



Introduction

James 5

Well, FCBC, after today we've got just a couple messages left in the

book of James. The Lord has taught me a lot in this book. I'm pretty changed because of it. And today's message is no exception.

And the way things line up, we are going to actually end the messages of James on Easter Sunday which will also be the last Sunday I'm officially preaching here at FCBC. A lot of emotion in that for me. Maybe you come today with a lot of emotion about something. Well James is going to help us today.

So today we enter into James' final words. We know we are winding things down because we have this literary marker that lets us know we are nearing the end. A lot of the NT epistles follow this pattern. Paul does a similar thing in his books. Finally brothers....and then he wraps things up. And here is James doing it. "But above all brothers...." He's wrapping up his letter.

Now what he says in his wrap up is pretty surprising to me. Before we reveal that, let's think about everything James has said up to this point.

We have said approximately 100 times that the entire book of James is a test for people to assess genuine saving faith. People can say anything. People can claim whatever they want. But just because you say it doesn't make it true.

And that is especially true when it comes to faith. People can say, "I am Christian." People can say, "I have saving faith." But that doesn't mean they do. How do you know if they have genuine faith? Forget other people, how do YOU know if you have genuine saving faith? You know because genuine faith works. Genuine faith produces genuine fruit.

A certain type of root will always produce a certain type of fruit. And though you cannot see the root, you can know what kind of root it is by simply examining the fruit.

So James is just systematically working through all these different fruits that are observable in the Christian life.

- What does genuine faith do under trials?
- Where does genuine faith turn for wisdom?
- How does genuine faith think about wealth and oppression?
- How does genuine faith speak?
- How does genuine faith think about the future?

There's a certain type of fruit that will grow in these environments. These are all micro-tests of saving faith. But the more of these tests you do, the more clear the pattern becomes. So that's what we've been talking about at a thematic level.

Now it's interesting how he wraps things up. It's not at all what I would expect. He begins the wrap up with a command not to make oaths.

James 5:12, But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

And I think its so interesting that this is how he chooses to close off a book that largely deals with having genuine faith. Don't make oaths. Why would he do that? Why is that kind of like the summary capstone command that closes things out?

Here's a Bible interpretation hint that always helps me. Whenever you get stuck trying to understand something just zoom out and get the big picture. We know faith is the theme of the book, so you would expect that as he closes things out, he's going to really zero in on the essence of faith.

What's he been saying in the near context? In the past 20 verses, James has been talking to us about suffering, trials, Job, the prophets... I mean there has been all this talk about trusting God in the midst of difficulty.

Put your faith in God. Put your faith in God in the midst of difficulty instead of what? Instead of SELF.

Placing faith in self is the opposite of placing faith in God.

The Summary

So let's now go back to it. Why does James close with this command to not make oaths? Why? How does that relate to faith.

When we make an oath, we are making a claim about the future aren't we. I promise you I will repay you this money in 6 months. And we are also making a claim about who is responsible to ensure that this future outcome is realized. Who is responsible, according to an oath, for making that future moment a reality?

I am.

There's a bit of arrogance in that.

Now this can't possibly be a prohibition against all oaths. Because other parts of the Bible talks about making oaths and in those places there's not a hint of a suggestion that it's wrong. Presumably, there are times when making an oath is acceptable and other times when it is not. So what's the deal?

It's a call for examination of why you are making the oath. It's a call for an examination of where you are placing your faith. There's a way to make an oath that tries to wrestle control away from God.

Even this week, I caught myself. It was very humbling and at first seemed like such a small deal. I was trying to comfort someone with my words. They were in a hard spot and I was trying to comfort them. And in my effort to comfort them, I promised to them more than I could really promise. I said something like, "I'll always be here

for you.” It’s a small thing. But it’s not really true. There will be a day when I won’t be either because of my own faithlessness or because I’m just physically not there or because I’ve died.

And you might just laugh at that and say, “That’s just a human expression.” But the more I thought about why I said it, the more I saw it as an evidence of trying to take control of something that is not mine to control. Why not instead of casting their future hope on my ability to ‘be there’ cast them on Christ.

- Weak faith tries to assure outcomes that only God controls.
- Weak faith tries to control the future.
- Weak faith tries to make promises where it cannot.
- Weak faith denies the reality of our frailty.

James already warned us about this earlier in the book by teaching us to say, “If the Lord wills, then I will do such and such.”

