

James: The Practical Christian

The Christian's Godly Responses

James 5:13-16a

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Scripture

James is the brother of our Lord Jesus. Since Jesus was Mary's firstborn child (Luke 2:7), James was obviously a younger brother. In fact, it is likely that James was the second-oldest of the five sons that Mary had (cf. Mark 6:3). James eventually came to believe that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, the Anointed One sent by Jehovah to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

The letter that James sent out "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (James 1:1) is really a remarkable piece of literature. It has been said that the letter of James is the "Wisdom Literature of the New Testament." I tend to agree with that assessment, as it contains wonderfully helpful material about how to develop a faith that really works in the nitty gritty of life.

In his letter James addresses all kinds of issues that are important for Christian living. In our text for today, James describes the Christian's godly responses to various situations. Let's read what James says in James 5:13-16a:

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. (James 5:13-16a)

Introduction

Some of you send me articles of humor via the internet. Someone sent this to me some time ago. It is titled "You know it's going to be a bad year when. . . ." Let me share it with you.

You know it's going to be a bad year when. . . .

- The Government notifies you that your Social Security number has been revoked.
- Your personal computer threatens to tell all.
- The moving van starts to unload next door, and the first four items down the ramp are dirt bikes.
- Your 14-year-old daughter insists that Jesus never preached against pierced noses, tongues, and belly-buttons.
- Your ailing station wagon fails to qualify for the demolition derby.
- Your new boss asks if they've filled your old position yet.
- Your pacemaker is recalled by the manufacturer.
- Your church treasurer says, "The IRS called me the other day about some of your donation totals."

We smile when we hear about these humorous situations. But life so often presents us with situations that are not humorous. How do you respond to the various situations that come your way in life? For example:

- How do you respond when trouble comes your way?
- How do you respond when you're happy?
- How do you respond when you're sick?
- How do you respond when you have sinned?

Each of us responds in different ways. However, the word of God has some clear guidelines for us as to how we ought to respond to the various situations that come our way in life.

Lesson

In James 5:13-16a, the brother of our Lord teaches us how the Christian ought to respond in times of trouble, happiness, sickness, and sin. Let's learn what the Christian's godly responses should be in these situations.

I. How Should Christians Respond When in Trouble? (5:13a)

First, how should Christians respond when in trouble?

James begins in verse 13 by asking, “**Is any one of you in trouble?**”

The Greek word for “**trouble**” is “suffering misfortune,” or “suffering in difficult circumstances.” James uses the word “**trouble**” to describe any suffering, misfortune, or difficulty in life.

We should note in the first place that Christians are not exempt from **trouble** in life. It is false doctrine that teaches that Christians do not suffer difficulty or misfortune. Proponents of the “prosperity gospel” are in error when they teach that Christians should be healthy, wealthy and free from trouble.

James does not define the nature of the **trouble** that a Christian can face. However, in this letter written to Christians scattered abroad because of persecution (and persecution sounds like a “**trouble**!”), James mentions a number of troubles facing them:

- discrimination because of poverty (2:1-4)
- exploitation and litigation by the rich (2:5-7; 5:1-6)
- lack of clothing and food (2:15)
- fights and quarrels (4:1-3)
- slander (4:11-12)
- physical, personal, and material suffering (5:10-11).

There is plenty of **trouble**! Well, how do people respond to **trouble**? Some may become *angry* at their lot in life. Or they may try to *ignore* their trouble. Others may become *depressed*. Still others may, like the sailors on Jonah’s boat, *pray* to his own god (Jonah 1:5). None of these is the proper response for the Christian.

In answer to the question, “**Is any one of you in trouble?**” James says, “**He should pray.**” Prayer is the proper, godly response to **trouble**. The great Reformer John Calvin says that “there

is no time in which God does not invite us to himself. For afflictions ought to stimulate us to pray.”¹

Throughout the Scriptures we learn that prayer is the proper, godly response to **trouble**. Manasseh prayed when he was shackled and bound in Babylon (2 Chronicles 33:10-13). Job prayed during the time of his affliction and suffering (Job 33:26). David prayed when he hid from Saul in the cave of Adullam (Psalm 142). Jonah prayed when he was inside the fish (Jonah 2:1-10). And, of course, our supreme model is Jesus himself when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest (Luke 22:39-44).

When you are in **trouble**, let me urge you to pray. Why pray? Hebrews 4:16 says: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” In your time of trouble God promises mercy and grace when you seek him in prayer.

II. How Should Christians Respond When Happy? (5:13b)

Second, how should Christians respond when happy?

James asks, “**Is anyone happy?**” (5:13b).

Life for the Christian is not always trouble. There are times of joy and happiness.

How should the Christian respond in times of happiness? James says, “**Let him sing songs of praise**” (5:13b). When things go well for the non-Christian, he attributes his joy to himself and to his circumstances. But when things go well for the Christian, he attributes that to the goodness of God and he responds by singing **songs of praise**. He is mindful of the fact that it is God who is the source of his happiness and joy (Psalm 21:6).

