to our lives. One of the continuing themes in the book of James is how to respond to trials, hardship, and suffering in a way that fulfills God's purpose in our lives and brings Him glory. These Jewish believers were suffering persecution and hardship for their faith, and James is writing to encourage them in the proper response to such difficulties.

Last week we looked at the proper response to those who are coming against us; a response of mercy toward the persecutor and faith toward God for His vindication and justice. I think it is appropriate to evaluate this passage today in that context.

The word for trouble in verse 13 means suffering hardship or difficulty. Jesus said in this world we will have trouble and tribulation. And according to this passage, the response to trouble and difficulty, especially at the hands of others, is to pray – to call upon the Lord for help, for comfort, and for strength to respond in a way that will glorify Him. James said earlier in the letter that we should pray for wisdom in time of trial, and that God will abundantly supply that wisdom if we ask trusting Him.

Verse 13 goes on to say that there will be other times when we will feel great, and be merry, and cheerful, and we are not to keep this to ourselves, but express that blessing in our hearts through our mouths in songs of praise to God for His blessing and goodness in our lives. God sends relief, blessing and happy cheerfulness into our lives so that we might express praise and thanksgiving to His name. Just as He invites and commands us to call on Him in times of great stress and trouble, He also invites and commands us to praise Him with songs of joy when we are happy.

Verse 14 – The word used here for sickness is severe. It refers to extreme weakness and infirmity; a sickness that could certainly result in death. It carries the idea of an overwhelming situation; a debilitating situation where we need help. And when we are in that situation, we need to look to the church, specifically to the leaders that have gifts of discernment, ministry, and care. We are to call on them to pray for us; to pray

for restoration and relief from the overwhelming weakness and sickness that has come our way.

The elders are to pray over us, and this verse speaks of an anointing with oil. There are several interpretations of this practice. Some believe that this refers to a ceremonial anointing that should accompany praying for the sick. Others would say that this is a reference to the application of oil for its healing and medicinal value. Finally, some would say that this anointing is a metaphor representing the comfort, encouragement, and strength that is to be ministered by the elders through the prayer of faith. Whichever interpretation is accurate, one principle holds true for all three. The elders are to bring comfort and restoration to the one that has called in their weakness and affliction.

The elders are to do this in the name of the Lord. This speaks of their authority, that they are ministering in the behalf of Christ, in His name, and also I think it speaks of their submission to the Lord's will. To pray in Jesus' name is to pray in submission to His plan and His will. It is to pray that His name will be glorified and promoted. It is praying according to the revealed will of God and in submission to His purpose.

Verse 15 holds out a great promise, that the prayer offered in faith by the elders for the one that is sick will make him well, and the Lord will raise him from His weakness and bring restoration. This statement raises some obvious questions that we address later, questions such as "Does God always heal the sick when a prayer of faith is offered on their behalf?" Verse 15 taken by itself sounds pretty absolute.

The last part of verse 15 sheds more light on James' instructions. The elders are not just to seek physical restoration, but the resolution of spiritual issues and the forgiveness and restoration of any brokenness resulting from sin. This verse says "if he has sinned", implying that the sickness is not necessarily a result of personal sin on the part of the person calling the elders. What is implied is that the elders should be aware and discerning that sickness in the life of the believer can be an expression of God's chastisement for sin, and that possibility needs to be considered to properly obey this instruction. The person calling for prayer must be willing to be forthright and open about any sin or shortcomings in his life that may have led to this situation. God's ultimate purpose in allowing or sending the infirmity could well be the spiritual restoration of the sick person. This is why when we are sick, we may need to call on those who can help us work through spiritual issues in our lives.