Now what’s the opposite then of trying to control the future, trying to promise and manipulate circumstances that are outside of our control?

The opposite is to pray. And so the rest of the book of James just ends on this note of prayer. You want to know the true evidence of strong faith?

Prayer. Prayer. Prayer. Prayer is THE evidence of strong faith. It’s THE great claim, I have no control. It’s the great claim of helplessness. Only you have control, Lord. It’s placing your vote of confidence in God. It’s hoping in God. It’s great evidence that you trust and believe in God and God alone.

Now James give us three situations in which we can build faith

through prayer. Here are three conditions in which we might find ourselves: general suffering, happiness, sickness. Let's start with the first one. Suffering.

Is anyone among you suffering?

James 5:13, Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

James gives us a way to approach suffering that will build faith.

Suffering can take all sorts of forms.

- There's psychological suffering.
- There's financial suffering.
- There's emotional suffering.
- The suffering of confusion.
- The suffering of worry and anxiety.
- The suffering of scars from the past.
- The suffering of sin and rebellion directed at you.
- The suffering of discrimination.
- The suffering of ridicule, scorn or neglect.

Now there are a lot of ways we can respond to suffering? We can wallow in self-pity. We can complain. We can gripe. We can whine. We can sulk. We can try to alter or fix the situation through dint of effort. All of these responses suffer from one major problem:

These responses don't work. These responses are doomed to fail from the beginning. It's like trying to launch a rocket into space that is constructed of cardboard. You're demanding something of cardboard that cardboard just isn't able to support. And similarly when we complain, sulk, gripe, we burn up. When we try to fix the problem through self-effort, we are incinerated. The weight of suffering is too large and too hot for our cardboard frames.

We can't fix suffering. We can't really do anything. So what do we do instead?

James says, if you are suffering, I want you to pray. If anyone is suffering, let him pray.

The faith is NOT in the fixing the situation. The FAITH is in the sovereignty of Jesus. The HOPE is not in the suffering ending. The hope is in the 100% certainty that the purposes of God will be realized. So we can build faith by praying in suffering.

So let me ask you, "Are you suffering? The instant next question, 'are you praying?'" They go together. It needs to be instinct.

Just picture putting your hand on a hot stove. It's just reaction. Your hand just jerks back. Let that be the picture for you. You find yourself in the pain of suffering. The prayer of your spirit just leaps into heaven.

When you suffer, the primary way in which you find help in that suffering is through prayer. And not just prayer by yourself. Pray with others. Ask others to pray for you. Ask others to come over and join in and pray for you.

Pray, pray, pray. It's the way we cast ourselves on the mercy of God.

Let us pray.

Is anyone among you rejoicing?

Second he says, is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. James gives us a way to approach happiness that will build faith.

Are you happy in life? That can be a faith building experience. Depending on your response that can either be a faith building or a faith wrecking experience.

Let's say you get a significant raise. Let's say you close on a new home. Let's say you get to go on a vacation. And you find yourself just so excited.

That can either destroy your faith or build your faith depending on your response. If you credit God for that moment of joy, that's a FAITH BUILDING experience? If you credit self for that moment of joy, that's a FAITH DESTROYING experience.

Because what you are doing is providing a feedback loop into your mind about where blessing is derived. If you credit self, then you destroy Faith. Essentially what you end up saying is, "Yeah, I know we all say that God is the giver of all good gifts, but let's be honest, 'I

made this happen through plain old fashioned hard work.'" That destroys faith.

On the other hand, think about a common table prayer. God, this food is making me happy. But I am here to acknowledge that this food, even though it looks like it comes from my hard work and money in the bank account, it really, finally and ultimately, comes from you and you alone. Thank you God! That's faith building.

The blessing of God can build your faith. Think about that. You don't have to feel guilty for being blessed. Are you happy? Then praise God. Do you have moments where your kids just make you sing for joy, then praise God! Do you have moments where you just overflow with happiness at God's creation? Sing praise!

Build your faith by being thankful. Every time you smile, let a prayer come out of your mouth. Here's how I think about it. Literally, as the corner of your mouth goes up, praise goes up.

Let us pray.

Is anyone among you sick?

Now the final condition he addresses is sickness. Sickness is really a subcategory of suffering mentioned in verse 14. Sickness is a particular form of suffering. And James has given us a way to approach sickness that will build faith.

