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Bridgeway Church
James #19
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Healing and the Two “One-Anothers”
James 5:13-18

Many of you are new to Bridgeway and may not as yet fully understand what we mean when we say *we are a church committed to both the Word of God and the Spirit of God*. Or, upon hearing that, you may respond by saying: “Big deal. All churches *believe* in the importance of the Bible, and all churches *believe* in the existence of the Holy Spirit.” That may be true, but that’s not what we mean here at Bridgeway.

We are not merely “believers” in Word and Spirit. *We strive to be practitioners*. That means we are devoted to verse-by-verse expository preaching of God’s Word. We are committed to changing our beliefs when the Bible tells us we are wrong. We change our behavior when the Bible tells us we have gone astray. *The Bible exercises authority over our lives when it comes to what we believe and how we behave*.

But we also strive not merely to affirm the existence of the Holy Spirit, not merely to insist on his vital importance for Christian living. *We also strive to experience the power of the Holy Spirit through all the spiritual gifts described in the NT*. We believe these gifts continue and are valid in the church today because the Bible tells us they are. Thus we are people of the Spirit precisely because of our commitment to the authority of the Word. And we aim to implement, facilitate, and exercise these gifts in the power of the Spirit for the good of Christians and the glory of God.

One more thing. *We refuse* to let our emphasis on Scripture quench the presence and power of the Spirit, just as *we refuse* to let our pursuit and experience of the Spirit diminish the authoritative role of the Scriptures.

That is why we approach a passage like James 5 in the way we do. We are looking very closely and carefully at each word and phrase so that we might understand the truth about divine healing. And once we have determined what God’s design is for the church today, we will do precisely what the text says: we will anoint the sick with oil, we will confess our sins to one another, and we will pray for one another so that the sick might be healed.

“Doin’ the ‘Stuff’”

Some of you will remember a story I once told about John Wimber, a dear friend of mine who founded the Vineyard movement and died in 1997. John was the manager and also contributed to the musical arrangements of the Righteous Brothers in their early years. When he came to faith

in Christ he attended a church with his wife, Carol. After the service John greeted the pastor and asked him a simple question:

“Sir, I enjoyed the service, but when are we going to do the stuff?”

“The ‘stuff,’” the pastor asked, in a somewhat bewildered tone of voice? “What do you mean by the ‘stuff’?”

“You know,” said John, “the ‘stuff’: healing the sick and casting out demons and prophesying. The ‘stuff’!”

“Oh, I see what you mean,” said the pastor. “We don’t do the stuff. We preach about it. We believe what the Bible says about it. But we don’t do it.”

Well, here at Bridgeway we are committed not only to believing the “stuff” but “doing” it as well. And so we turn our attention yet again today to James 5 and the subject of the healing of the body.

A Brief Review

Two weeks ago in our first study of James 5 we looked at several things of great importance. I pointed out that the language used here most likely portrays a person who was physically ill and bed-ridden, perhaps even near death, who calls for the Elders of the church to pray for him/her. We talked about the symbolic use of oil as pointing to the person/power of the Holy Spirit. And we examined what James means by “the prayer of faith.”

But most important of all, I explained that in the NT, contrary to widespread, popular opinion, ***there is no such thing as “the” spiritual gift of healing.*** No one is ever portrayed as possessing the power to heal all people of every disease, at any time. Rather, the Holy Spirit sovereignly bestows to one person a gift for healing a particular disease, while then bestowing to yet another person yet another gift for the healing of yet another disease. Healing is never in our back pocket, so to speak, as if we control it and use it according to our will. Rather, multiple gifts for a variety of separate healings are bestowed by God according to his will.

Five Essential Truths

Let me say one more thing before we begin. My reason for paying such close and meticulous attention to the text of James 5 is to increase and deepen and intensify your faith in God’s power to heal and in his design for healing today. I want you to *believe* what James says so that you will *behave* in a way that will lead to the healing of the sick. I don’t want you merely to *believe* in the stuff: I want all of us at Bridgeway to be actively and energetically engaged in *doing* the stuff!

