

The relevance of James 5:14ff to pastoral ministry today

Mgr. Petr Rattay

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Introduction

Western society is struggling in many areas of life, including racial, social and other issues and has no answer for some of its troubles. Among some of these troubles belongs the need of sick people to be healed. The number of people suffering sickness is very high in the world, but also among Christians of all denominations.¹

It is not a big surprise that any congregation would include somebody in it that is sick. Any group in the world would consist of those who are not well at any one time. A simple fact that a person is a Christian does not make him safe from being sick. Kendall states, 'There is no promise in the Gospel that a Christian, who becomes such by grace, will be without any physical impediment, because all men must die.'² The question is when!

Sick people search for help in various ways, such as medical treatment and religious practices, but many do not find relief at all. Nevertheless, the New Testament provides clear instructions how to act in the case of being sick as a Christian. The key verses are found in James chapter five.

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.

¹ George H. Malkmus, *Why Christians Get Sick* (Treasure House. Shippensburg, 2005), p. 33

² R.T. Kendall, *The Way of Wisdom Patience in Waiting on God: Sermons on James 4-5*, Volume 2 (Pater Noster Press, 2002), p. 285

This passage belongs to the most difficult parts of James. The meaning of this passage seems to be clear, but deeper investigation shows variety of interpretations that are offered. According to D Lioy, 'Some see the verse as teaching cooperation between prayer and medicine, between god and physician. According to this view just a prayer or just medicine alone is less than a full prescription for renewed health. Together they are a powerful remedy for serious illness.'³ However, other see.... [debate the authors' arguments against each other.]

The aim of this paper is to describe the general context of this passage, further to prove that it is still relevant for pastoral ministry today. Firstly, I focused on the meaning of the verses. Secondly, I described James's probable intentions and thirdly and lastly, a portion of this paper is devoted to pastoral problems related to these verses from a practical point of view.

Who is the sick person

Some Christians consider James 5:14-16 to merely reflect the cultural thinking and practices used by Jews at that time. Thus elders anointing the sick with oil or praying for them would fall into the same range as foot washing, a holy kiss or similar practices done by the Jewish communities. Moo claims that James is addressing his epistle to the Jewish community in Jerusalem or also to those who spread from Jerusalem⁴ to other places due to the persecution.⁵ In the first chapter James uses the calling dear brothers, which indicates his close relationship to identity with the Christian community. The close relationship and the community life is evident from the hierarchy that James is describing in the

³ Daniel Lioy, *International Lesson Commentary KJV with NRSV Comparison* (Cook Communications Ministries, Colorado Springs 2007), p. 424

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, (Leicester: APOLLOS, 2000), p. 48

⁵ Ibid, p. 50

term 'elders of the church.' For these reasons it is possible to say that a sick person is a Christian, who belongs to a local community of believers led by the elders.

What is the sickness

To recognize the most important meaning of this verse it is necessary to view the general context of the whole passage and the book itself. The Book of James is very important for us since it deals with the topic of healing if briefly with assumptions made on the readers. Not only could it be the earliest book in the NT, but its author may have been the James who was a leader of the most prominent Christian center in the early church, based in Jerusalem. 'James is advocating the re-establishment of wholeness in a context of pastoral concern in the Christian community, in which spiritual and physical harmony is to be, maintained as a result of prayer, forgiveness and righteous lifestyles.'⁶ The following quotation shows that James's letter describes the early church's view on healing.

'Since the author writes the letter from a prestigious position, the book shapes a very early and important insight into the thinking of the church concerning healing.'⁷

A deeper look brings us to James's earlier teachings. In the fourth chapter James deals with uncertainty of life itself. Therefore, it is necessary to realize that our life and plans are in the Lord's hands and that we are submitted to His will. This aspect of James's teaching carries a clear link between any situations in our lives, therefore in sickness as well. According to these verses, it is undeniable

⁶ Keith Warrington, *Healing & Suffering: Biblical and Pastoral Reflections* (Bletchley: Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 149

⁷ Warrington, *Healing*,, p. 150

that even though the elders are supposed to pray for those who are sick, it is exclusively subject to the Lord's will.

