

## Healing

By Rev Todd Farnsworth

James 5:13-20



**13** *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 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. 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. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. 19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

Here they areeee, Sick Americaaaa! Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you our Queasy Candidates for Sick America!

- **Number one** is a tissue box of sneezes, wheezes, and sniffles. They show up at your work or party whenever a fever strikes, a rash erupts, or a sneeze explodes from their nose, and cry out in full sore throat: *It's Ok, I'm not contagious!*
- **Number two** is a Modest Mess. They don't want to bother anyone with their malady, so they walk around pretending that: *I'm fine!* Even though it is pretty clear to everyone around them that they are in fact, not fine. They may be quietly sporting a cane or, holding onto their ear or head in pain. You may see them wince, but words they don't mince: *I'm Fine!* Is their call. Number 2, the Modest Mess.
- And here comes **Number 3** who proclaims to all the world: *I'm Sick!* This Woozy Waif wanders around any room they find themselves in, letting everyone know just how very ill they are. They'll tell you about their most recent diagnosis, show you their test results, inundate you with information that you'll struggle to understand. And you may very well try to understand, but still they'll cry out: *Doesn't anybody care???*
- And finally, Contestant **Number 4**, The Denier. You may never know that The Big D is struggling with cancer, mental illness or dementia. They may have survived a terrible trauma or be wrestling with a life or death decision regarding treatment. They keep it under wraps in fear of being judged or counseled. They'll talk about the weather. They'll talk about your kids, diverting attention away from themselves. You'll

never know how sick they actually are when they say, *“Can I have the recipe for that dip you made?”* The Big D is almost invisible...

And those are our 21st Century contestants!

It was typical in the first century for illness to be treated as a sign that the gods were unhappy. With you. With your family. It wasn't always clear. And in some cults, the only way to appease the gods was with a sacrifice. Could be crops. Could be a prized animal. Could be money. Or perhaps you could try a *ritual* to cleanse your sick soul.

According to Bible-history.com: *Mark adds an interesting fact in his report of CHRIST healing the woman with the issue of blood. He says that she "had suffered many things of many physicians" (Mark 5:26). One writer quotes the Talmud of Babylon as authority for the fact that some of the rabbis themselves posed as physicians, and very queer remedies indeed were prescribed by them for a woman with this ailment. If one course of procedure did not succeed in healing, another one was suggested. One of these was this: "Dig seven pits, and burn in them some vine branches not yet four years old. Then let the woman, carrying a cup of wine in her hand, come up to each pit in succession, and sit down by the side of it, and each time let the words be repeated: 'Be free from thy sickness.'" [Manners And Customs of Bible Lands]*

Illness: physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual takes a lot of different forms. In the first century, James noted that most of these forms of dis-ease create an estrangement between the person who is struggling and

their community of faith. He sought to remedy that situation with a code of conduct that makes up today's text.

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James does not distinguish between being "raised up" in this life or the next. He doesn't say, "pray and you'll be back to work this afternoon."

James is living in a time when the belief in resurrection is powerful. It is the ultimate healing. So as nice as it would be to make tonight's ballgame at Fenway, an eternity with God is not a bad deal. In the meantime, there is reconnecting with another human being. There is reconciliation with the community of faith. There is the assurance of God working with you and for you toward a positive outcome...in this world or the next. You'll be in good hands. You'll be ok.

I'm wondering if anyone here has ever been part of the Sick America Pageant? Have you ever fallen into one of those roles and by your participation, felt estranged from God, or your faith community? Maybe you stopped answering your phone...or maybe the phone never rang. Maybe you are feeling that way today.

James offers us a description of how to attend to one another in just such a case.

He notes that if you are feeling disconnected from your health or community, begin by calling on an elder of the community. Someone who has been around a bit. Someone who has survived illness to tell another tale. Call that person to be by your side and let them know you need some help.

### **1-4 say, HEIp me!**

Could I get a couple “elders” up here to demonstrate how this works?

- Once you are together, James advises that the “elder” begin by listening to the story of the person who is ill or estranged. Don’t try to fix them. Don’t interrupt. Don’t try to one up them. Just listen. Ask “what’s going on?” “How are you hurting?” “What do you need?” Go ahead and try that...
- After listening to the confession of the person who is hurting, the elder also confesses to needing God’s help. You may say something like: “I remember a time when I felt like that and I called out for God to heal me...” or “Although I never went through what you're going through, I have also experienced hurt...” or “I confess that I have found myself needing God’s help when I was hurting.” Words that suggest that you have heard the other person’s struggle, and you

understand how alienating that struggle can be. Go ahead, elders...minister.

- By confessing together we begin to heal some of the estrangement that can occur when someone is ill.
- Next, pray. Ask God to hear your confessions (describe the struggles you and your friend are needing help with) and ask God to bring you both a healing spirit. The prayer does not have to be anything fancy. From the heart will do. You could say, “Dear God, we are struggling here. I have struggled in the past and my friend here is struggling in the present. Send your healing spirit upon us so that we may continue to heal and know your peace. Make us whole in your name. Amen.”
- Go ahead and try that...
- After praying (and this is probably a bit new to us in the 21st century) apply a bit of oil to your friend’s hand. If you have some olive oil, or grapeseed oil, (even basic cooking oil will do!) take a little bit and (with permission) place some on your partner’s hand, in the sign of the cross. If you do not have any oil, just make the sign of the cross on their hand as a seal and blessing of the prayer. Invoking Jesus’ name has a power that reconnects us to one another and the Holy. The oil acts as a vehicle for that power to be transferred. The sign of the cross acts in a similar way. Neither has any “magical” energy. Instead, they are potent reminders of God’s tender loving presence.
- Go ahead and try that.

- Finally, James tells us to keep in touch. **19** *My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

It's not clear whose sins are covered, perhaps because the point of James's lesson is *not* that illness equals sin. James is calling us beyond that notion to look at the powerful healing that occurs when we are brought back into community with one another.

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James believes, and I with him, that when we are together death has no sway over us. When we are together we are healed by the power and presence of our Lord. When we are together in community, there is life in Jesus Christ. May that healing spirit of community bring us peace in this life and the next.

Contestants...you are free! In Jesus' name. Amen.