We now turn our attention to what James says in the remainder of v. 15, extending through v. 16. And there are five things that warrant our close study.

First, James says in v. 15 that ***“the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up”*** (v. 15b). He doesn’t mean that this person was an unregenerate, unbeliever. The word “save” is often used in the NT to describe not merely spiritual forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal condemnation. It is also used to describe physical healing of the body. There are countless examples of this in the NT, but one verse should be enough. It concerns the woman who suffered from a discharge of blood for over twelve years. We read in Matthew 9 that

“she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.’ Jesus turned, and seeing her said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well” (Matt. 9:21-22; see also Mark 6:56; 10:52; Luke 17:19).

The word translated “made well” that occurs three times is the same Greek word found in James 5. We could as easily translate Matthew’s text: “If I only touch his garment, I will be ***saved***. . . . Take heart, daughter; your faith has ***saved*** you. . . . [and] the woman was ***saved***.”

And this is confirmed by what we see in the next phrase which says that God will “raise him up,” that is to say, he will physically raise him up from his sickbed.

Second, James says that ***“if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”*** (v. 15c). James is in harmony with Jesus (John 9:1-3) and Paul (2 Cor. 12:1-10) that not all sickness is the direct result of sin. Sometimes it is (1 Cor. 11:27-30; Mark 2:1-12) but not always. The ***“if”*** in verse 15 is not designed to suggest the one who is sick may *never* have sinned. The meaning is that if God should heal him in answer to prayer, this indicates that any sins of the sufferer, which might have been responsible for this particular illness, were forgiven. In other words, *if* sins were responsible for his sickness, the fact that God healed him physically would be evidence that God had forgiven him spiritually.

Third, James says that before you pray for one another you should ***“confess your sins to one another”*** (v. 16a).

The NT never singles out any individual or special group of ministers who alone are “priests” and are uniquely privileged or empowered or have greater and more consistent access to God. All Christians are priests. James has in mind mutual confession; not of all individuals to one priest, but of each individual to every other individual as the need may present itself.

So how does this work? Some suggestions for how to confess your sins to one another.

(1) First, this “confession” can happen anywhere at any time. It can happen over coffee or lunch with a friend. It can happen in your community group, if you should choose to confess in the presence of several people. It can happen in your D-group with two or three of your closest friends. It can happen in smaller prayer sessions such as those we make available for you on Sunday morning during the service. It can happen after our services, with the help of one or several of our prayer ministry members.

But note carefully that it is confession “to one another” and not just to God. Certainly there is the need for confessing sins to God, but James has in mind taking this a step further and making it known to another Christian. Not a non-Christian. Not a golfing buddy or the lady next door. It is one Christian to another or to several other Christians.

(2) Although James does not specify when or where or to how many this confession should be made, it seems reasonable to think that the first and best way to obey this command is to do it ***privately rather than publicly***. I don’t think James is encouraging that all the members of a local church stand up in front of the rest and publicly confess their sins. It may be that on occasion a few need to do this, but James is probably thinking of a more private, one-on-one situation.

(3) The first and most obvious way in which we might fulfill this command is by confessing to the person against whom we’ve committed the sin. If “Joe” has sinned against “Mike” it is much easier for him to tell “Bob” – “I sinned against Mike when I slandered him to a group of people just to make myself look good.” It is much more difficult for “Joe” to go to “Mike” directly and say to him – “Mike, I need to confess to you that I sinned against you. I spoke ill of you in front of others, all to make myself look good. Would you please forgive me for this?”

Quite honestly, sometimes we are willing to tell someone else a sin we committed as a way of avoiding having to confess to the person we sinned against face-to-face. But what good is it to confess your sin against “Mike” simply by telling “Bob” about it? That enables you to “confess” without also repenting and asking for forgiveness from the person you offended.

I don’t think James means that if your struggle is with lust that you should go to the woman or man who is the focus of your lust and say: “I need to confess to you that I often lust for you. I have sexual fantasies about you.” No. That should be confessed to a third party. And it may be best that you not mention the name of the person for whom you lust.

