
Dealing with Chastening

James 5:13-19

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Here is the essence of the Christian life:

*¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful?
Let him sing praise.*

Prayer and praise. Seeking from God as those who suffer. Singing to God as those who are blessed.

But the next phrase is a bit of startling reminder that all is not well in the life of the church, "Is anyone among you sick?" Yes someone is. God has moved to deal with sinful ways of the troublemaker. We have seen this person being addressed through the book.

He has a reputation for wisdom and understanding that is not borne out by meekness and good conduct.

He has bitterness (long-term, unresolved anger) against people, particularly against those who have thwarted his ambitions in the church.

He is often behind division, discord and disorder in the church, though he is carefully hiding it.

Here he is again. But not under the admonition of James. He is now under the hand of God's correction.

Frankly, some of the hardest times of my life have been the times of God's chastening. You have all received the chastening of our loving Father. Yes, all of you. Because if you have never been chastened by God, you are not one of His children. Our Father disciplines every one of His children.

Now, some of you are going to wonder why I am saying this text is about chastening. In my second point I will show you why. So, if you will please allow me to walk through the text as I see it and hopefully it will all come together at the end.

The Experience of Chastening**(v. 14-16)**

This text is very challenging. It looks easy on the surface. But there are some important and difficult questions here.

14 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.

The Situation to Discern**(v. 14)**

Now that person is under the chastening hand of God. He has fallen sick. But we need to think Biblically about sickness, affliction and debilitating or incurable illnesses.

All sickness is the result of the fall. We live in a world cursed with sin.

All sickness is in the providence of God. No illness is by chance or accident.

Not all sickness is the result of sin that you have committed.

Not all sickness is God's chastening. God may have other purposes for your illness.

Some sickness may be caused by Satan or spiritual forces, but it is always with the permission of God.

Some sickness is testing. God is testing your faith and submission, your willingness to trust Him and to submit to Him.

Some sickness is humbling you and breaking your pride, independence and self-sufficiency.

Some sickness is just to bring glory to God. God is going to use your illness to show how great, good and glorious He is.

All sickness in a believer will be healed but we may have to wait until we receive our glorified bodies.

But often God uses sickness to humble us, to peel away our sin, to lift weights that keep us from finishing well, to cause us to run to Him.

Hebrews 12:3-11

3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to

them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ 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.

This is the first question to ask: "Father, is this that You have sent me from Your loving hand for my good to deal with sin or to deal with a weight?"

The word here for sick can not only mean physical illness, but also spiritual weakness. The picture is of someone who is languishing at home possibly in bed, physically ill and spiritually struggling.

The Facts of the Text

¹⁴ 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.

Here are the simple, straightforward facts, or so it seems.

A person is sick. This sickness is primarily physical, but also may be spiritual.

The sick person must call the elders of the church to come to them. The church is to have a plurality of spiritual leaders who serves as elders and pastor the church. This body of elders (not just one elder) are called to the sick person's bedside.

The elders must pray over the sick person. The picture is clearly of the pastors standing around the sick bed and praying for the sick person.

The elders are to anoint the sick person with oil in the Lord's name. There is so much discussion over this. It seems that the oil was a symbol of the working of God both through natural and supernatural means. It was common in their culture where medicine as we understand it was primitive and simple.

The prayer of faith will save the sick person. The elders' prayer, offered in real, Biblically informed faith, will save, deliver the sick person. The elders do their part in praying believing God will do His work. The elder's prayer here is more likely for the spiritual condition of the person since the effect is a word normally associated with the healing of the soul.

The Lord will raise up of the sick person. The Lord then grants healing to the body. There is an emphatic "will raise up" that almost functions as a promise.

If the sick person has committed sins, they will be forgiven. If all that is commanded is done, the sick person's sins 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.

And then the "therefore..." A conclusion is being drawn from the sentences above. Which seems to me to add a qualifier, in fact, a command.

