

Lone Rangers are Dead Rangers

Rebuilding a Broken Church Culture Part 4

James 5:14 10-11-2015

Summary: Your walk with God is a community project – each body part needs the body. Physical sickness/healing illustrate spiritual sickness/healing in Scripture. James closes with a section that starts with physical healing and gradually shifts to spiritual restoration because this section is all about the remedy for all the spiritual maladies exposed in the book. The oil is a physical act symbolizing healing, renewal, refreshment, and possibly dedication to God. Elders are to be called by the sick person because they are shepherds who care for broken sheep in times of trouble and offer prayers as well as the spiritual care needed in times of sickness, when it's hard to draw near to God.

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Introduction

Open your Bibles please to James 5. If you made a list of all the commands in the New Testament, would you be surprised to find out that one of them is this: call the elders of the church to your house? It is in James 5:14. God commands you, under certain circumstances, to summon the elders. And when you do so, we have to come.

13 Is any one of you in trouble? Let him pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 14 Is any one of you sick? Let him call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him 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 him up. If he has sinned, he 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 man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. 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, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone

should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Why healing?

That is a controversial and difficult passage. It is difficult for a few reasons, not the least of which is the context. This seems like such an odd place for a discussion of physical healing. It doesn't appear to have anything to do with the rest of the book or the immediate context. A verse on integrity, then private prayer, then sickness and healing, then restoring a wandering sinner. It's no wonder that several commentators say this is just a jumble of completely unrelated thoughts at the end of the book. One of them said it's like when you are writing a letter and you see the mailman coming so you quick jot down all the rest of your miscellaneous thoughts. Is that what happened here? James saw the mailman walking down the street?

Why Relief?

And here is another question – all through this book when James refers to suffering, he never says anything about how to alleviate the suffering – only how to handle it and respond to it well. But now, with the suffering of sickness, the only focus is on how to get relief. He doesn't say, "If you are sick, persevere in faith." He tells us, "If you're sick, seek healing." Why is that? Is it more important to be delivered from physical problems than it is to be delivered from other problems? If you have a financial problem, persevere. If you have an emotional problem, persevere. If you have a relational problem, persevere. If you have a physical problem, seek healing. Is that the message of Scripture? And if so, why?

Why Elders?

And why call the elders of all people? If healing is what is needed, why not call for someone with the gift of healing? Or a doctor? They had doctors back then – why not call them?

Community Project

If you back up one verse you will see that James brings up three scenarios. Are you in this situation? Do this. This situation? Do this. This situation? Do this. And after the first two we think we know what's coming on the third one. But James throws a curveball. He says, are you suffering hardship? Go to God! Are you happy? Go to God! Everything in between – go to God! But then he says, "Are you sick? Go to... the elders of the church. Go to God, go to God, then go to people - the elders of the church. Then from there he starts talking about confessing our sins to one another in the church, and everyone praying for one another. Then he talks about rescuing one another when we stray. Twice he actually uses the word "to save" and both times that saving, or rescuing, comes through people in the church.¹

It is still all about prayer, so it is ultimately God who does all the healing and restoring and saving. But it comes through the prayers of others. James started with private prayer, but now he is moving to praying for one another. And it is only through those prayers that the restoration comes in this passage.

So the reality that is staring us in the face here is this (and I know some of you just really don't want to hear this, but there is no escaping it) – your walk with God is a community project. That is the inescapable reality of this and countless other passages in the New Testament. We have to reject the privatized "Jesus and me" religion of Western culture, where we prize our individualism and privacy. God has not equipped you to live the Christian life by yourself. He has not given you what you need to do it on your own. In this spiritual war, lone rangers are dead rangers. Take any body part – any part, and cut it off and put it on the table, and it will die. (And even if it didn't die – what good would it be sitting by

¹ In v.15 in the Greek it says the prayer of faith will *save* the sick person. And in v.20 it says the person who turns a wanderer from the error of his way will *save* him.

itself on a table? It would be totally useless and worthless.) God designed you to need the rest of the body, and the body to need you. The more you cut yourself off from the body the more worthless you make yourself, and ultimately it is suicide.

