

Righteous Living

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 5:13-20

Pastor Bryan Clark

Do you think God promises those who are sick that, if you have enough faith, or the people around you have enough faith, you will be healed? Some people would say that's what James promises. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to James, Chapter 5. This is our last week in the book of James and I would suggest that James ends this letter exactly as we would imagine him to end it. If you've been with us through this whole series, you kind of get a sense of his tone. We pick it up in verse 13:

Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. (*NASB, James 5:13)

Now those words should sound somewhat familiar because it sounds very much like where we started—the very beginning of chapter 1. I would suggest to you these are the bookends of James. In chapter 1 he talked about *whenever you encounter various trials, consider it joy. If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God.* Suffering, joy, prayer—it's exactly where he goes in verse 13. I think the bookends are just a reminder in a book that teaches us what it means, *practically speaking*, to live like a Christian—that it's hard! You should expect that life's going to be difficult; you should expect to suffer for your faith. We're living contrary to the value system of this world and so I think there's a reminder at the beginning and at the end—"That's hard". The word **suffering** in verse 13 is the exact same word he used in verse 10 to describe what happened to the prophets. It's a very strong term. But he also reminds us that this is the life of joy; this is where life is found—in walking in obedience to God's commands. So I think those are the bookends and then, starting in verse 14 to the end of the book, there's kind of like an appendix. There's this final statement, this reminder, of why it's so important to walk in obedience. Verse 14:

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. (Vs. 14-20)

Here's a question we need to wrestle with as we dig into this text, specifically as it relates to verse 14. Is this text talking about someone who is sick or is it talking about someone who is sick because of sin? Now at first glance we would say it's just simply talking about someone who is sick—don't read anything more into it. If that's the position you take, there are many statements in this text that simply make no sense, in my opinion. Let me kind of walk you through. If you're to

take the position this is just about anyone who is sick, let me raise some questions for you. **Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church.** First of all, why *must we* call? This is not saying that'd be a nice thing to do. This is not saying that's something maybe you'd do now and then. This is an imperative—it's a command! You *must do* that. Why is that? We would have some very busy elders if, every time you got sick you were required to call the elders—and why the elders? Do the elders have God's ear more than other people do? Are the elders somehow a *cut above*? Are the elders somehow more spiritual? Are their prayers heard more by God or their prayers more effective because they are elders? That begins to create a very dangerous theology. It begins to create this theology where you have this two-class system. You have the elders who seem to have special access to God—so you kind of have the clergy class—and then you have the rest of you slugs that have to just kind of manage the best you can. We would say everything the New Testament teaches is contrary to that—there is no two-class system. My prayers aren't more effective than yours; I don't have to access to God that's different than yours— so that doesn't make any sense. Why *must we* call the elders?

Go to verse 15. It says **...the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up.** That is a promise so it raises the question, “Is the promise of James, if you just pull this verse out of its context—have it stand alone—is the promise that if you, or in this case the elders, have enough faith, is the promise you will be healed?” The problem with that is it just doesn't seem to hold true. I have gathered at the bedside of many suffering from disease, some who were terminal and we have asked God to bring healing and God has not seen fit to heal. If that's what this verse is saying, what do you conclude? Someone shared with me last night that she called the elders in to pray and weeks later nothing had changed. Say, man, we've got some defective elders. Is there anybody else out there? You know, can we get the first string called in? (Laughter) I've known people with very weak faith who have been healed. I know people of great faith who died of their disease. The formula just doesn't hold true. Besides, it creates a very dangerous theology. If we're going to believe that, on the basis of enough faith, I will be healed, then when we are healed, we take credit for it. We were healed because, “I had so much faith”. Contrary to that, when people are not healed, the only thing we can conclude is, “It's your fault because you lack faith.” That's not a real encouraging message to people that are already suffering. When you think of what we've talked about related to the grace and mercy of God—contrary to a performance-based system—none of that makes sense. It would not make sense that, on the basis of your performance, you experience God's healing. That can't be what the verse is talking about.

Then it says **...if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.** First of all we'd ask the question, “Where is that coming from?” We're having a nice little chat about healing and suddenly we're talking about sins. And why would those sins be forgiven? There's no mention of repentance; there's no mention of confession. Is the formula that if the elders pray and you are healed that your sins are forgiven? That doesn't make any sense.