(4) People often ask: “Do I need to confess my sins to someone I know, or can it be to a stranger?” Again, oftentimes people prefer to confess to someone that doesn’t know them. It’s easier. It’s safer. It’s less likely you’ll feel ashamed or embarrassed because a total stranger has no prior expectations of your behavior. Some are disinclined to confess to someone who already knows them out of fear they might lose face or suffer loss of respect. But if this is in your heart, it may be an indication that you aren’t entirely sincere or humble or broken. If you are still self-protective, one might wonder if you are being entirely honest with the Lord and with others about your sins. What good is that sort of confession?

(5) I think the best way to fulfill James’s counsel is first of all, if possible, confess your sins to the person against whom they’ve been committed. Ask their forgiveness. But second, if your sinful struggles are more general and less directed to a particular person, speak to a friend or several of them and open up your heart in honest contrition. Some sins are more self-referential in the sense that they can be present in your life and no one else would know about them. I have

in mind things such as envy, unbelief, greed, selfishness, idolatry, jealousy, drunkenness, and pride.

(6) If someone confesses their sin to you, you are under strict obligation never to repeat the content of that confession or the person's sin to anyone else. There are two exceptions. First, it may be that the person confessing gives you permission to tell others. Second, if they confess to you that they have committed a physical or sexual assault against a minor, you are obligated by law to report this to the authorities. It may be best that you report this to a pastor or an Elder who will then assist you in making the report to the proper legal authorities.

(7) What should you do if someone comes and says, "I've been sexually unfaithful to my spouse." What should you do? First, process this with a pastor or Elder or your community group leader. Second, the likelihood is that you would need to return to this individual and say to them: "It's important that you not conceal this any longer from your spouse. You should go to them immediately and confess to them also. If you don't, I will do so myself." Give them a reasonable time-frame within which to make this happen.

Fourth, after confessing your sins, "***pray for one another***" (v. 16b). Notice the word "*therefore*" with which v. 16 opens. In other words, he is saying: "*Since* God can heal the sick when we pray for them, as v. 15 makes abundantly clear, be diligent to pray for one another."

What we learn from v. 16 is that *it isn't just the Elders who are responsible to pray for the sick*. The entire body of Christ, men and women, young and old, are instructed to pray "for one another" so that "you," the people in the local church, "may be healed." You must never think that you are excused from praying for the sick simply because you are not an Elder. The word translated "one another" is all-inclusive: everyone in the body of Christ is responsible to pray for everyone else.

Ask God to increase your faith and confidence in his ability. Ask God to impart a gift for this particular healing. Ask God to be merciful and kind and compassionate. Ask God to release his power into this person's body and to restore it completely to its former condition of health.

Note carefully that James does not simply say, "Expect God to heal you." He holds out the possibility of healing but ***only after*** we confess our sins to one another and pray for one another.

But why is confession so important? Why would God seemingly suspend healing on it? There are several ways to answer this.

If your sin is one of bitterness or resentment or unforgiveness, there is an undeniable emotional and psychological release that comes with confession. These sinful energies in the soul can eat away at you much like an acid, poisoning your heart, bringing depression and anger, blinding you to the truths of God's grace. It's almost as if such sins release a toxin into your spirit. They sour the soul. They likely cause you to doubt God's goodness and power.

If the sin is one of unforgiveness or resentment, you may need to speak directly to the other person involved. “I need to confess to you that I’ve not forgiven you for what happened. I still hold anger and bitterness in my heart toward you for what you did and I often find myself wishing that bad things would come your way. That is evil. It is sinful for me to think of you in this way. I don’t want to think or feel this way ever again. Will you forgive me for failing to forgive you? Will you forgive me for holding this against you?”

One more thing should be noted. It is horribly inconsistent and presumptuous of us to continue in unrepentant sin all the while we ask God to heal our bodies. It’s as if we are saying: “God, I’m enjoying my sexual immorality too much to give it up, but while I’ve got your attention, could you help me with this deep pain in my back?” Or, “Lord, I genuinely resent Steve/Sally. And I intend to continue to hold resentment in my heart. But since you’re merciful, would you go ahead and heal me of diabetes?”