James is very clear that health comes through the community, and where health is lacking, healing will come through the prayers of others.

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

The last two weeks we asked the question, “How’s your private prayer life?” Next week we will be asking, “How’s your corporate prayer life? (Praying for others.) But here we’re asking, “How’s your being prayed for life?” How much do you feel the need to be prayed for?

If you are going to make it, you need to be prayed for in your weakness, but that is not going to happen if your life is so closed off that no one knows about your weakness and neediness. So this is going to require some people to let go of pride, jettison the fantasy of your own self-sufficiency and strength, and let people know where you really need prayer. So many people come to church like a guy with massive internal bleeding coming into a hospital and saying, “I’m fine. Just give me an aspirin.” Why would you go to a hospital and hide your illness?

If you have been around here very long you know that here at Agape we make much of the many “one-another” commands in the New Testament. We are all about the one-anothers – (love one another, encourage one another, bear one another’s burdens, confess your sins to one another, rebuke one another, forgive one another, etc.) And when we talk about those, for some of you, your attention might be mostly fixed on your responsibility to offer these things to others. You need to love people at church, you need to bear their burdens, you need to rebuke and encourage and strengthen and spur them on to love and good deeds, etc. And you might forget that you have just as much responsibility to not just give those things, but also to receive them. If the Bible commands us to rebuke one another that means you must not only rebuke those who need it, but you need to receive rebuke from others. If the Bible says to encourage one another, you must encourage, but you must also receive encouragement. And if it says pray for one another – guess what? You need to do what this verse commands you to do and ask for prayer. If you are unwilling to receive those things, you’re fouling up the process.

Other people need to be reminded in the other direction. You are all about receiving but not giving. You are focused on being loved and being cared for, but you don’t realize your responsibility to love and care for others in the church. You come here, you want to be greeted, you want to be welcomed, you want to receive counsel when you need it, you want a bulletin, you want the church cleaned up after you, you want the microphones to work, you want the kids to be taught – but it’s not really on your radar that you have responsibility to serve and to wash the feet of the saints.

Every healthy body part is dependent on the rest of the body, and it exists to serve the rest of the body – giving and receiving. And so guess what that rules out – privacy. There are a lot of people in the church who prize their privacy more than they care about you. Somehow they think they have the option of being a Christian and also being a private person. They think they have the prerogative of having a huge personal space. That’s false. God does not give His children the option of being private people. This is a family. That is what the Bible says we are, and you can’t be in a family and be private. And the desire to do so reveals some serious heart problems.

Proverbs 18:1 One who isolates himself pursues selfish desires; he rebels against all sound judgment.

Do you realize what you are admitting to when you say, “I’m a private person”? That’s like saying, “Hi, I’m Darrell. I’m selfish and I rebel against all sound judgment.”

Privacy is out of the question in the church because privacy is always the enemy of intimacy. You can have privacy or intimacy – never both.

“But I don’t want to get hurt again!”

Well, then, you're in the wrong religion. You need to go find a religion that allows you to place your own comfort above the commands of God, and your own wisdom above God's wisdom. But if you want to be a Christian, self-protection as a priority above what God commands is not an option.

But you don't have to be afraid of that. It is really a beautiful thing, and I trust you will be able to see that by the time we're done.

Pastoral Care

Physical and Spiritual Healing

So let's start with this question of why James treats sickness differently than other suffering. I looked up every verse in the Bible that uses the terms sickness or healing. That is a massive amount of material – hundreds of verses. And one thing that really became clear right off the bat is this: There is a very clear and frequent connection in Scripture between *physical* sickness and healing, and *spiritual* sickness and healing.

Physical wellness and healing are very often connected with faithfulness to God. And in the sacrificial system, God used diseases of various kinds as illustrations of sin. That's why people who had those diseases were ceremonially unclean and couldn't enter the Temple. And I counted over 40 times when the word *healing* is used to refer to spiritual restoration.