In the fifth chapter the topic of suffering emerges from the text. Definitely there is a strong link between all the texts in the Bible. Therefore, it is more than interesting that suffering arises in combination with patience. He encourages Christians to be patient until the Lord comes again. Although we do not know precisely what kind of suffering is meant, it is interesting that James refers to Job as an example for suffering and patience. 'Bearing in mind the wide range of disaster – including sickness – that Job went through, it seems likely that James has in mind any form of suffering that may come our way as Christians.'⁸

This logical conclusion brings another question concerning James's instructions on healing the sick. Why does he give different instructions in verses 13 and 14 when the term of suffering described in the example of Job leads to patience? The possible answer lies within the different conditions. Moo describes that the Greek verb *astheneo* was used in the New Testament in association with spiritual condition, general appearance, mental ability and bodily constitutions.⁹ While verse 13 encourages any who are suffering to pray, verse 14 encourages any who are sick to call elders to pray over them anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. Therefore, verse 13 speaks to those who are in trouble and experiencing some kind of suffering, but are able to pray for themselves. On the other hand, verse 14 speaks to those who are seriously sick - probably to those who are not able to pray for themselves. Therefore, they are encouraged to call for the elders to pray for them.

⁸ David Petts, *Just a taste of Heaven* (Mattersey: Mattersey Hall, 2006), p. 101

⁹ Moo, *The letter of James*, p. 236

The 21st century view

A very interesting view on the term sickness is described in the book *Healing & Suffering* by Keith Warrington. 'All modern translations of James 5:14-18 refer to the identity of the suffering concerned as being sickness. As a result of this, most readers have assumed that the ministry offered in the passage is only relevant for those who are (seriously) physically ill.'¹⁰

Warrington suggests that James is not bringing hope for those in the church who are physically ill, but also as he says 'for those who find themselves marginalized as a result of other forms of weakness.'¹¹ This argument is also supported by Daniel Lioy who explains the term sick in the meaning of physical illness as well as for the weakness of faith or conscience.

This argument is gaining strength particularly in today's society. A vast number of Christians are infected by various diseases that are not physical ones. A following list offers examples of what we as a society and also as a church face in our everyday lives: Stress, discouragement, spiritual weakness, emotional weariness and fear. These are some examples of conditions that are not commonly defined as sickness, but nevertheless they are very dangerous, since they can be as debilitating and as damaging. In some cases and forms they can be more devastating than physical sickness to the individual concerned.

¹⁰ Warrington, *Healing & Suffering*, p. 151

¹¹ Ibid, p. 151

¹² Ibid, p. 151

¹³ A form of weakness that may be **excluded from the guidelines** in 5:14-18 is that caused by **persecution**, including the normal sufferings that sometimes co-exist with being a Christian. Such sufferings are not necessarily removed, though prayer is advocated as a means of gaining strength to bear them. Keith Warrington, *Healing*, p. 151

be active. James gives a clear instruction that it is the sick person who is supposed to call the elders. On the contrary, the elders should not neglect observing their sheep, since it is definitely a part of their ministry.

‘That the Lord intended physical healing to be a part of the ministry of the Church is proven by two things: His gifts of power to the church, and the instructions for praying for the sick found in James’s epistle.’¹⁴

Although the instructions are very clear, and God’s children can confidently expect healing, there is a danger of wrong comprehension on both sides. Each congregation should be aware of this fact.