James 5:14-15, Is anyone among you sick? 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. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Now there are a lot of interpretive issues here. And these interpretive issues are important; we need to spend time on them. Most of the times we don't spend very much time on interpretation because the interpretations are straight forward and so we choose instead to spend a lot of time on application but today's text is not that way. Depending on the interpretation, your application might be pretty drastically different. So we need to think through the various possible interpretations and then give reasons why a particular interpretation is most likely so you can have confidence in the application.

So we have three major interpretive issues here and I'll put them in the form of three questions.

What Does it Mean to Be Sick?

THREE KEY QUESTIONS

1. What does James mean by sick?

Is anyone among you sick? This is not as straight forward in the Greek as it may appear in the English. Here's the place in the text that gives rise to the question.

The Greek word behind the ESV's sick is *astheneō*, "to be weak."

This word is applied to all kinds of situations in the NT:

It can refer to our human limitations (our human weakness) as in Romans 6.19

Romans 6

Romans 6:19, I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

It can speak of our spiritual weakness.

Romans 5

Romans 5:6, For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

It can refer to a weak conscience.

1 Corinthians 8

1 Corinthians 8:7, However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

In can even refer to our physical appearance.

2 Corinthians 10

2 Corinthians 10:10, For they say, His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.

Because of the broad and varied usages, some commentators suggest that what is being referenced here is not physical illness but a spiritual weakness. So James would be saying, “Is anyone among you spiritually weak?” If that was the best understanding then the application would be for the spiritual leaders of the church to pray for this spiritually weak person so that his or her fervor for the Lord might be restored. An exhortation to pray for such a situation would fit very well at the end of a letter that has regularly chastised its readers for spiritual apathy.

I certainly think this is appropriate and an excellent application of the text. I don't think we should limit the concept of weakness to physical weakness. So let's apply that. If you are feeling spiritually weak, if you lack zeal and fervor, if you feel spiritually sluggish, if you feel like a tissue paper that's just ready to get engulfed in the next flame of temptation that blows your way, then call for prayer. Have the elders come pray for you.

Now some go too far in my opinion. Some Bible interpreters insist astheneo means ONLY spiritual weakness. The concept of praying for supernatural healing makes some feel uncomfortable so we have to make the text say something else. I get that, but we have to stare at the text and ask, “What is God saying here?”

To say that astheneo EXCLUSIVELY references spiritual weakness and has no application to physical illness goes way to far. Let me give you a few reasons why. Many have observed that the greatest influence on James’s vocabulary and theology comes from the gospels, and in the 12 times the word astheneo is used in the gospels, 12 times out of 12 ALWAYS denotes physical illness.

Additionally, the closest parallel to this text occurs in Mark 9 where anointing with oil is connected with physical healing.

Mark 6

Mark 6:13, And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

So to answer our first question, “What does James mean by sick?”

He means spiritually sick or physically sick. If you are either of these, call the elders. Now that leads to our second key interpretive question. When the elders come, they are supposed to anoint you with oil and pray over you that you might be healed. What does it mean to anoint a person with oil?

THREE KEY QUESTIONS

1. What does James mean by sick?
2. What is the purpose of anointing with oil?

The practice is only mentioned one other time in the Mark 5 passage we just read and it doesn't help any more than this passage. It's a little bit mysterious. What does James think that the anointing will accomplish?

There are really three possibilities here.

1. A Practical Medicinal Purpose

There's no question that oil was used medicinally all through the Roman empire during this time. You pressed out wounds. Along with wine, it's a great antiseptic to clean and sterilize wounds.

And while this is true, it's kind of strange to suggest medicinal usage of olive oil as a blanket remedy for what could be myriads of types of physical sickness.

It's like a doctor having one remedy no matter what your problem. Imagine going into the ER with a compound fracture sticking out your skin and the dr prescribes some olive oil. You might be a bit frustrated. Olive oil is great for somethings but it's certainly not universal.

Additionally, it's kind of assumed that others in their care network would have already done this sort of thing. Why are the elders called upon to administer an antiseptic? A medicinal explanation doesn't seem the most likely.

It also has the least support lexically. There are two words for anoint in the NT. Neither word ever refers to oil used medicinally. We do have one instance where we know that oil is used medicinally in the NT. Do you know where it is? It's the story of the good Samaritan. Remember the guy gets beat up by robbers and he has all these open wounds and left for dead. Along comes this Samaritan and the kind-hearted man binds up his wounds and pours out oil and wine on. In that case, the text doesn't use the word anoint. It simply uses the verb to "put on."