Isaiah 53:5 ...by his wounds we are healed.

And Peter quotes that in the context of spiritual healing (**1 Pe.2:24**).

Isaiah 57:17 I was enraged by his sinful greed ... 18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him

The ravages of sin on the soul are compared to physical sickness because the effect sin has on your inner man is similar to what disease does to your body. It weakens you, brings pain and misery, and makes it so your body doesn't work right. Sin does those same things to your soul. It gets all messed up and dysfunctional. Your desires get messed up, your attitudes and perspectives get messed up, your thought patterns, your reactions to things, your affections – what you love, what you hate – it all gets messed up. That is what God teaches us by comparing spiritual problems to physical disease and illness and injury. So whenever you get the flu, break your leg, have arthritis pain, cancer, bad back, bad eyesight – all of it is designed to teach us something about the effect that sin has on our soul.

That's why Jesus did so many healing miracles. When Almighty God became a man and entered into this world, and then did miracles to prove who He was, He could have done anything. He could have rearranged the stars. He could have thrown Mount Herman into the Dead Sea. He could have called millions of angels and told them to do anything. Jesus did do some miracles to show His control over the creation, but by far, the vast majority of His miracles were miracles of healing. There was a reason for that. The Messiah came to bring spiritual restoration, and He symbolizes that by essentially banishing disease from Israel during His ministry.

Restoration in James 5

So with all that background, James 5 starts to makes more sense. He is not hop scotching between random topics. Throughout the book he exposed all their spiritual problems and maladies, and at the end of the book he talks about the remedy. And if you look closely, you will see that he starts with physical healing and gradually moves in the direction of spiritual restoration.

In verse 14 – **Is any one of you sick?** That word translated **sick** means ... sick.² And the picture seems to be of a pretty severe illness. The fact that the person has to summon the elders to come to him

² The word translated **sick** in v.13 is actually the word for weakness, and it is sometimes used of spiritual weakness. For example,

instead of him just going to them, and they're praying over him, seems to picture someone who is bedridden. This is the only place in the Bible where someone is said to pray **over** someone else. It is not a common way of speaking about prayer. And that phrase **the Lord will raise him up** is used very often of Jesus raising up a sick person from their bed (like Peter's mother-in-law when she had a fever). So we know he is talking about physical sickness here in verse 14. In fact, in verse 15 he says **if he has sinned...** - which implies he may not have sinned. That would be kind of hard to explain if this is only talking about spiritual problems. And the only other place where anointing with oil is connected with healing is in a passage about miraculous, physical healing.

Mark 6:13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

So I don't think there is any getting around the fact that he is talking about physical sickness and physical healing in verse 14. But I think it is just as clear that while he starts out talking about physical sickness, there is no question that as he moves through the passage, he gradually shifts in the direction of spiritual sickness and spiritual restoration. The word translated *sick* in verse 15 is actually the word *weary* - which would be the kind of word you would expect if he is talking about spiritual weariness or discouragement. And when verse 15 says he will be made well, that's *sozo* - the normal word for salvation. He will be saved. So now we are getting the sense that James is talking about both physical and spiritual problems. With that first man James says *if he has sinned*, but the conclusion he draws in verse 16 is completely focused on confession of sin. And by the time you get to verses 19-20, there is no question he is talking about spiritual malady and spiritual restoration with no hint of physical at all.

And if we look at the passage that way, then it makes perfect sense in context. The end of the book is all about spiritual restoration, and that spiritual restoration is illustrated by physical restoration.

That's why God wants to heal you. He wants to give you all kinds of blessings, but especially physical healing. There is something special about that, because that's how God has chosen to symbolize spiritual restoration.