James’ point in verse 13 is that happiness is every much a reason for coming before the Lord as is trouble. The difference is simply that when we are **happy**, we have something for which to praise him.

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume 22, James* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 354.

William Law, in his book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, writes, “Would you know who is the greatest saint in the world? It is not he who prays most or fasts most; it is not he who gives most alms, or is most eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice, but it is he who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God wills, who received everything as an instance of God’s goodness, and has a heart always ready to praise God for it.”

So what is the proper, godly response when you are **happy**? You are to **sing songs of praise**.

III. How Should Christians Respond When Sick? (5:14-15)

Third, how should Christians respond when sick?

James asks, “**Is any one of you sick?**” He answers: “**He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 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**” (5:14-15).

Now, what are we to make of these verses? This instruction has been interpreted differently throughout the history of the Church. Let me clear the ground of some false interpretations.

By the way, I often hear people say that different churches or individuals have different interpretations of Scripture. That is true. But it is not true that all interpretations are correct. Clearly, the author (both human and divine) had only one idea in mind with only one interpretation. This principle is stated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (I.IX) as follows: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (*which is not manifold, but one*), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly” (italics mine). Our task as interpreters of God’s word is to seek the “true and full sense” (that is, the right interpretation) of each passage.

Now, let’s note some of the false interpretations. First, the Roman Catholic Church uses this passage to establish their sacra-

ment of “The Anointing of the Sick,” also known as “Extreme Unction.” In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to indeed by Mark, but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of our Lord.”² This anointing, in practice today, is usually given to people in imminent danger of death in order to prepare them for eternity. But this is not what James is describing. James does not tell us what kind of illness is involved here, whether life-threatening or not. His words are completely general. In any sickness, the individual is at liberty to call for the elders. Furthermore, James does not tell us that the person’s death is imminent; in fact, it is quite the reverse. The sick person, rather than die, is, if anything, expected to recover.

Another false interpretation is given by none other than the great John Calvin³ and other Reformed commentators (such as Thomas Manton⁴). They contend that this ministry of healing was either exercised by the apostles or confined to apostolic times, but which has now ceased to be available to the Church. However, James clearly says that the sick person is to call **the elders of the church** and not the apostles (who exercised the miraculous gift of healing). James associates this ministry to the sick, not with the unique and irreplaceable apostles, nor with the long-passed apostolic age, but with the continuing leadership in the local church, namely, the elders.

A third false interpretation is given by Charismatics who find support here for their “miracle healing services.” Clearly what James describes is a far cry from the modern day healing services. In a healing service, the venue is a church or some such meeting place; James implies that the venue is the home. In a healing service, the “healer” invites the sick; James says that the sick one is to call for the elders. In a healing service, the “healer” is often a visit-

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1994), p. 378.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 355-356.

⁴ Thomas Manton, *A Commentary on James* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), pp. 448-451.

ing preacher/healer; James says that the ones who pray must be the elders of the church of which the sick person is a member.

These three different interpretations have begun to clear the ground for the right interpretation. Notice five points in particular.

First, call for the elders. James says that the sick person **“should call the elders of the church. . .”** (5:14a). Notice that it is the responsibility of the sick person to **call the elders** and not the responsibility of the elders (and particularly the pastor) to find out who is sick! There are some people who get upset when the pastor doesn’t visit them when they are sick. Most often the reason is that he doesn’t know that they are sick, and they don’t know that it is their responsibility to contact him!

But more than that, James indicates that it is the *duty* of the sick person to **call the elders of the church**. The verb **“call”** is in the imperative in the Greek; in other words, it is a *command*.

Let me make an application at this point. When you are sick, **call the elders of the church** to pray for you. James does not define the nature of the sickness; he simply says that if you are **sick**, if you have some ailment, if you have a need, you are to **call the elders of the church**. In my three and a half years as Pastor at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church hardly anyone has called specifically for the elders of the church to come and pray for an ailment. Brothers and sisters, that ought not to be the case. I can think of only two reasons why our members have not called for the elders of the church to pray. One reason is *ignorance*: members did not know that they were supposed to call the elders. Having just explained this passage to you, you are now no longer ignorant! And the second reason is *pride*: members did not want to call the elders to pray because of an unwillingness to ask for help. Let me urge you as strongly as I can: if you are sick, you **should call for the elders of the church** to pray for you.

Second, prayer by the elders. Just as it is the duty of the sick person to call for the elders of the church, so it is the duty of the elders of the church **to pray over him**. The word **“pray”** is also in the imperative (i.e., a command) in the Greek. Praying for the

needs of the sick is one of the duties God has given to the elders of the church. Let me assure you that it would be a joy for our elders to pray for you if you are sick.