He goes on in verses 17 and 18 and talks about Elijah as a model, an example of what he's talking about, and then in verses 19 and 20 he talks about turning a soul back, turning someone back who is taking the wrong path. I would suggest to you, if you put the whole thing together, that what he's talking about is someone who is sick because of sin—and then the rest of the passage is addressing this basic issue. I think the issue is a righteous person—**the prayer of a righteous person is effective in the presence of God.** He's summarizing the entire book and coming to the conclusion that we are called to live as righteous people and righteous people have the ear of God. Righteous peoples' prayers are effective and so then the last two verses are really a call to reach out, turn others back who are on the wrong path and call us together to walk in obedience.

So let's go back and kind of unpack this passage, then, accordingly. **Is anyone among you sick?** I think, clearly the answer would be, "Yes". They know what's going on. They are very aware, so he's asking the question but implying they know that's the case. **Then he must call for the elders of the church.** Why the elders? Because this is an issue of discipline! Because someone has maintained a lifestyle of sin and offense before God, God has mediated out discipline. Discipline is the issue of the elders. Now the first question would be, "Does God really do that?" And the answer would be, "Yes, of course He does." 1 Corinthians 11, for example, Paul talks about those who had offended God through their misuse of communion. He says, "*Some of you are sick and some of you have even died because of God's discipline because of your sin.*" You have examples in the book of Acts; I think this is an example in James 5. Clearly, God does discipline His children. Hebrews 12 is very clear. Does God use sickness and disease to do that? Absolutely He does! Now in the first century they believed that if you are sick, it's because of sin and Jesus had to correct that. That was out of balance. I think in today's economy, we have swung clear to the other end of things. We don't ever associate sickness with sin—at least sickness with the idea of God's discipline. And so somewhere in there, there is the balance—there's the reality—it's not that God is punishing us because He's angry with us, it's because God is seeking to bring correction. We're on the wrong path and we simply won't listen to Him and if He doesn't do something, we're going to destroy ourselves. So God has different ways to get our attention and sickness would be one of those. That's just the example in this particular text. Typically, if someone is under discipline, it would be their responsibility to go to the elders and to confess their sin to the elders, to repent of their sin in order to lift the discipline. I think for anyone that's under discipline, that's a necessary step. You have to go to your spiritual authority and you have to deal with it; you have to confess it; you have to repent. This particular person is too sick, so what must he do? He must call the elders and the elders, in this case, come to him so that he can confess his sin; he can repent of his sin in order that the discipline would be lifted. So that's why it's the elders and that's why it's a *must*.

What are they going to do? **They are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.** In this particular verse *pray* is the verb; *anoint* is a participle. So praying is the point; the anointing is kind of a side issue, which we'll talk about in just a minute. But he talks about **...in the name of the Lord.** That would be the equivalent of saying...*praying in alignment with God's will*. Now if you've ever gathered around someone, for example, who is suffering from a terminal illness, it's very hard to know, "What is God's will? We want that person healed but we don't know that that's what God wants. Sometimes God chooses to heal and sometimes God chooses not to. Sometimes God's will is very mysterious; it's hard to understand. But if this is a situation where someone is sick because of sin, God's will is very clear. God's will would be that this person confesses, that this person repents, and that God's discipline is lifted. So in this situation it would be very obvious how to pray in alignment with the will of God. So the elders come and pray in alignment with God's will.

So what is the piece about **...anointing with oil?** There are certain denominations who have made quite an elaborate theology out of this, but the text here really doesn't warrant that. As a matter of fact the Greek language offered two very distinct Greek words for this concept of **anointing** or *rubbing with oil*. One of the Greek words carries the idea of anointing. It's a derivative from the word from which we get our word Christ, which means *Anointed One*. It almost always refers to ceremonial or religiously anointing someone with oil. The oil is symbolic; it represents something and there are places in the Bible where it teaches that. There's another Greek word that is simply an everyday, kind of garden-variety street term that just simply means *to rub*. One Greek scholar said if someone was describing a tradesman in the first century, there was taking kind of a mud or a