The Elders' Job

And He wants it to happen through the ministry of the elders of the church. I asked the question earlier, why elders and not doctors, or people with the gift of healing?³ If it's just a matter of physical health, doctors would make sense. But if it is spiritual healing and restoration, and the physical healing is a picture of that, then it makes perfect sense for it to be the pastors because that is a major part of the elder's job description. Ezekiel 34 is a chapter where God rebukes the pastors for failure to do their job.

Ezekiel 34:1 The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel

The word *shepherd* and the word *pastor* are the exact same word - both in Greek and Hebrew, Old Testament and New Testament. When it is talking about animals, it means shepherd. And when it is talking about people, it means pastor. In this chapter, it is clearly talking about shepherding people, so we are talking about pastors. What was it that these pastors did wrong?

those passages that talk about the weaker brother (Ro.14 & 1 Cor.8) – this is the word used to describe their weak faith. But when it refers to spiritual weakness, it's clear from the context and usually has some modifier – like weak in faith. The vast majority of the time that word refers to physical sickness. In the Gospels, that is the only way it's used. And more than any other New Testament writer, James draws his vocabulary and ways of speaking from the Gospels.

³ It could be that there was no such thing as *the* gift of healing. The only place in the Bible that gift is referred to is 1 Corinthians 12. And instead of the gift of healing, it refers to gifts of healings – both words are plural. That seems to indicate that it might be different from the other gifts. Many scholars believe that instead of it being like the gift of teaching, where a person can just decide to teach whenever he wants, individual gifts of healings came at different points in different occasions according to the sovereign plan of God – whenever He decided to grant a healing. That would explain why at some points Paul performed amazing miracles of healing, and other times he left Trophimus sick at Miletus, and his coworker up Epaphroditus got so sick he almost died.

Ezekiel 34:4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.

Take all the negatives out of there and you have got a job description for a pastor. A pastor is a shepherd, and the shepherd's job is to feed and protect the flock (through teaching), and to give special care to those who are weak or sick or injured or who are straying away and getting lost.

What about the people who are doing okay? The pastor feeds them through teaching, but the general day to day care comes through the rest of the body. All the people of God are to minister to one another, and encourage and care for one another. The pastors can't give individual attention to every single person. But when someone gets especially broken down and is in need of special help, that's when the shepherds step in. Of course the rest of the church should seek to help them too, but the elders take the lead.

When we get sick, isn't that when we tend to have the most trouble spiritually? When you are really sick or you're in a lot of pain, isn't that when it's hardest to read your Bible? Isn't that when it's hardest to focus on prayer? Isn't that when you miss out on fellowship because you can't make it to church? How many times have you heard of someone turning away from God as a result of an illness? In verse 13 James tells us to take every situation to God in prayer, but when you're really sick, that's hard to do. And when you are really weak spiritually – depressed, discouraged, broken down, wearied, spiritually weak; it's hard to pray, and you need help. So call the elders.

Your Responsibility

And please notice that it is the sick person's responsibility to call the elders. It doesn't say that the elders should keep track of who is sick so they can go visit them. It amazes me how many times I hear people complain, "The elders never came to pray with me in the hospital," or "The elders never came to my house," but they never even did what this verse said to do by calling the elders to come.

It's important for them to call the elders, because for this ministry to work the sick person or spiritually weak person must be receptive to spiritual restoration through the ministry of the elders – even to the point of being willing to confess sin. Some people are not interested in that. They don't want to confess their sins to the elders, they don't want the elders talking to them about spiritual things, they don't want to get back on track spiritually. So going to them won't do any good. The way the elders know if you are open to our ministry is if you call us. Whatever reasons you might have for why you think the elders should be the ones to take the initiative, James is very clear - if you're sick, you call the elders.

Serious Illness

That doesn't mean you have to call us every time you runny nose. Again, this person is evidently bedridden. It's when you have a serious problem – especially if it's causing spiritual harm, that you call the elders. If you are handling it just fine, that's great. But if it's starting to weaken your faith, it's keeping you from prayer, it's making you bitter, it's having a negative effect on you spiritually – that is when you need to call the elders.