Third, anointing with oil. The sick person is anointed with oil. Although oil was often used for its medicinal value in biblical times (cf. Psalm 55:21; Luke 10:34), that is not what James has in mind here. The fundamental significance of oil and anointing was its use as a symbol for the grace of God (e.g. Psalm 133:2; Mark 13:6). There was no magic in the oil since it was not the effectual cause of the healing; it simply pointed to the grace of God. In this respect, oil is neither effectual nor necessary.

Fourth, the healing. The promise of healing is connected to the prayer and not to the anointing or the oil. James says, **“And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up”** (5:15a). This seems to be an unconditional promise. This is not unlike other statements in Scripture, such as Jesus’ statement in Mark 11:24: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Yet, we all know that not everyone is healed for whom prayer is offered. What should we make of this verse?

Scripture teaches us that all of our petitions are subject to the sovereign will of God. 1 John 5:14 says: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us.” The key phrase, of course, is “*according to his will*.” In other words, as commentator J. A. Motyer puts it, “In the prayer of faith, our prayer is not that the promises will be fulfilled just like that; it is the faith which rests trustfully on the will of a sovereign, gracious and loving God.”⁵ What is the effect of acknowledging that all of our petitions are subject to the will of God? “Its effect,” says Motyer, “is to take away from our prayers all the limitations of our knowledge of what our real needs are, all the limitations of our proposals for the meeting of our needs, and to place ourselves and our needs unreservedly into the hands of

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Tests of Faith* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 118.

that infinite wisdom, love and power which is our heavenly Father's. To say, 'Thy will be done' *does not impose a restriction on what we ask; it lifts the restrictions.*"⁶

So, we pray and ask God to restore health and strength to the person who is sick, knowing that God will act in accordance with what he knows is best for that person. Our duty is to trust God and know that he makes no mistakes.

And fifth, the forgiveness of sin. James says, **"If he has sinned, he will be forgiven"** (5:15b). There is a dimension of healing besides that of the body. There are three possibilities here. One is that, while sick, the sick person becomes aware that his sickness is due to sin. This, of course, is what happened to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:29-30). Or second, while sick, by self-examination he becomes aware of sins that he had forgotten. They did not cause his illness, but his illness was the opportunity of remembering them. This, it seems to me, is what happened to Hezekiah (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:24-26). Or third, while sick, he recognizes that he cannot ever be completely whole unless he is also completely reconciled to God. This is what happened to Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Daniel 4:28-37). However the sin comes to mind, the sick person is to let this be a time of spiritual healing as well.

So, how does the Christian respond to sickness? The proper, godly response to sickness is to call for the elders of the church so that they can pray with and for you.

IV. How Should Christians Respond When in Sin? (5:16a)

And finally, how should Christians respond when in sin?

The sick person and the elders are no longer in view. James tells us what to do when we have sinned: **"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed"** (5:16a).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

The word “**therefore**” is important. What James is saying is this: “Seeing that prayer is such a wonderful thing, seeing that we can bring our sick friends to God in prayer, and that God has pledged himself along these lines in the generosity of prayer, then surely we are to lay hold of prayer for all of life’s situations.”

James says that if a person is struggling with sin, he should find another Christian in whom to confide. This kind of support is essential in any Christian fellowship. But before we commit to each other in the bonds of confidence for confession and prayer we ought to observe two rules which James makes for this kind of mutual support. First, when James says, “**And pray for each other,**” he is declaring that there should be no hearing of someone else’s confession of sin and need without a deliberate intention of making it a matter of prayer. We are not to have a spirit of prying curiosity which, apart from not helping the confessor with his sin, would make the whole confession a matter of sin for the listener.

James’ second rule is that there must be no confession without the determination to be healed, to be rid of that sin. Notice that this is the stated aim of the confession and prayer: “**Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.**” Just as the listener needs to examine his motives in listening, so the confessor needs to examine his motives in confessing. He is not to confess his sin unless his desire is to be rid of it.

So, what is the proper response to sin? The proper, godly response to sin is to **confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.**

Conclusion

These are the proper, godly responses to trouble, happiness, sickness and sin in our lives. May God help us all to respond in these ways to the various situations we encounter in life. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father in heaven, your word is so practical. In the text we examined today you revealed to us how we are to respond to various life situations. Help each one of us to respond to trouble, happiness, sickness and sin in the way you have commanded in your word.

Oh Lord, we know that we are unable to respond apart from your grace. So, we cast ourselves upon your grace. Help each one of us to acknowledge and submit to your grace in our lives. And as we do so, we ask that you will receive all the honor and glory.

All these things we pray in and through Jesus our Savior and Lord. Amen.

CHARGE:

Realize today that trouble, happiness, sickness and sin are God-given opportunities for you to demonstrate godly responses in the race called “life.” Depend upon God and his grace to help you respond in godly ways and develop a faith that really works in the nitty gritty of life. And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all forevermore. Amen.