Confess sins to one another and then pray **so that** you may be healed. Now, this is not just "telling each other our sins." This is confessing sins *to those we have sinned*

against. Since confession and presumably, forgiveness, have taken place, then there is reconciliation. Reconciled people will pray for one another so that God will heal.

The righteous person walk in Christ's righteousness. They are people who deal with their sin. They are not the "super spiritual" but ordinary people doing amazing things. So the statement about the prayers of righteous people is the transition to the example that follows.

The Challenges that are Raised

Seems straightforward and simple. Except I have some questions.

Is this any sick person? Is this only those who are so sick they are unable to leave their homes? Is this only for a person who is sick because of sin?

Why call all the elders and not just one, particularly in the light of "the prayer of a righteous person, singular, has much working power."?

Calling the elders is a command. The sick person in this situation *must* call the elders? Why is that?

Praying over the person is also a command. The elders in this situation *must* pray over the sick person? Why is that?

What is meant by anointing with oil? What kind of oil? Is there special oil? Will any oil do? What about suntan lotion? Most often the word here has a hygienic or cosmetic use in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament. It is hard to see why the elders would be doing this as medicinal, so it may be symbolic. It is commanded or exemplified nowhere else so may only apply to the special case of this text's situation.

What is the prayer of faith? What if the elders do not "pray in faith"? What if an elder doubts that what they are doing is Biblical? Or doubts the sick person is genuinely repentant?

Is the elders' prayer guaranteed to heal? The text clearly says so. So do elders prayers have special healing powers? Does the gift of healing come with being an elder? There is a tacit promise that in this situation, the prayers of the elders will result in the sick person being raised up. That is plain meaning of the text.

Is the text moving from the particular responsibility of the elders (v. 14-15) to the general responsibility of the congregation (v. 16)? How does the "therefore" illuminate what has gone before? Or is the "therefore" connecting the confessing of sins in verse 15 with the confessing of sins in verse 16?

Note how James writes this. He asks a general question. Is anyone among you sick? The answer obviously is, "Yes, there is someone sick." And then James directs a "him". Let him, that individual take these steps.

James may be alluding to **Isaiah 33:24**, "24 And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick"; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity." This text is speaking of a future day when God's people living in the world in God's kingdom may be sick. Yet their sins may be forgiven them.

Before we can answer some of those questions, we need to keep reading. Sometimes what comes before a text is important in order to correctly understand the text. Sometimes what

comes after a text is important as well. Let's consider verses 17-18 and see if James helps us with some of our questions.

The Example of Chastening

(v. 17-18)

What James says next is very important and hugely affects my understanding of verses 14-16. The example James draws from in the Old Testament is a surprise.

¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Elijah's Connection with Us

James is assuring us that while Elijah was a prophet of God, the power of his prayer did not come through his prophetic office. The effect of his praying is connected to his being a righteous man and praying fervently. But otherwise, he has the same spiritual weaknesses and frailties as the rest of us.

So James is not only connecting Elijah with us, but also with the context. As far as I can see, Elijah is not just an example of a righteous man praying fervently. It is also putting him in the same ministry setting as in the context.

Elijah's Ministry Setting

What is that setting? Elijah served as a prophet under the horribly wicked Ahab and Jezebel, the king and queen of Israel. Elijah is ministering to a nation sunk in deep sin. They had fallen into idolatry. They are involved in all sorts of wickedness. The king and queen are involved in many of the same sins that the person or group James has been addressing through this letter.

Elijah's Powerful Praying

Now, notice what James brings forward as a powerful example of Elijah's praying. But it is not what we would expect. It is *not* the calling down of fire from heaven on the sacrifice in the contest with the priests of Baal. This is quite a surprise. No, James reaches back to and uses the time when Elijah's praying *that brought and removed the chastening of Israel for their sins under Ahab and Jezebel*.