Don't hesitate, because it's when we are suffering that we need spiritual guidance the most. When King Asa got sick in 2 Chronicles 16:12 it says, "**even in his illness he did not seek help from the LORD, but only from the doctors.**" He called the doctors but not the pastors. And that word **even** says a lot. It sounds like the Lord was doing things to bring Asa to seek help from Him, and Asa wouldn't do it, so God made him sick, and *even then* Asa still wouldn't seek help from God. Sickness is not only an object lesson to teach us about the effects of sin on the soul, but it is also God's messenger to call us to draw near to Him as the source of life and soundness. And that is why very often God grants healing through people who are designated as His messengers – like the elders of the church.

Shepherding

Sometimes people have trouble getting comfort from God because God is invisible. And they want someone they can see and hear and touch. Like the one little kid said, "I want someone with skin on." If Jesus is such a great Shepherd of the sheep, why doesn't He provide comfort and help for me that is physical, since I'm a physical being? Answer – He has. God gives us His love and cares for us and shepherds us through human agents that He has designated to be shepherds (pastors). So when he says, "When you're in trouble, pray; when you're happy, pray; but when your body is sick, call the elders. That's not James changing direction on the third one – it is God putting flesh and blood on the care He has for you. The presence of elders in the church is a sure sign of God's love for you.

Anointing with Oil

So call the elders and have them pray and anoint you with oil. What's that about – oil? James just throws it out there without giving any explanation. And so there are a lot of theories about what it means.

Sacrament?

The Roman Catholic Church uses this verse to support what they call extreme unction, which is part of last rites. The problem is, this passage is not talking about preparing someone for death; it's talking about healing.⁴

Medicine?

Another theory is that this is a medicinal use of oil. In those times, oil was thought to have all kinds of healing properties. They used it to treat everything from wounds to headaches to paralysis. And that would fit the terminology that James uses here because he doesn't use the normal, religious or ceremonial term for anointing. The word translated **anoint** literally just means to rub - like rubbing on some topical ointment.

But the problem with that view is that it is not the oil that heals, but **the prayer of faith**.

15 And the prayer of faith will make the sick person well

Secondly, it does sound to me like a religious anointing because it is the anointing that is done **in the name of the Lord**.

14 ... pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Plus, if this were a medical treatment, you would expect that it would be doctors rather than elders doing it. I don't know of any reason why medicine would need to be applied by elders in the church. Probably the reason James uses this particular word for rubbing instead of the more ceremonial word for anointing is that the more ceremonial word is always used in the New Testament to refer to a metaphorical anointing.⁵ So if James wanted there to be a literal application of actual, physical oil on the person, it would make sense for him to use this word. There is only one other place in the New Testament where these two words (anointing and oil) are used together, and in that context it seems to refer to miraculous healing.

⁴ Heibert notes that the Catholic scholar Jean Cantiant recognizes that "exegesis as such, and of itself, would not suffice" to establish the sacrament from the words of James.

⁵ Those who argue for the medicinal view argue that if this were a religious consecration or setting apart, we would expect the word *xrio* rather than *aleipho*. But the use of *aleipho* here may be because *xrio* is never used of a physical act in the New Testament.

Mark 6:13 [The 72] drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Literal Oil for a Symbolic Purpose

So then what's the point of the oil? I believe what James is calling for here is a literal anointing for a symbolic purpose – just like baptism and communion – literal water, literal bread and juice that symbolize spiritual things. And so this oil is literal oil that is a symbol of a spiritual reality.

What spiritual reality? What does it symbolize? In that culture it symbolized two things: healing and refreshment.⁶ I already mentioned how they used oil for healing. But anointing with oil was also part of their daily hygiene and refreshment. James takes so much of his language from Jesus, and if you look at Jesus use of this word for anoint, here is what you find:

Matthew 6:16 When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting

That word for **anoint** is the same one that James is using. While David's baby was sick he fasted and didn't bathe, but after the child was gone:

2 Samuel 12:20 Then David got up from the ground ...washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes ... and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

That phrase **put on lotions** is this same term for anointing.