In my view this is the least likely option.

2. Sacramental/Symbolic Purpose.

Some have taught that this is sacramental. A sacrament by definition is something that imparts grace. In a sacrament there is a visible and an invisible reality. So for example, when I hug my kids,

the visible reality we see is the hug. The invisible reality is the love behind the hug. We cannot “see” the love the hug expresses.

Later today we are going to take communion. In communion we have an outward expression, the bread, but we also have an invisible, very real, reality. The invisible reality we cannot “see” is God’s grace. When we take communion his grace is made known in fresh ways. The redemption we’ve received through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ is freshly experienced.

Now some (primarily Roman catholics) have seen this administration of oil on the sick as a sacrament. So by anointing sick person with oil, we are imparting God’s grace in a special way to a person.

The main reason we would not adopt this interpretation is because this is not something Jesus directly told us to do. Regarding communion, Jesus told us to “do this in remembrance of him.” So we do.

Regarding baptism, Jesus told us to go into all the world and make disciples. How? By baptizing them. So we do.

That’s where the sacraments come from. But Jesus does not say to us. Go into all the world and anoint the sick.

Now a third possibility is closely related but distinct.

3. Symbolic

Anointing with oil frequently symbolizes the consecration of persons or things for God’s use and service in the OT.

Exodus 28

Exodus 28:41, And you shall put them on Aaron your brother, and on his sons with him, and shall anoint them and ordain them and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests.

Priests would also anoint temple furniture. It was a way of physically demonstrating this is no ordinary chair. This is a temple chair. This is no ordinary candlestick. We consecrate it, we set it apart for special use.

And this usage continues into the NT.

The apostles were anointed for special service. Jesus was anointed for his ministry.

So if James has this background in mind, then he would be recommending that the elders anoint the sick person in order vividly to show how that person is being set apart for God's special attention and prayer.

In effect, the oil is saying, "This is not a normal moment. This is a moment set apart for special prayer to the Lord." It's a physical way

of demonstrating that what is going on here is a special event.

We make these kind of distinctions all the time. When we graduate from school you wear strange hats with tassles and people wear strange robes. Why? You have clothes that are sanctified for that single usage. It makes that moment special. What we are doing here is not normal. This signifies something significant.

I think that's the best explanation of what is going on here. The oil is saying, this moment is special. This moment is no ordinary moment. You might feel a bit strange having oil put on you like you might feel strange wearing a gown with a tassel. That's by design. We don't do this everyday. We consecrate this moment for prayer.

So I think that answers our second question. What is the purpose of the oil? To set apart the moment and set apart the person. This is a scared moment where all eyes are toward heaven in a moment of great need. Now there's a third question that arises out of this text.

THREE KEY QUESTIONS

1. What does James mean by sick?
2. What is the purpose of anointing with oil?
3. Is there a relationship between sickness and sin?

The reason we ask this question is because the text, at bare minimum, implies this.



So here's this sick person (maybe spiritually sick; maybe physically sick). And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

The implication is that sin has caused the sickness; prayer and subsequent confession is necessary to be healed.

Is this what is being taught? Here's the million dollar question:

Is my physical or spiritual sickness caused by my unconfessed sinfulness?

You want to know what the answer is: Maybe. Maybe not.

That is a very uncomfortable answer but that's what the Bible teaches. On the one hand it's wrong to suggest that all sickness is the result of sin.

Certainly the book of Job, just last week, makes this point very strongly. Jesus also makes this point in John 9. Remember the disciples are approaching Jesus and they see this man born blind and they ask, "Who sinned that this man was born blind? Was it him or his parents?" And what was Jesus' response? Neither. He was born blind to demonstrate the glory of God.

So Job and Jesus both make it clear that drawing a direct relationship between illness and sin is impossible to do.

So it's wrong to claim that all people are sick because of sin. But it's also wrong to claim that no people are sick because of sin. The Bible does teach that some people are sick because of sin.

In our modern world we are so averse to thinking that any physical ailment has a spiritual connection. Physical disease has physical causes. You die of arsenic poisoning because you drank arsenic. Let's not spiritualize things that don't need to be spiritualized. I agree. I don't want to overspiritualize. But I also don't want to underspiritualize.

