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Is Anyone Among You Sick?

James 5:14

Prayer: *Father, I do thank you for your grace, I do thank you for the incredible blessing that we have, even of a place to meet, a place to come every week where so far we are unfettered by the fears of government intrusion, yet we don't know how long that will last. And Father, I just, again, I thank you for just the ability to gather together, the ability to corporately raise our voices in song and prayer and worship and the ability to corporately come together, to open up your word. I pray this morning as we do just that, Lord, as we again go back to your book, the book of James, that you would give us the presence of your Holy Spirit, enable us to open up this book, enable us to see it, to hear it and to again make it a permanent part of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, it was about 13 years ago and we were sitting around the table having dinner with Elisa, my daughter, and Alex, her husband, and the kids when Leah, my granddaughter who was about nine or ten months old at the time and who was actually walking, she came to

the table looking very, very strange. Actually what she did was she came to the table with her head tilted way, way back because her eyelids were almost completely closed and she was tilting her head back in order to be able to see, and Janice took one look at her and said, "Elisa, you've got to get her to a doctor." Well, long story short, there was a series of tests and diagnoses, et cetera, and the diagnosis came back that Leah had a disease known as myasthenia gravis. The Mayo Clinic describes this disease this way. It says: "Myasthenia gravis is characterized by weakness and rapid fatigue of any of the muscles under your voluntary control. Myasthenia gravis is caused by a breakdown in the normal communication between nerves and muscles. There is no cure for myasthenia gravis, but treatment can help relieve signs and symptoms such as weakness of arm or leg muscles, double vision, drooping eyelids and difficulties with speech, chewing, swallowing, and breathing. Though myasthenia gravis can affect people of any age, it's more common in women younger than 40 and in men older than 60." It was extremely rare in little girls less than one year old. And so the diagnosis was in and the diagnosis obviously was not good. It was a disease that had no cure, but we were told that it was manageable with drugs. Alex and Elisa came to the elders, and we gathered around Leah anointing her with oil and praying for her, and within two weeks, the disease was completely gone. In 13 -- in the 13 years since, there's never been even a trace of it.

Our text this morning is James 5:13-15, it says this: *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.*

40 years ago I was working as a carpenter in San Francisco. I developed a chronic cough that would not go away. In fact I was drinking about a bottle of cough syrup a day just to keep it under control. Janice finally got me to go to a friend of hers who was a doctor and he got me to take a chest x-ray, and he told me that it looked very, very bad. He said my lymph nodes were swollen to the size of golf balls, and he thought -- they thought that I had some form of cancer. So they scheduled me for a lymph node biopsy which was negative, and finally after a while, they came up with a diagnosis. I had a disease known as Boeck's Sarcoidosis. It's an autoimmune disease that affects the lungs. You might recall Bernie Mac, the comedian, he died of Boeck's sarcoidosis. Well, the doctors told me it's a disease that comes from we don't know where, it lasts we don't know how long, and sometimes it leaves for reasons we don't know why. Well, my church at that time prayed for

me in the same manner that James prescribes, and the disease disappeared. That was 40 years ago. I have not had a symptom since. So you might say I have very good reasons to believe in this text. What I don't believe in is magic.

Over the last 40 years, we have prayed this prayer over scores of people. Some were miraculously healed. Others were not. But everyone who prayed like James says to pray was blessed. Let me take some time to explain how. James 5:13 says: *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.* So James starts out by identifying what should be an automatic response in every believer. You know, suffering or -- or trouble or difficulty should automatically produce in us a response of prayer. There are plenty of times when I hear Jan and myself on the phone saying, "Oh, no" or "Oh, I am so sorry." These words are often followed by the question, "Can I pray for you right now?" *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*

Conversely, good news and blessings should automatically call for songs of praise. Again, James 5:13: *Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.* Psalm 92:1: *It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O, Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night.* We've heard this sung many, many times. There's something

medicinally blessed about expressing good news through praise. Proverbs 17:22 says: *A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.* You know, at any given moment, I can tell in a phone conversation what is going on on one end of the line by listening to Janice on the other end. You know, if she's exclaiming, "Oh, praise God," "Oh, that's wonderful," or "God is so good," well, obviously I know that the news is good. And that's just the way it should be, we should be praising out when there's good news.