2 Samuel 14:2 ... Dress in mourning clothes, and don't use any cosmetic lotions.

Same word. It is used of the beauty treatments that Esther used before going in to the king.

Daniel 10:3 I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

So putting oil on your skin was a part of hygiene and pleasurable refreshment. In Hebrew 1 it's connected with joy.

Hebrews 1:9 ...God has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

So you might compare this to rubbing some really soothing lotion or ointment on your dry skin. So I believe the anointing with oil is symbolic of healing, refreshment, restoration, and renewal. And that would fit with the word **weary** in verse 15.

15 And the prayer of faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.

The word translated *sick* there is actually the word *weary* or discouraged. The only other place that word is used in the New Testament is Hebrews 12:3.

Hebrews 12:3 Consider him who endured such opposition ... so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So there it is the weariness connected with discouragement. When the elders anoint with oil and pray, the Lord will restore and refresh and renew the weary, disheartened, broken down person – physically and spiritually.

And I think the implication is that the elders' job is to go beyond just prayer, and to also do what they can to encourage and refresh the person's spirit. If you think about what a good backrub does for you

⁶ Some people have floated the idea that maybe it represents the Holy Spirit. That's a possibility. Sometimes oil is a symbol representing the Holy Spirit in Scripture, but I don't think that is likely here, because James never mentions the Holy Spirit a single time throughout the whole book. So it doesn't seem likely that's what would spring to the reader's minds.

physically, and then you try to think of “What would accomplish that same thing for someone’s soul?” – I think that puts us on the track of what James is talking about.

Although I will say this - I do think there is significance to the fact that we are called to do something that involves touching the person. In that culture (and in ours) people don’t want to touch sick people. But you can’t put oil on someone without touching them. And I think that’s important. When we encourage each other and show warmth and love, appropriate physical touch is part of communicating that love. And when you are really sick, sometimes you don’t pick up on subtle expressions of love, but you notice a gentle, loving, caring touch.

And again – don’t sit around waiting for the elders to come knocking on your door. Or anyone else for that matter. It just drives me crazy when people disappear from the family and then complain because no one seemed to notice they left. Whenever I hear people say that I want to ask them, “During all those weeks you were gone, what if someone else in the church was also gone? You didn’t notice that person was gone. You didn’t call them. Why does everyone in the church have the responsibility to keep track of you, but you don’t have the responsibility to keep track of them?” The Bible does tell us to go after strays. But it never tells the sheep to go ahead and stray just to see if the shepherds are on their toes.

So James gives us such a revolutionary idea – if you need a visit, ask for one! Pick up the phone and say, “Hey, I need a visit.” Don’t use an excuse.

“Oh, they’re too busy”

“Oh, I can’t call them – I’m a nobody. I’m not important enough to be so bold as to contact the elders directly and ask them to come to my house.”

That is hogwash. None of this is tied to the prominence or perceived importance of the sick person. The only thing you need to be qualified to summon the elders and require them to come to your house is – sickness. Just get sick – that’s all you have to do. Remember, this is a family. A sick child doesn’t have to have any kind of seniority or prominence in the family to be able to call out from his bedroom and say, “Mom, come help me. I’m really sick!”

In the Name of the Lord

So call us, and we will come and we will put a dab of oil on your head as a symbolic act to remind us and you in a special, formal way that we are there to bring healing and refreshment and renewal. And we will do it **in the name of the Lord**. That’s important. We don’t want to do it in a way that makes it seem like there is some special healing power in the elders or in the oil.⁷ If there is going to be any healing power, it’s going to be clear that it came from God. And if we work to refresh and encourage and bring renewal and joy to the person, we won’t do it through human means. It is not going to come through telling jokes, or some psychological technique for cheering them up, or psychotropic drugs – our method will be to give them encouraging truths from the Word of God.