I think this is important. It is consistent with the context. This whole text is about believers who are sick because of chastening and particularly because of sin. It is giving instruction both to the chastened believer and to the elders of the church. Elijah is an example of God's appointed leader engaged with the people of God who are sinning. His prayers are fervent and effectual in the bringing and removing of chastening. He aptly illustrates the situation the church finds itself in.

In the closing we will consider some practical implications for our people and our practice.

The Expectation in Chastening**(v. 19-20)**

These final two verses continue James' thought. Two expectations are placed before us at the end of the book.

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The Rescue of those who Stray**(v. 19)**

Here is a tender encouragement for all of us. Those whose love and ministry helps to rescue and restore and sinning believer are commended for being an instrument in God's hands. It is a good thing to be involved in one another's lives. It is pleasing to God when we lovingly rescue our brothers and sisters who have strayed from truth and wandered off into sin. We talk a lot about being people helpers and counselors. James' way of speaking of the same ministry is that of being a rescuer.

The Results for those who Stray**(v. 20)**

But there is a clear warning here. Those who stray are in severe danger. Those who rescue are doing a great ministry. Two things are spoken of.

The person who wanders and does not repent may be in danger of dying. Now that sounds severe. But this early in the church, James experience would include the death of Ananias and Saphira for lying about their giving. Paul says that at the church at Corinth, some were sick and some were dead because of their abuses at the Lord's Table. So if we turn a person back to truth and to pleasing God, we may be rescuing their souls from dying.

The person who rescues the wanderer also covers many sins. This is language of restoring relations. This is not "covering up sins" but rather, restores relationships so that believers who are being sinned against may Biblically bear the person's burdens, overlook their sin in love and forgive where there is confession.

And so this paragraph is tied to verses 15-16:

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.

I realize that for many of you this sounds very different from what you have been taught in the past. I hope that you will consider this way of handling the text. We are open to ongoing discussion and counsel as we think about this.

Reflect and Respond

Regardless of how you handle this text, there are several important applications from it.

Examine yourself. Is your sickness due to known sin in your life? Are you experiencing the chastening of God? Maybe you need the counsel and guidance of your elder/pastor.

If you have sinned against a brother or sister, you need to confess your sin to them and seek their forgiveness. In this way you will be restored to the Lord and to one another. Many of our sins involve confession to both God and to others. May we all be willing to humble ourselves, seek one another's forgiveness and be quick to forgive.

Be willing to pursue sinning brothers and sisters. Pray fervently for them. Seek to rescue them. Trust that God will use your loving, caring and faithful ministry to restore them.

This text is addressing a local problem at Jerusalem. Some commentators see the commands as to that congregation, but not to the church as a whole down through the ages. However, it was written to the believing Jews who had been scattered. This would seem to make the text apply to all. At minimum, the principles would apply to us even if the commands do not.

While the scope of when the following guidelines apply may change depending on whether your own understanding of this text, the steps are still much the same.

If you are sick and have sin in your life that you have never dealt with, consider whether or not God is chastening you.

If you are sick because of God's chastening and If you are repenting of your sin, ask the elders to come *because you are repenting*.

Either all the elders or those appointed to do so, will come and we will do as James directs:

We will pray for you that God will grant repentance, faith and obedience. We will pray that God will remove the chastening.

We will anoint with an oil as a symbol of sins forgiven and healing of the soul. It will be an outward token of what we believe is God's inward work.

We will help you to determine if there are people you have sinned against and will facilitate your confession of sin to them and reconciliation.

We will trust that God will raise you up and heal your sickness within His sovereign will. At all times we must be willing to accept God's will even if the answer to our prayers is different than we asked for.

And let me reassure you that we who are your pastor/elders are always willing to come to visit you in your sickness, to pray with you, to counsel you and to help you. But we do so because we love you and want to shepherd and help you.

Finally, may we treat sin with the seriousness this text does. And may we love our brothers and sisters enough to pursue them when sinning, to restore them when repenting and walk with them in peace when believing.