What this tells us is that God has chosen to suspend healing mercy on the repentance of his people. When the hurting don’t get healed, it may be a result of stubbornness and spiritual insensitivity more than because “God doesn’t do that sort of thing anymore.” Simply put: we should never expect that God will heal us while we hypocritically nurture in our hearts unforgiveness and anger and spite and greed and lust without sensing any need to confess such sins or to turn from them.

Fifth, what reason do we have to believe that any of this will make any difference at all? The reason is found in the last half of v. 16 – ***“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working”*** (v. 16c). Do you believe that? If not, why not? Is God misleading us by having James write this? Surely not.

So what does James mean by the word “righteous”? In one sense, all born-again believers are “righteous” through faith in Christ. God has imputed or reckoned to you the righteousness of his Son. So every Christian can lay hold of this promise. On the other hand, he also wants us to understand that if we choose to live “unrighteously” by willfully resisting God’s will and selfishly refusing to repent or confess our sins, we shouldn’t expect that our prayers will accomplish much. This is what we saw in James 4:2-3.

But if we humbly acknowledge our sins and seek by God’s grace to live in accordance with his revealed will, there simply is no limit to what God will do for us in response to our prayers. Never forget: there is “great power” in and through prayer because we pray to an omnipotent and almighty God!

So, Why Doesn’t God Always Heal the Sick?

The reason why many are not healed may be answered in any one of eight ways.

(1) Although we must be careful in giving more weight to the role of *faith* than does the NT itself, we also must be willing to acknowledge that occasionally healing does not occur because of the absence of that sort of faith that God delights to honor. This does not mean that every time a person isn't healed it is because of a defective faith or that if only a more robust and doubt-free faith were in exercise that healing would inevitably follow. But it does mean that faith is very important.

(2) As we've just seen in James 5, sometimes healing does not occur because of the presence of sin for which *there has been no confession or repentance*. Again, please do not conclude from this that each time a person isn't healed it is because he/she has committed some specific sin of which they have refused to repent. But in some cases (not necessarily all) this is undoubtedly true.

(3) Although it sounds odd to many at first hearing, healing may not happen because the sick *don't want* it to happen. Jesus asked the paralyzed man in John 5:6, "Do you want to be healed?" What on the surface may appear to be a ridiculous question is seen, on further examination, to be profoundly insightful.

Some people who suffer from a chronic affliction become accustomed to their illness and to the pattern of life it requires. Their identity is to a large extent wrapped up in their physical disability. I realize that sounds strange to those of us who enjoy robust health. Why would anyone prefer to stay sick? Who wouldn't jump at the opportunity to be healed? But I've actually known a handful of folk who in a very real sense enjoy their dependence on others and the special attention it brings them. They are convinced that the only reason people take note of them and show them kindness and compassion is because of their affliction. If they were healed they fear losing the love on which they've come to depend. Remaining sick is to their way of thinking a small price to pay to retain the kindness and involvement of those who otherwise would simply ignore them. Then, of course, in some instances people don't want the responsibilities that would come with being healthy. To their way of thinking, it's easier (and perhaps even more profitable) to remain the object of other's generosity and good will than it would be to be healthy and thus expected to get a job and show up 9-5 on a daily basis. This is not a common phenomenon, but it does happen in a few cases.

(4) We must also consider the principle articulated in James 4:2, where we are told that "you do not have, because you do not ask." The simple fact is that some are not healed because *they do not pray*. Perhaps they pray once or twice, and then allow discouragement to paralyze their petitions. *Prayer for healing should be prolonged, sustained, persevering, and on occasion combined with fasting.*

(5) Some are not healed because the ***demonic cause*** of the affliction has not been addressed. I'm not suggesting that all physical disease is demonically induced. But consider the case of the woman in Luke 13 "who had a disabling spirit [or, a spirit of infirmity] for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" (Luke 13:11). According to Jesus, "Satan" had "bound" her (Luke 13:16; cf. Acts 10:38). It takes considerable discernment, time, and patience to determine if an illness has a demonic cause, together with even greater commitment to praying for that individual and leading them to address the reasons for their spiritual oppression. When these factors are ignored, healing may not be forthcoming.