Dedication

One other thought about the anointing – it might also symbolize dedicating that person to God. Sometimes anointing was used that way.

2 Corinthians 1:21 ...He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

So this may also be a way of dedicating the person to God in a special way. Saying, “Ok Lord, this person is looking to You, he’s repented of his sins, he’s seeking healing from You in Your prescribed

⁷ It may be that the elders would be the logical candidates if you are looking for someone who is spiritually mature and who is walking with the Lord in righteousness (in the next verse James says the prayer of a righteous man is powerful). So it may be that their prayers will be especially powerful because of that, but they pray and anoint in the name of the Lord so that it is crystal clear to everyone that it is not the oil, it is not the elders – any healing power that’s going to come is from the Lord.

way. We, as his elders, now place him in Your hands and ask that You would restore soundness and health and life to his body and soul.”

Don't think that the anointing is unimportant just because it's symbolic. Symbols and reminders are important. We always try to remember the cross, but there is something about physically taking communion that impresses it on our hearts in a greater way. Before you get baptized, you already understand the principles of being cleansed, and being buried and raised with Christ. But when you physically get submerged in water in the presence of the whole church, that has a way of driving those things into your soul in a much more profound way. And we often pray for healing, but when it's the kind of situation that calls for the elders to go to someone's house and pray over him, God wants us to take that especially seriously so He gives us a formal procedure to solemnize it and call to our minds all these principles. And we'll see as we go farther into this text, this is not just your average, ordinary prayer for healing. This is something very special.

Conclusion: Church Membership

This is one of the countless places in Scripture where it is just assumed that you are a member of a church. It doesn't say, "Is anyone sick? If you happen to be a member of a church, try calling the elders." James assumes, if you are a believer, you've got some elders whose phone numbers you have. You can call, and they will come. People who get tired of all the difficulty involved with fellowshiping with a bunch of sinners, and they bail out of church – they have a million excuses to try to justify what they are doing.

“I'm reading the Bible. I've got the Holy Spirit. I listen to sermons online, I've got worship music on my iPod – why do I need to go to some building with a bunch of hypocrites and phonies who do nothing but hurt me and disappoint me?”

Or this one – “We're our own church. Our friends come over, we talk about the Bible – it's a house church. Jesus said it – where two or three are gathered, that's a church, right?” Wrong. Jesus said where two or three are gathered, they have authority to take church discipline to the next level, which is where those two or three present the matter to the church, which means the two or three are not the church. If you don't have enough people to do church discipline, you don't have a church. And not if you don't have a group of men who have been called by God to serve in pastoral ministry and that calling has been validated by the body of Christ who found those men to be qualified according to 1 Timothy 3 – you don't have that, then you don't have a church.

The day may come when the family of God hurts you so bad, disappoints you so much, fails you so egregiously, that you will be tempted to run away from home spiritually. Or a time may come when you cool off so much spiritually, that you feel too unworthy or too ashamed or you just desire the world and not God's family, and so you are tempted to give up on “organized religion.” Or to redefine church so you can avoid the really hard parts. When that happens, you need to give yourself the same speech you would give a 12 year old who wants to run away from home. You don't want to be out there in the world. You don't want to run away from the flock. It doesn't go well for sheep that don't have shepherds. Lone rangers are dead rangers. Everywhere you look in the New Testament it is simply assumed that you are fully committed to a local body of believers, and are under the spiritual care of elders.

And I am wondering if it would be a good idea for all of us to remind ourselves of that in a formal way – before the day of temptation comes. There are pros and cons to having a formal membership covenant. One of the cons is that the more you formalize membership, the more you create a situation where you have non-members – people who are believers and who attend regularly, but they haven't gone through the requirements, so they aren't members. And non-membership is not a biblical concept. So that is one reason we haven't had a more formal process.