plaster—like we would think of it as—to *work the walls*, where he would use this word. He’s just rubbing it in. Another Greek scholar translates this passage *oiling with oil*. It’s just the everyday practice of rubbing with oil. Whenever this term is used, it’s referring to the medicinal use of oil. In the first century the most common medicine was oil. They had a variety of oils and they would rub it on people in order to bring about certain healing effects. This text is not talking about coming with some sort of oil in some sort of symbolic way. It’s talking about bringing *the medicine of the day*. The idea is this: you may have tried every medicine possible but, if the sickness is because of discipline, no medicine’s going to touch it. But once the sin has been repented of; once there is confession of sin; once God’s hand of discipline is lifted; then that medicine may be very effective. So the idea is to bring the medicine and apply it and begin the process of healing. Verse 15:

...and the prayer offered in faith will restore one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up...

Now this is the dangerous verse if you rip it out of context because we then make it promise something God never promised. Because this is a promise but within this context, what He’s saying is: “If someone is sick because of sin, then if that person repents, if that person confesses that sin, that discipline will be lifted and that person will be restored and that person will be healed.” There is a promise that God’s grace is enough. God’s discipline is never punitive; it’s always corrective. For those seeking to parent their children in a grace-based environment, this is a critical principle to understand. There is a huge difference between discipline that is punitive—you were naughty; you must be punished—versus discipline that is corrective, which means as soon as my children get it—as soon as there’s a correction—discipline is lifted. That’s all I was after. Those are two different mindsets. God’s discipline is not punitive; it’s corrective so as soon as people get it—they confess and they repent—then the discipline’s lifted and the promise is: “Yes, you will be restored; you will be healed. God’s discipline will be lifted.” There’s just a promise that God’s grace and mercy is always enough.

And then it seems to turn a corner: **...and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven.**

Suddenly that makes sense because, if this is sickness because of sin, then there’s the promise that those sins will be forgiven. The “if” clause there is what’s called a third-class subjunctive which just means...*if he has committed sins and we know that he has*—could be translated in the English...*since he has committed sins*. It’s kind of a technique to make a point. I think one of the reasons that James uses this technique is because he’s not just talking about one particular circumstance for all time. He is talking to believers down through the ages and so the technique offers a reminder that just because someone is sick doesn’t mean they’re sick because of sin. Now, yes, it’s true that there is sin in the world. We live in a fallen world and all sickness is related to that, but it’s not saying that if you’re sick, it’s because you’ve sinned. When you start to think like that, you can make your life a disaster very quickly. Every time something bad happens, every time you have a flat tire, every time you get the flu, every time you contract some sort of disease, suddenly, “*It’s because I’ve sinned. God’s mad at me! What did I do?*” As a matter-of-fact I hear people say that all the time when difficult times come. “What did I do?” That’s a really bad theology. We just live in a very hard world. It’s a fallen world; life is hard. The idea is that there may be times when God uses sickness as a means of His discipline. I would say the overwhelming majority of times, that’s not what it is. You don’t want to get in the frame of mind where you get the flu and then you’re thinking: “*What did I do? You know, I really wasn’t very nice to the clerk at Wal-Mart a couple weeks ago and now God’s going to get me.*” You know you just have to be careful with that kind of thinking. The question would be, “How do I know?” I would answer it like this: “Trust me—you’ll know!” This is not just some little thing that you did and so God’s striking you down. This is an

issue where someone has been thumbing their nose at God—someone is in a fight with God. Someone clearly knows that their behavior's offensive to God and God has convicted their heart and they've basically said, "*God, you can convict me all you want, I'm not going to stop doing it.*" And this has become an all-out fight. I can absolutely guarantee you, if you are sick because of sin, you don't have to guess; you don't have to wonder, "*What could it possibly be?*" You know exactly what it is. You know that you've been fighting with God; you know that you've been thumbing your nose at God and you finally get to the point where you say, "Okay, okay. That's enough. I give up; I give in; I confess." So this isn't something where you have to be wondering and guessing. Trust me, if this is the case, you will know. The only real question is whether or not you'll choose to confess and repent or whether you'll choose to continue to fight and do battle with God. Verse 16:

Therefore... (What is the therefore referring to? It's referring to everything that's preceded.)
Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.