On the other hand, James says in James 5:14: *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.*

Well, let's break this down a little bit. Let's look first at the idea of anointing with oil. There are many different opinions as to what this means. But we know from the gospels that oil was frequently used in those days medicinally. The good Samaritan was one who tended to the wounded man by giving him oil. In Luke 10:34 it says this: *He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.* See, the oil would soothe while the

alcohol and the wine would be antiseptic to the wound. Now there are some who say that oil is simply symbolic of the best medical treatment one could find at that time, and they interpret James as saying do likewise, but understand that the best medicine there is is simply man's ends -- man's means to God's ends. After all, it was James who told us in James 1:17: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* What he's telling us is that God has given us the gift of medicine, that it is as much a part of healing as any other part.

Now, the other symbolic use of oil is that of anointing. You know, in the Old Testament, kings were always anointed to signify God's special blessing. Well, the anointing that the elders do is designed to signify God's blessing through the Holy Spirit as well. The act of anointing a person sets that person and that circumstance apart from normal every day activity. We know when someone comes to the elders to anoint him or her, we know that it's not for a head cold or a hangnail. So the principles are actually very, very simple, when things go well and we are blessed, we are to sing praise and thanksgiving. When there is trouble and difficulty, we are to pray. When there is some form of troubling sickness, we are to call the elders of the church. Now, it's important to recognize here that God makes this effort incumbent on

those who are sick, or in the case of little ones, incumbent on their parents. Part of the reason for that is because the very act of going to the elders is humbling. James emphasizes over and over again the importance of humbling ourselves before each other and before our God. He says in James 4:6: *"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."* *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* So one very practical way to determine whether or not you are willing to do that, willing to submit yourself to God is to ask yourself, have I ever been sick, have I ever been sick and yet a little too proud to ask the elders for prayer? You know, having been on both sides of this issue, I can tell you it is a very humbling experience. So why do we do it? Well, other than the fact that the sovereign Lord who is king of the universe and also the author of scripture said to do it, and God tells us to obey is better than sacrifice. Other than that, I can think of a number of other compelling reasons. One is that you might get healed. You also may not. See, there's nothing magical about being anointed for prayer. As I've already said, I've seen miraculous answers to prayers. I've also seen many, many instances where there has been no change whatsoever in the physical health of a person who requested anointing by the elders. What I do is I tell folks, this is simply an act of obedience that you want to check off in your quest to get healthy.

So let's look at the question of healing in general. Let me repeat again what James is saying here. James 5:14: *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.* Just what does that mean? Well, basically there are three different reasons why people get sick. The first reason is because we all live in a fallen world, a world that is now subject to decay. This is not the way the world was originally designed. Our federal corporate head Adam was placed into a world of perfection. He lived for we don't know how long in a literal Garden of Eden, in a place where there was no sickness, no disease, no decay and, no death. By willfully choosing to disobey God, Adam gave up the perfection that he shared with his creator. Adam voluntarily chose an action that he changed his nature from perfect to fallen. He went from being a friend of God to one who hid in fear from God, and we as his sons and daughters have inherited that fallen nature, a nature that Adam voluntarily chose. You see, he had the choice. We didn't. We are born into this world fearing and loathing the very creator who made us and we don't even know it. Ephesians 2:1-6 says this: *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is*

now at work in the sons of disobedience -- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. You see, that's the bad news. The bad news is that all of us were born and are by nature children of wrath. We are by nature sworn enemies of God. You see, the good news of the gospel makes no sense unless it has a backdrop of the bad news that makes the good news so good. And the good news is what follows in the very next verse. In verse 4, it says: *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved -- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.* Jesus Christ was very God, and he saw the sorry state that we were in and he took on flesh and he lived the life we were supposed to live and then died the death we all deserve to die so that by faith we could appropriate his perfection as ours. He came to reverse the curse of Adam. See, Adam's sin had caused his nature to change from perfect to fallen, thereby dooming every one of his offspring which includes you and me. And because all of us now share in his imperfection, all of us also share in the death that he brought into our world. Romans 5:12 says: *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.* Now part of that death

includes sickness. In fact, you can say that all sickness, all sickness is the result of sin because no sickness existed before Adam introduced sin into the world.

So the first type of sickness we encounter is generically but not specifically related to sin. It's simply a byproduct of the world that we live in. I mean, we live in a world that is essentially from the moment we are born trying to kill us. Romans 8 tells us that all creation is groaning under its bondage to decay while it awaits its redemption. And in the meantime, we are surrounded by opportunistic bacterium and viruses that are just waiting for the opportunity to make us sick and to eventually kill us. We all know that ultimately some combination of sickness, disease, or accident is going to march us off this planet. You know, you can spin the concept like Disney loves to by calling it the circle of life, but it really is a circle of death, decay, and destruction that will eventually consume every one of us, regardless of our sin.