That's one of the cons, but there are some pros. And maybe the biggest pro is that a membership covenant is like wedding vows – it reminds us, in a solemn, formal way, of our responsibilities to one another that God's Word requires of us. I am curious to know how many would be willing to voluntarily sign a membership covenant. We've placed one in the bulletin (and it's also in the Appendix of the

sermon manuscript). We would like you to take that home and pray to God about it. If it's a covenant you would be willing to make, please let us know that. If it is not, we would be very interested to hear why – if there is something in there you don't agree with, or something wrong with the wording, or if you just don't want to make that kind of commitment, or whatever. But whatever you think of the idea of making a formal commitment to God, let the process remind you of two things:

- 1) Your responsibility to the family of God
- 2) The tender, compassionate love the Lord Jesus Christ shows you through the hands and feet of the shepherds He has placed over you, and all your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Benediction: Hebrews 13:20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) On a scale from 1-10 where 1 is no involvement in the body life of the church and 10 is the kind of giving and receiving of grace that Scripture calls for, how would you rate your current level of involvement at Agape?
- 2) If you have a deep involvement, describe some of the blessings and graces that have come through that.
- 3) Is something holding you back from greater involvement? If so, what is it?
- 4) Is there an area where your life is in need of refreshment or renewal right now? If so, ask the group to pray for you.

Appendix: Biblical Obligations of the Members of Agape Bible Church to the Body

The requirements of this membership covenant are in no way intended as an addition to the biblical obligations of a believer. Rather, this document functions primarily as an accessible yet non-exhaustive explanation of what the Scriptures teach about the obedience that faith produces.

Having received Jesus Christ, through faith, as the Lord, Savior, and, supreme Treasure of our lives so that we trust Him more than we trust ourselves, and having declared that through baptism, we do now, in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with God concerning His commands regarding our responsibilities to one another as one body in Christ.

I covenant...

- to submit to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues
- to strive, to the best of my ability, to carry out (both giving and receiving) the “one-another” commands in Scripture.
- to pursue, seek hard after, closeness with God through regular prayer, meditation on Scripture, and fellowship
- to regularly participate in family life at Agape attending weekly services and a prayer group, and serving in ministry, “washing the feet of the saints,” as a steward of the grace that flows through my spiritual gift
- to steward the resources God has given me, including time, talents, spiritual gifts and finances. This includes regular financial giving of my firstfruits to God, service and participation in community that is sacrificial, cheerful and voluntary
- by God’s grace through the power of the Holy Spirit, to strive for holiness in all areas of life as an act of worship to Jesus Christ
- When there is an ongoing struggle, I will seek help through discipleship/counseling. This includes striving to maintain sexual purity (no sexual interaction of any kind with anyone but my spouse), avoiding drunkenness or getting high, illegal activities, dishonesty, selfishness, and pride
- to strive to guard the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, refusing to look down on or grumble against God, the leadership, other members, or circumstances, striving to be patient with others, assuming the best motives, and immediately forgiving those who repent. And I will make reconciliation of broken relationships a supreme priority – as soon as I discover someone has something against me, or when I have something against someone that can’t be overlooked, and I will follow the steps of restoration in Matthew 18:15-17. When I can’t resolve a dispute, I will take it before the church for help
 - I will honor the marriage covenant, strive to fulfill my marital role as a husband or wife, and to bring up our children in the training and instruction of the Lord, and before considering divorce I agree to walk through the steps of marriage reconciliation at Agape Bible Church, and will obey the Scriptures on this subject
- to be willing to set aside freedoms that cause others to stumble, and to avoid activities that hinder my walk with the Lord
- to do the following when I sin:
 - confess my sin to God and to those I sinned against.

- repent and seek help to put my sin to death
- to submit, both in action and attitude, to the elders and other appointed leaders of the church
- If I leave Agape, I will first
 - do all I can to resolve any conflicts, and discuss my reasons with an elder
 - notify ministry leaders in areas of ministry where I am serving so they can prepare to replace me
 - when possible, help train replacements in my ministry before leaving
 - to immediately seek another church with which I can carry out my biblical responsibilities as a believer, and notify the leadership at Agape when I have found a new church.