There are at least two things to say here.

First, the very modern medicine that we worship is now suggesting that much of the ailments that we suffer physically are results of internal emotional and spiritual issues. We can note the simple connections all the time. Stress creates ulcers, high blood pressure, stomach pain, brain fog... all of that can be caused by things going

on in your mind. Who among us have not noticed physical decline that is associated with emotional and spiritual suffering? We are connected beings.

So of course our spiritual condition affects our physical condition.

But beyond that simple insight, here's a second insight. The NT consistently teaches that some illnesses are, in fact, the disciplinary mercy of God:

1 Corinthians 11

1 Corinthians 11:27-30, Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

So let that sit. Don't move on too quickly. If you are sick, it's okay to ask the question, are you sick because of sin. Just ask it. It's okay. And just so you know, if that's the case, you aren't being punished. It's a mercy of God to slow you down.

It's a mercy of God to alert you. Imagine living in a body that gave you no indicators of pain. You'd twist your ankle off a curb and then just keep walking on it and keep injuring it. Pretty soon all the

ligaments in that angle would be absolutely destroyed. If you are living in sin and God halts you through sickness. That is a mercy. The most unloving thing in the world would be to allow you to continue in that self-destructive behavior.

So ask the question.

Application

Now here's the big point. We are going to get lost in the weeds here and never make the important application necessary. The most dangerous possible outcome of today is you walk away and you go, I always wondered what that passage meant. Sweet. I like that interpretation. And then it just vanishes from any practical expression in your life! NO.

Let me let you know how I think this should be applied right now. If you are suffering, what should you do? Pray. If you are happy, what should you do? pray and rejoice.

And if you are seriously sick (either spiritually or physically) what should you do? Call for the elders, ask your self if, perhaps, it's because of sin that you are sick, and have them come, anoint you with oil, set you apart for a special moment of prayer. This is not ordinary prayer. This is a special consecrated moment of prayer. This is the main job of the elders. Teach the word and pray.

And what does the text say?

“And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.
16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one

another, that you may be healed.”

You want to know what I hear here? I hear an OATH by God. We were told not to make OATHS. But here God is making an oath to us. There are only two ways a being can make an oath.

The first way you can make an oath is if something in the past already accomplished has implication in the future. For example. I might say to my son, when you get home, there will 20 dollars on the table waiting for you. I can promise that because that 20 dollars is already there. I put it there an hour ago and that past action will have future implications on my son. My son is saying, “Right dad, when have you ever done that.”

Secondly, I can promise if I have some reasonable way of controlling the future. I could say, “I promise when I get home, I’ll clean the dishes.” That’s an event that in most cases is within my ability to control.

Here Jesus is making an oath to us.

Three promises

- The prayer of faith will save the one who is WEAK.
- The Lord will raise him up.
- If he has committed sin (NOTE: it’s not always a sin issue. So it’s conditional). IF he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

God will save them. That’s the promise.

Those are all promises of God to those who pray. And they are based on the past action of Jesus Christ on the cross and they are based on Christ’s absolute control over the future. We do not know

how a sick person will be saved. We do not know. Some are saved in death. Some are saved through healing. But they are all raised up eventually. The weakness is replaced with strength. We don't know how the healing will come.

But we do know how sins are forgiven. Sins are forgiven by what we come here to celebrate this morning in communion. Listen, the great theme of James is confession. Confess your sins this morning. Confess. The cause of so much suffering in the world is just plain old, run of the mill sin.

Do you realize that all the suffering in the world could be instantly overcome if everyone just confessed their sin. Because if everyone did that God would be faithful and just to forgive that sin and cleanse them from all unrighteousness.

Think of a wound filled with dirt. That's the picture of sin. It's deeply infected. It's so sensitive when you touch it. That's sin. We are all so deeply affected. All of us. All should be able to confess right now. All should be able to come to the table and confess. We are a room full of beggars coming to the table this morning to receive grace we don't deserve.

But how wonderful!

Communion

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. I bind unto myself the Name, The strong Name of the

Trinity; By invocation of the same. The Three in One, and One in Three, Of Whom all nature hath creation, Eternal Father, Spirit, Word: Praise to the Lord of my salvation, Salvation is of Christ the Lord.



A bird is an instrument working according to mathematical law, and it is in the capacity of man to reproduce such an instrument. A man with wings large enough and duly attached might learn