

Prayer and Dealing With Sin

James 5:13-18

Introduction

The letter of James is often thought of as a disparate collection of proverbial and practical instructions from the apostle to the saints dispersed in the early years of the church. However, the letter contains themes woven through it, and the more one studies it, the more the letter appears to be a cohesive whole. These final verses again at first may seem to be a set of somewhat random exhortations tacked on to the end of the letter. This section is also dense and rich, with much to unpack. All of this makes it exegetically challenging as James weaves together topics of prayer and sickness and healing and confession. But these too can be understood under James' overarching theme. Taken this way, the thrust of this passage is to count it all joy when faced with tests in our prayers and in our life together.

Prayer

In vs. 13-18, there is a clear emphasis on prayer (mentioned seven times and alluded to several others). Christians are to pray in suffering, to sing psalms (which are prayers) when cheerful, to pray over the sick, and to pray for one another in the battle with sin. Like Paul says to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), taking this passage of James with his opening, we see that we are to rejoice always as we pray persistently to the God who grants wisdom for all of our circumstances (1:5). Elijah is given as an example of a righteous man praying effective prayers. Elijah was not superhuman, but he did pray such that God heeded him (vs. 17-18). It is striking that James mentions this after reminding his readers to confess their sins to one another. We know that unconfessed sin toward God means that God does not listen to our prayers (Ps. 66:18, 1 Pet. 3:7). When our prayers seem to go unheard, it is a test of our faith (cf. 1:3-4). Either we have sin to confess, or we are to grow in our trust of God as we continue to plead with Him.

Dealing with Sin

James does not clearly state that the sick man is one who was in sin, although this is possible. Because of how James connects this with confession, it may be that his calling for the elders is because his sickness was used to bring him to repentance. Scripture makes it clear that one's sickness is not necessarily a product of particular sin (e.g., Job and the blind man Jesus healed). However, it also can be (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:30, Ps. 32:3-4). Whenever God brings affliction, part of the purpose is to draw our gaze to Him. If there is unconfessed sin, God may bring physical discipline so we can no longer ignore it. Our sin is against the Lord first, but it also breaks fellowship with fellow believers. Faithfully living together includes honestly confessing sin to those who have been harmed by it. James has already addressed envy and in-fighting among the brethren (3:14, 4:1). Sin, like sickness, separates people. So, brothers and sisters confess to one another, not ultimately to receive absolution, but to maintain the unity of the Spirit. As Christians confess, they should also pray for one another. It is this—honest confession and prayer for one another—that brings healing to the body of Christ. Is James here speaking about physical healing or spiritual and relational healing? Again, we know that sickness can come from sin, and God does at times directly answer prayers for healing. But Scripture also gives us examples to the contrary. We know more certainly that division in the body comes from unconfessed sin, particularly the envy

and bitterness that take root. Forthright confession of sin can heal those wounds between brothers. A righteous man is not sinless, but he confesses quickly and honestly. And with that done, his prayers get to work.

Anointing with Oil

The instruction to anoint the sick man with oil is very debated. The man here seems to be so sick that he is separated from the regular fellowship of the church since he has to “call for the elders.” Some take this passage to be a promise of healing for those who are anointed and rightly accompanied by a fervent “prayer of faith” (v. 15). There are trustworthy accounts of people being miraculously healed after having been anointed as James describes. However, note that James does not specifically promise healing, at least not how we tend to think of it. The verb “save” here (v. 15) could be understood to mean “heal,” as could “raise up.” The former of course has a broader meaning (salvation, deliverance), and the latter can be used to describe an appointment (e.g., Phil. 1:7) and also the resurrection (e.g., Col. 2:12). This seems to be a sacramental action, a sign of a greater reality. The elders are to anoint “in the name of the Lord,” making it an anointing from Him. In the OT, anointing with oil was sometimes a sign of joy and comfort, of God’s presence in the midst of trial (Ps. 23:5, Ps. 92:10). It was also a sign of the fellowship of God’s people (Ps. 133:1-2). It was a sign of something set apart and consecrated to the Lord (Lev. 8:10-12). And, anointing with oil was a sign of being appointed to an office, like the anointing of a king (1 Sam. 16:13, 1 Kings 1:39).

It seems that the emphasis is a commitment of the sick into God’s hands. He is being appointed to an office of suffering, consecrated to God, and preserved in the unity of the body and as a vessel for the Spirit to work in. The Lord may heal him, through “natural” or “supernatural” means; He may deliver him by means of death and resurrection; He may simply wait. This is not a copout argument or a “safe bet” because we lack the faith to see these kinds of healings. Which is greater, to heal someone from an infirmity, or to raise someone from the dead into eternal life (cf. Matt. 9:1-8)? When Jesus was raised from the dead and given all authority, He was “anointed with the oil of gladness” (Ps. 45:7, Heb. 1:9). The brother anointed with oil is reminded of the promise that he is in Christ and in Him has received the victory (1 Cor. 15:57), whether or not he is healed now. He is not alone in his sickness. In this way, the sick man and the elders learn to count it all joy.

Conclusion

Once again, James is calling the church to some hard things. Is it a trial, a testing of your faith, to admit your sin before a friend? Are you tested when someone confesses sin to you? Is it a trial when your prayers seem to go unheard? When dealing with a hard affliction, is your faith tested when you realize it is because of sin, or when you are certain that it is not? Even these things fall into the category of trials that James gives us. In all of this, count it all joy. God sets these things before you to continue to produce patience in you and to mature the church around you as He makes you all complete and perfect in Him. A body living this way grows resilient to both temptations and persecutions. When we practice faithfulness in these little things, we will be faithful with much.