James then encourages the believers to pray for one another, stating that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. The NASB translates verse 16 like this "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." James said earlier in chapter four that we have not because we ask not. Prayer is not to be a last resort, it is to be our continual attitude, and we should be ready to pray at all times and in all situations. Why would James feel the need to state this truth, that effective prayer can bring about mighty things? When faced with overwhelming difficulties and trials, such as severe sickness and weakness, we are tempted to believe that our prayers avail little or nothing. We pray as a last resort, and without much faith or hope of anything really changing. In a sense, we may be just offering unbelieving prayers of resignation. This is not the type of prayer that James is calling for. We need to pray with the attitude that God is alive, and that He will do wonderful and great and mighty things in response to our prayers. Not because we are anything. He desires to answer for His glory and namesake. James uses the example of Elijah, certainly a man of God, but a man none the less. He was a man just like us, and yet the heavens were shut up for three and a half years in response to his prayer and later opened back up. When our prayers are in line with God's purpose, then nothing is impossible.

With that great encouragement in mind, James wants us to consider the potential that we have towards those who have wandered away from the truth. These last verses in the book of James address those who have been hearers, but because they did not respond in doing, were led astray, or deceived. We shouldn't give up on those who have heard the truth and then wandered away, rather, we should go after them and try to bring them back. This is another work of true ministers, going after the wandering sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son. It is not only pursuing the person outwardly, but in context, it is praying diligently and fervently

for them with the promise in mind that the earnest prayer of a righteous man avails much.

So with all of that said, I want to come back to a question that we posed earlier based on verse 15. I will restate the question in several different ways:

Is it always God's purpose to bring complete physical healing to everyone who asks for it? When we pray to be healed, should we always expect to be completely physically restored? Is it a lack of faith if a believer remains sick or disabled or under some type of physical ailment?

Again, if we look exclusively at this passage in James, it seems to be a blanket 100% promise for healing every time the "prayer of faith" is offered. All such promises must be evaluated in light of the full counsel of God and all that God has revealed. Much heartache and frustration has been wrought by only looking at limited portions of Scripture.

Why do Christians get sick? For that matter, why do Christians physically die? Why do our bodies deteriorate and wear out? Why is there even a need for healing? Why doesn't God just keep us in perfect physical health?

One reason is because our salvation will not be completely fulfilled and manifested until our bodies are resurrected. This body is under the curse of sin inherited from Adam. Adam's sin brought the wages of sin, which is death. Sickness is in essence just the principle of physical death at work in our bodies. Though the Christian has been legally redeemed from death, that redemption will not be fully experienced or revealed until our bodies are changed, and this corruptible will put on incorruption. Christ's atonement did conquer sin and death and the consequences of sin, which is sickness and death, but that deliverance from that curse will not be fully experienced until we receive our incorruptible new glorified body. What a day that will be!

But until that day comes, we do not need to be in despair about sickness, pain, disease, and physical troubles. Though in this life we may not experience full deliverance from these maladies, God is in control of every detail of each one.

To fully appreciate and grasp the subject of divine healing, we must grasp the concept of purpose. Why does God choose to heal or not heal? We must see that He actually uses all things, including sickness and disease and pain, to work for our good and His glory.

Does this mean that we should not pray for and seek relief or healing? No! We just need to pray for healing in submission to His purpose and will in our lives. We should pray with the confidence that God is able to heal, realizing that there are times He is willing to remove sickness and disease from us for His glory. I firmly believe that there is a measure of suffering we experience because we don't ask God to heal us, or because we don't trust that He is able to heal us, and consequently we don't call upon Him as our Great Physician. I do believe that this passage in James is stating that God does at times grant the faith to believe Him for healing. This gift of faith is a result of having an understanding of God's will in the situation. I John 5:14-15 clarifies the issue. If we ask anything according to God's will, then He hears and answers that prayer, and when we know the will of God, we can pray in confidence, knowing that we will receive what we ask for. God has revealed Himself as Yaweh Rapha – the Lord that healeth thee. He is a healing God, and often desires to manifest Himself in that way. The Scriptures clearly teach that there are times when He allows sickness and disease for the express purpose of manifesting His glory in its removal (e.g. John 9 and the blind man). This is why James instructs us, when we are sick, to call on the elders and to pray.