Confess your sin to one another. Pray for one another. That's what we've talked about—the need to pray for one another—bring in the elders. The idea of confessing is kind of implied but it certainly comes, then, with the response that those sins will be forgiven. Obviously the person has confessed or repented. That's the only basis by which those sins would be forgiven. So what is he saying here? I think what he is saying is, "*Therefore, in light of what we've just talked about, it would be far better to deal with our sin ourselves before God is forced to discipline us.*" Therefore the idea of **...confess your sin to one another...** does not mean that afterward we should have cookies and coffee and all go out in the hall and tell everybody our sins. You know that would be a disaster! What it does mean is that we should have people in our lives that we're willing to be open and honest with and say, "Hey, I've got a problem. I'm struggling with something. I need to deal with this. I need you to pray for me." The word *confession* literally means *to agree with God*. I found that language, over the years, to be extremely helpful. I don't know about you but I get really good at talking around sin. Things where I'll say, "You know, God, I don't even know if that really was sin. I mean the way that I talked to my wife and, you know, if possibly, on some remote chance that it was offensive to someone, you know, maybe, I'm kind of sorry..." and you know we kind of go around and around. When we do that, we continue that behavior year after year after year. But when you actually say to God, "God, You call this sin and I agree with You that this is sin. It is offensive." I use that language. "God, I agree with You. It was offensive to You that I did that, that I said that." Once you go that far, it's really hard to justify that behavior. It's really hard to rationalize that behavior. It's really hard to continue to practice that behavior without this overwhelming guilt and this sense of, "*I need to deal with this*". So the idea of confession—**confess your sins to one another**—is to have people you trust and be able to say, "I'm engaged in a behavior; I'm doing something; I'm saying something; I'm thinking something; there's something in my life that I know is offensive to God and I agree with God. It is sin and I need to deal with it and I need you to help me. I need you to hold me accountable. I need you to pray for me." The idea is if we did that, it wouldn't ever have to get to a discipline issue. We wouldn't have to experience the preceding two verses. We deal with it ourselves and that's the idea. **Confess your sin to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed.** I don't think that **healed** there is limited to physical illness, that you spiritually would be healed, that you would travel down the path of life.

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (Vs. 16b)

So right on the tail end of **...confess your sin to one another...** is the reminder that this is about walking in righteousness. This is about doing the right thing. This is about walking in obedience. That's the goal—that together we pray for one another; we confess our sins to one another; together we seek to be **righteous** people; we seek to walk in obedience to what God has called us to. *The life of a righteous person is powerful. The prayers of a righteous person are effective.* God hears; God responds; God cheers; God applauds. That's what God wants from us.

And then he uses the example of Elijah. If I haven't convinced you yet, I think these two verses kind of seal the deal.

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and a half years. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (Vs. 17-18)

Elijah isn't just some random example out of the Old Testament. It's very strategic. The Hebrew people were living in sin. They were worshipping the gods of Baal; they were living lives that were very offensive to God. So Elijah, as a righteous person, asked God to discipline them to get their attention and for three-and-a-half years, they lived without rain as God's discipline upon them. After three-and-a-half years, they repented of their sin—they confessed their sins—so Elijah prayed and asked God to bring rain to lift the discipline. And God lifted the discipline and brought forth the rain. It's a perfect illustration of exactly what he's been talking about.

Verses 19 and 20 are just kind of the summary.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth (that's what he's been talking about here) **and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.**

What he's saying there is that we should care enough about one another that if we see someone else headed down a path of destruction—headed down a path of disobedience—that we should get involved, that we should roll up our sleeves and do what we can to seek to turn that person back to the path of life. When we choose to do that, we actually save them from death. I think the death he's talking about is exactly the same as he used in chapter 1 when he was talking about temptation. He says sin is conceived in the mind, gives birth to the action, and the action brings forth death. It was a term that was talking about being stillborn—it was a very graphic term—saying that when we choose the path of sin, we ultimately choose the path of heartache. So he's saying when we do that, we save people that we know from a pathway of heartache; we save them from destruction; we save them from a multitude of sins that will destroy their lives.