(6) We must also consider ***the mystery of divine providence***. There are undoubtedly times and seasons in the purposes of God during which his healing power is withdrawn or at least largely diminished. God may have any number of reasons for this to which we are not privy, whether to discipline a wayward and rebellious church or to create a greater desperation for his power or to wean us off excessive dependence on physical comfort and convenience or any number of other possibilities.

(7) Then there is ***1 Peter 3:7***, where the apostle says to men: "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, *so that your prayers may not be hindered.*"

If you want your prayers to be helped and not hindered you have to live with your wife in gentleness and kindness and with concerted effort to understand what makes her tick and what she needs most from you. You must speak of her and treat her as someone who has experienced God's saving grace no less than you have. You must honor her! All belittling and criticism and sarcasm and devaluation of her must stop! Now! And forever!

[But what must we say when the problem isn't the absence of faith or the presence of a demon or the refusal to repent or the failure to pray or a lack of desire or the failure to honor our wives? How then do we account for on-going physical affliction?]

(8) ***Often times there are dimensions of spiritual growth and moral development and increase in the knowledge of God in us that he desires more than our physical health, experiences that in his wisdom God has determined can only be attained by means of or in the midst of or in response to less than perfect physical health. In other words, healing the sick is a good thing (and we should never cease to pray for it), but often there is a better thing that can only be attained by means of physical weakness.***

More important to God than our physical health is our spiritual holiness. This isn't to say the body isn't important. God isn't a Gnostic! He values and has redeemed our bodies and now dwells within them as his eternal temple. But while we live in this corrupt and decaying world, inner and spiritual conformity to the image of Christ often comes only at the expense of or at least simultaneous with physical deterioration and suffering (see 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

If I believe Romans 8:28, that God sovereignly orchestrates all events in my life for my ultimate spiritual good (and preeminently for his ultimate glory), I can only conclude that, ***all things being equal, if I'm not healed it is because God values something in me greater than my physical comfort and health that he, in his infinite wisdom and kindness, knows can only be attained by means of my physical affliction and the lessons of submission, dependency, and trust in God that I learn from it.***

In the final analysis, *we may never know why a person isn't healed*. What, then, ought to be our response? In the first place, don't stop praying! Consider the Apostle Paul's "thorn in the flesh" which he repeatedly asked God to remove from him (2 Cor. 12:7-10). But why should Paul bother to pray for release from something that God wills to inflict? The answer is because Paul didn't know what God's will was in this particular case until such time as God chose to make it known. And neither do you or I know God's will with regard to any particular illness that we may suffer.

If the Lord had never said in response to Paul's prayer, "No, it isn't my will that you be relieved of this thorn," Paul would have been justified, indeed required, to continue to pray for his healing. I once heard my friend Jack Taylor put it this way: ***"Never cease praying for healing until you are shown otherwise either by divine revelation or death!"*** If you are able to discern, as did Paul, through some prophetic disclosure or other legitimate biblical means that it is not God's will now or ever to heal you, you may cease asking him to do so. Otherwise, short of death itself, you should persevere in prayer. You never know but that God's ultimate and long-term will for you is complete healing after he has for a season accomplished his short-term sanctifying purpose.

In Paul's case, the only reason he ceased asking for deliverance was because God, in effect, told him to shut up! "No, Paul. I'm not going to heal you. It isn't my will in this instance that you be set free from this affliction. Rather, I have a higher purpose in view: your humility and my Son's glory manifest in the context of your on-going weakness."

Conclusion

Finally, we must be willing to bear the stigma of *perceived* failure. It isn't failure. But it may be "perceived" by others as failure. We have succeeded when we have obeyed the Scriptures to pray for the sick. Whether or not they are healed rests with God.

John Wimber once said, "I decided long ago that if one hundred people receive prayer and only one is healed, it is better than if none receive prayer and no one is healed" (*Power Healing*, xviii). I agree.