Leah's disease that I mentioned at the beginning of this message, that was part of this whole process and it was part that God reversed through the process of prayer. But being as Leah was only nine months old, it is safe to say that the fallenness of creation along with all of its attendant diseases and not Leah's sin, well, that was the main issue. When Jesus healed the man born blind, he

specifically told the disciples who had asked him in John 9:2:
"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born
blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his
parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." The
fallenness of creation itself had produced the man's blindness, and
Jesus used that blindness as a means to display his glory.

Now the second type of sin and sickness, it's a little more
cloudy. I remember about ten years ago a conversation that I had
with my dentist -- and I had a great relationship with my dentist.
I used to routinely share the gospel with him, he's a wonderful
man, he retired to Florida, but he was a believer in all these
different New Age philosophies. One day -- and as I recall it was
at the height of the AIDS epidemic, he asked me as a Christian, if
I thought that AIDS was God's curse on homosexuals. I said no. I
did not think that. I said, look, we are fearfully and wonderfully
made, but if your life-style choice repeatedly puts pressure on
your immune system, eventually something's got to give. It doesn't
necessarily mean that God cursed you for your sin and it also
doesn't mean that your life-style is not sinful. It simply means
the two events might not be directly related. You know, in the
same way, I don't believe that God flings the curse of cancer on
people who smoke cigarettes. I don't believe that he flings
diabetes on people, some people who overeat. There are simply

consequences to our life-style choices and some of them are very negative. Just a couple of weeks ago, there was a man who crossed over a part of the Grand Canyon on a tightrope. Now, if he had slipped and fallen to his death, I would hardly say that God cursed his life-style choice by killing him. Instead what I would say is, you know, if you play around with gravity, sometimes you have some very bad results.

And that leads us to the third type of sickness, and this is a direct application of what James is that speaking of in our text this morning. Let me repeat it again. James 5:14: *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.* You see, there are some sicknesses that are simply the result of having lived under a curse. There are some sicknesses that is come about as a consequence of a lifestyle choice, but there are also some sicknesses are that directly and not generically related to sin. You know, when Jesus healed a man who had been crippled for 38 years, he said to him in John 5:14: *"See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you."* Now, I want to be very careful here because it's very easy for people to draw some very bad and some very inappropriate

conclusions about their own struggles with sickness, and first I need to reiterate the point that right now, right here, today, God knows every single sin you have ever committed. He also knows every single sin that you will commit in the future. Psalm 69 says: *You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you.* So there is nothing about your and my life that is hidden or secret to God. There is nothing about your and my life that we could ever say or do that will ever catch God by surprise. You know, I say that because many people have no problem accepting God's payment on the cross for their sin, but somehow or other they seem to think that payment is not complete, it's not full. They think when Jesus Christ went to the cross, every one of our sins was 2,000 years in the future, and that Christ said I'll pay for your sins up to the moment you get saved then we'll have to negotiate the rest. That's not the way it works. He paid for them all in full. You know, so far as I can tell, there's nobody in this room who is over 90, so I can tell every one of us here, if you are a child of God, he has already paid for the sin you will commit on your 90th birthday, should you live that long. See, God doesn't wait for us to clean up our act before coming into our lives because he knows that we are incapable of that. Romans 5:8 says: *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* When you become a child of God, God sees you through his Son's perfection. You stand before him justified. The account of the

penalty of your sins is marked "paid in full" by his righteousness.

But then God does something very, very important. God begins the business of shaping and molding you into the very image of his Son, and the process that he uses to do that is life itself, every single bit of life. That's why God says in Romans 8:28: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* Now, this -- this process of conforming our lives to the image of God's Son, we call that process sanctification, and that process involves something that no one finds pleasant. We call that discipline. Hebrews 12:11 says: *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* See, here's the fact. If you are a child of the King, you will be disciplined as such. Now, the distinction that we often fail to make is between discipline the way God does it and discipline the way we do it. See, God's discipline is never an angry or emotional response to our sin because, as I said, God is never taken by surprise, and your sin debt, that has already been paid. His discipline is always a measured response designed to