Basically I think the call in this last section of James—and why I think it's consistent with the whole book—is James is saying that this is what it looks like, practically speaking, to be a Christian, from chapter 1 all the way to the end. This is not a book of suggestions. This is a book of commands. It's a very hard-hitting book. I didn't tell you this little secret on the first week because I was afraid some of you wouldn't come back, but I'll tell you on the last week. In just five chapters James issues fifty-four commands. This is not a book of suggestions. This is a book of commands and he is saying, "If you choose to walk in obedience, practically speaking, this is what it looks like to be a Christian. And it's hard, but this is the path of life; this is where you'll find joy; this is where you'll find everything you're looking for." If there are those who choose to disobey, our responsibility is to love them enough to try to turn them back, to try to get them back on the path. If

they're determined to continue down the path, there is a reminder that God may choose to step in and to discipline them, not because He's mad at them, not because He wants to punish them, but because He loves them and wants to correct them and turn them back to the path of life.

We've covered a lot of ground over the last several months, talking about, *practically speaking*—what does it mean to be a Christian? We've talked about how we respond when we encounter trials. We've talked about what it takes to persevere. We talked about the right way to respond to temptation. We talked about taking off the masks and a willingness to be real before God. We've talked about why the sin of partiality is so offensive to God and so contrary to a theology of grace. We've talked about the issue of the tongue and why we need to be very careful about what comes out of our mouth. We've talked about why our faith needs to be a faith that works. We've talked about the difference between the wisdom which is from above and the wisdom which is from this earth. We've talked about the difference of the wisdom and the difference of the consequences, in terms of which voices you listen to. We've talked about the importance of stewarding your time and your talent and your treasures for God's purposes. Now, at the end of the book, James is saying, "*Hey, this is a call to righteousness.*" We need to take seriously the commands of God, but know this: "If you choose to thumb your nose at God and continue to offend Him, God may choose to step in with His hand of discipline and do whatever is necessary to get your attention, in order that you might be turned back to the road of life." *Practically speaking*, this is what it means to be a Christian.

Our Father, we're thankful that You love us. You love us too much to just let us do our own thing. You love us too much just to look the other way. Lord, we're thankful that You love us enough to discipline us, to speak into our lives when we get off track and are traveling down a path of destruction. Lord, there's also a message in this text for all of us, that if we genuinely care about the people around us, we will choose to get involved. Lord, we will confess our sin to one another; we will pray for one another; and, when necessary, we will seek to turn one another back from a path of destruction, that we might experience the life that you so desire for us to live. Lord, we commit ourselves to this book—to this message. Lord, my prayer would be that there would not be one person here that would have to experience your hand of discipline, that we would choose to deal with our sin and that we would choose the path of life. Lord, may it be so. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2010 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

Righteous Living
Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James
James 5:13-20
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Does grace mean we are free to take God's commands as mere suggestions? Why or why not?
2. Why does God discipline us as His children? How might God discipline us?
3. What are we to do when we see someone we care about straying from the truth?

Bible Study

1. Read James 5:13-18. What are the similarities between 5:13 and 1:1-8?
2. Is this text about someone who is sick or someone who is sick because of sin? Does God use sickness and even death as a means of disciplining His children? (See I Cor. 11:27-32 and Hebrews 12:4-11).
3. If you believe the text is about someone who is sick because of sin, explain the details of the text in light of that interpretation. If you believe the text is simply about someone who is sick, how do you explain the following:
 - a. Why "must" the sick person call the elders? Are their prayers more effective?
 - b. Is James guaranteeing healing for the sick if the sick person has enough faith? Does that always work?
 - c. Why does James bring up the idea of "if he has committed sin" out of nowhere? Why are they forgiven, because he was healed?
 - d. Why does he go from healing to confessing sins to one another?
 - e. What is the point of the Elijah illustration?

4. How do verses 19, 20 summarize the main issue of 5:14-18? What is our responsibility to someone straying from the truth and why does this matter? (compare Galatians 6:1)

5. The tone of the final text of James seems consistent with the tone of the whole letter. This is not a book of suggestions, it's a book of commands (54 commands in this letter). What does this final text tell us about how seriously God takes these commands?

Application

1. As a group see if you can list the top 5 most important truths you learned or were reminded of in our study of James.

2. What are the areas you most need to work on?

3. What practical things can you do to make sure these lessons are not quickly forgotten?