But we must also affirm that the Scriptures teach that there are times that God may allow sickness to linger in our lives to accomplish a higher purpose, such as restoration to Him. This is why we need to view our physical ailments as a spiritual issue. Our loving heavenly Father will do what is necessary to keep us close to Him. Our spiritual health is His first priority, for it is what is going to matter in eternity. God often uses

physical ailments, disease, and pain and other difficult circumstances to chasten and correct us and set our lives straight. How many testimonies have you heard from brothers and sisters that have been restored and brought into an intimate fellowship with the Lord before their death through the experience of cancer or some other terminal illness? The disease and sickness is no pretty site, it is the consequence of the fall. But the thing that God brings out of the illness and works in the hearts of those He loves is a beautiful thing to behold. Paul said it this way, that though our outward man perishes, our inward man is renewed day by day.

God can also use physical difficulties, like other trials and hardships, to cause us to draw closer to the Him, realizing more fully our utter helplessness and need of God's daily sustaining grace. As our outward man perishes, we also better appreciate and anticipate the day when all pain and sorrow will be put away. God often uses the pain of this life to break our affection for this world and place our hope in our Lord and His coming kingdom.

This raises the question, "Where does medical science and physicians fit into the picture?" If God uses sickness and disease in our lives to fulfill His purpose, is it wrong for us to seek relief and healing through natural means? In Matthew 9:12, Jesus said they that are sick need a physician. If He was anti-doctor, I don't think He would use that analogy to teach us spiritual truth. There is also some evidence that Luke healed with medical means along side Paul who healed miraculously with the gift of miracles and healings as an Apostle. When facing issues of sickness and disease, we need to seek wisdom from God for how and when to apply medical means to our physical problems. Again, James states when facing trials, which certainly include sickness, illness, and physical problems, that we need to ask for guidance and wisdom from God. We can be thankful that God often uses the means available to bless people with relief from sickness and pain. The Scriptures teach that He meets many of our needs through the providential natural means that are available to us. None of these medical cures could be effective at all apart from His gracious hand. One thing is certain. In times of any adversity and trial, we should look to the Lord and trust Him for the provision and His direction.

Finally, for completeness sake, we need to address the issue of the supernatural gift of healing and miracles. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ had manifest authority over all of the natural world including sickness, disease, demonic oppression, and death itself. In fact, it was the astounding exercise and display of this glory and power that revealed His deity. Also, the Bible teaches that this power was given to His Apostles and others that He commissioned as a sign to authenticate their ministry and mission. The Apostles and Prophets are called the foundation of the church. These chosen men were granted special authority and power to carry out the mission of establishing the Church. Again, we must see the purpose in the miracles and healings that Christ and His Apostles performed. It was divine authentication of their message. These sign gifts served as a divine stamp of approval that authenticated and pointed to the message of the gospel. Once the church was established and the message of the gospel was recorded, these sign gifts were no longer needed. These gifts were very distinct. Any claim of these gifts being in operation today must be measured by Scriptural standards. Here are just a few of the characteristics of the authentic sign gifts of miracles and healings:

1. Jesus healed with a word or a touch.
2. Jesus healed instantaneously.
3. Jesus healed totally.
4. Jesus healed everyone.
5. Jesus healed organic disease.
6. Jesus raised the dead.

And if you look at the record of the Apostles and early church, these same criteria were true. This is the Scriptural standard. If the so-called gifts today do not meet these criteria, then they are not the Biblical gifts of healings and miracles.

We all see those suffering and sick, and we would desire on a human level that these gifts were still valid and in operation. But we must look at the purpose of these gifts. It was not merely to relieve physical suffering. There was a higher purpose that has been fulfilled, the proclamation and revelation of the deity of Christ, and the authentication of the Apostolic ministry during the establishment of the church and the gospel message.

Just because it is not God's purpose to heal through these sign gifts today, it certainly does not mean that God does not heal today. But the means and ways that He chooses today are in line with His purpose. God is sovereign, and can choose to do as He pleases at anytime. I am certain that there are times for His own purpose and reason that He transcends the natural laws and supernaturally intervenes with healing. He also is constantly at work in our lives providentially bringing about His will and purpose. To say that these gifts are not active today does not mean that God is not active today. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What should be our response when facing sickness, disease, and physical problems?
2. What are the implications of this passage for ministry in others lives?
3. How has this passage encouraged you to change your prayer life?