grow us into the image of Christ. And yes, sometimes that discipline involves physical sickness. Sometimes it involves pain. You know for us it's easy to think that God uses pain to kind of lash back at us for our sin, but that god is a god of our fallen imagination and not the real one. See, the real one died for us while we were still sinners. He saw what a sinful mess I was 40 years ago. He still saved me. 40 years later, I am still a sinful mess but now the sins are different, they're just far more subtle. That doesn't make them any less sinful. You know, I've had 40 years to clean up my act, and what I've learned in those 40 years is that the only act that is truly clean in God's eyes is one of absolute perfection. That's something none of us is capable of. That's why God says in Romans 3:10: *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one."* Only one person has ever been able to live a perfect life, and he took that life to the cross and exchanged it for mine, and to think that God uses pain to get back at us is to think that somehow or other we are capable of being poked, prodded, and coerced into spiritual maturity when all that would ever do is produce proud peacocks, strutting their spiritual skills, something the Pharisees loved to do. Romans 2 tells us it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. And yes, sometimes that kindness is a severe mercy that includes pain and sickness. It is far more accurate to understand that God uses pain sometimes simply to get our attention.

As C.S. Lewis puts it, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." You know, there's a real simple question you might want to ask yourself to understand why God might use pain to get our attention, and the question is this: What percentage of your own personal spiritual growth would you attribute to painful and difficult circumstances? Or to put it another way, how much have you grown spiritually when things are going great? So how does this relate to our text this morning. Let me give it to you once more. James 5:14: *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.*

By way of an answer, let me take you through the process as we do it here at Grace. You see, if someone is sick or troubled, they can ask any one of the deacons or elders for an anointing.

Sometimes we do it in the middle of the week, sometimes we do it after church, most of the time it is semiprivate, unless a person -- unless a person requests otherwise. We usually meet in one of the side rooms downstairs, and we gather around the individual to

ascertain how we can better pray for them. I read them this passage in James 5 that we're looking at this morning, and we point out some of the things that we have been talking about, and I suggest that if this sickness was brought directly by God in order to get that person's attention, then there might be a sin issue that's at the core of the sickness, and so we then invite the person to examine his conscience and see if there's any overwhelming sin issues in his or her life that might have brought him or her to this place. And once again, I have to make a case here, that God's Holy Spirit conviction of sin is never, never this generic free-floating guilt, this free-floating feeling of how bad and sinful and rotten I am. That's exactly how the devil falsely tries to convict us. You see, the conviction of the Holy Spirit is clear, it is compelling, and it is tied to a specific sin circumstance. If your conviction is just an overwhelming feeling that you're an evil person, you can be pretty comfortable it's not from God. If your conviction was that two weeks ago on a Tuesday night you said something about someone that was not true because you were jealous, and you wanted to make them look bad and you had no peace about it since then, then you can be pretty sure that's the Holy Spirit convicting you. I just made up an example here. Watch somebody have that exact circumstance. The point is, we invite the person we are anointing to examine their conscience and to confess any sins that God's Holy Spirit is pressing in on them.

If the sickness that is troubling them is God's way of getting their attention, then dealing with that sin will cause whatever malady they have to be healed either in this life or in the next. If the issue is not related to sin, the same principle still applies. Again, verse 15: *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.* You know, as Steve pointed out a few weeks ago, that healing will be here in this life as a possibility and as a certainty in the life to come because God says the Lord will raise them up. And as I said at the beginning of this message, over the last 40 years, we have prayed this prayer over scores of people and some were miraculously healed; others were not. But everyone who prays like James says to pray will be blessed. You know, the man born blind, he glorified God by receiving his healing in this life on earth. And all of us know that Donna Tetter who left us less than a month ago, well, she glorified God how she faithfully bore up under her sickness, but she was not physically healed. But you know, she has now received her complete healing and she will have that healing forever. You know, the apostle Paul had some kind of malady that he referred to as a thorn in the flesh. He, too, was told that he would have to wait until his eternal life had begun. God told him after he asked for a healing in 2 Corinthians 12, he said: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

And so the bottom line is this: Some folks will be healed physically in this life and some won't, but all folks who humble themselves, who seek the Lord through prayer and who confess their sins will be healed in this life. Some in spirit, some in spirit and in flesh. Either way, God is glorified. So I believe that is the specific intent of what James is saying when he says once again: *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Let's pray.*

Father God, I do thank you for your word, I thank you for your book, I thank you for your instruction, and I thank you for the hope that it gives us. Lord, I just, again, I pray if there's anyone in the congregation, if there's anyone who has need of prayer, who has need of anointing, that they will not be afraid, that they will not be reticent, that they would be willing to accept this gift, to accept what you have given to us as a means of walking through sickness. I pray that you would give us the grace, the wisdom, the peace, and the power to be able to be the hands and the feet and the voice of you on earth in your church, and I pray

this in Jesus' name. Amen.