Jeter notes that ‘Often a member becomes sick and never notifies the pastor. Later the same person complains because the pastor did not visit him when he was sick!’¹⁵ It is very important to know the expectations towards/ regarding each other. Therefore proper rules and right expectations are necessary for a good pastoral care. Nevertheless ‘the elders should be available for counsel and comfort, and willing to help the afflicted in any way possible.’¹⁶

Furthermore, it is also important to determine when it is necessary to call the elders. James is defining the case when the person is experiencing a serious sickness and is probably not able to pray for himself. Calling the elders is therefore an act of obedience and faith.¹⁷ The Greek translation is the aorist

¹⁴ Hugh Jeter, *By his stripes, A Biblical Study On Divine Healing* (Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, Missouri, 1977), p. 125

¹⁵ Jeter, *By his stripes*, p. 125

¹⁶ Lioy, *International Lesson Commentary*, p. 425

¹⁷ George Stulac, *James* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 181

¹⁸ Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: James* (Waco: Word Books, 1988), p. 206

¹⁹ Rinaldo Ronzani, *Christian Healing* (Kolbe Press, Kenya, 2007), p. 41

imperative and it is linked with terms of urgency.¹⁸ Also the person is very probably lying down, confine to bed (or house-bound), or is unable to join the community, otherwise he would come personally to the elders.¹⁹

When considering the appropriate cases two extremes may occur. The first one is underestimating the sickness in the life of a believer, when a believer does not call the elders due to obstacles on his side. On the contrary, the other extreme occurs when believers call the elders in minor cases which are not that serious. A proper balance in this particular aspect is not easy, but necessary for a healthy congregation and for individuals too.

The elders of the local church

The elders in the New Testament were mature believers, who cared for the local church.²⁰ It was a common practice within the local church to call the 'overseers' in case of serious troubles and suffering.²¹ Motyer claims that the ministry to the sick 'belongs not to any specially gifted person.'²² Rather he supports the non-charismatic scholars saying that James prefers the elders rather than the healing evangelists.²³

Nowadays pastors are overwhelmed with many administrative and organizational tasks which causes problems in having enough time for ministry itself, especially those who need special care. In churches where the ministry is aimed merely at one pastor, a lack of appropriate time for those who suffer is

²⁰ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The tests of faith* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 189

²¹ Martin, *James*, p. 207

²² Motyer, *The Message of James*, p. 190

²³ G. S. Shogren, *Will God Heal Us* (*Evangelical Quarterly* 1989), p. 100

evident. The problem of having enough pastors for the complex ministry of a local church, therefore also for the area of praying for sick people, might be in some cases, solved through the different understanding for the term 'pastor'. 'In the early church the term pastor, elder and bishop were used interchangeably. It also seems that they had more than one pastor in a local church. These, then, were the ones to be called when a believer was sick.'²⁴

Evidently, this understanding requires more people involved in ministry and therefore more time and possibilities to fulfill the ministry according to its need. Additionally, it carries a chance for effective development in the future of the local church.

To pray over the sick and the anointing with oil

The task of elders is to pray over the sick. The Greek word for 'pray' is translated as 'they should pray'²⁵ or as Brown translates 'let them pray.'²⁶ Both terms indicate James's goal. It seems that James is urgently emphasizing the power of prayer. The term 'pray over' carries a unique phrasal verb in the New Testament. Despite its unique occurrence most scholars agree that elders are standing and praying above the sick, who is probably lying down.²⁷

The next part is considering the anointing with oil. There are a few questions related to the significance of the oil. For instance what kind of oil should be used? What amount of oil is appropriate? First of all, it is necessary to realize that oil had a vast number of usages within the Jewish culture. There

²⁴ Jeter, *By his stripes*, p. 126

²⁵ R. Brown, P. W. Comfort, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1990) p. 805

²⁶ D. E. Hiebert, *James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972) p. 295

²⁷ Petts, *Just a taste of heaven*, p. 103

have been at least a few occasions when the oil was used in a very special way. The following lines show four important events when the oil was used:

1. A medicine
2. A symbol of God's empowerment
3. A ceremonial symbol of God's presence
4. A special times of joyful events²⁸

It is evident that using the oil has been rooted in the Jewish society. 'Medicine was in a primitive state, so anointing with oil was, as it were, the first-century combination of prayer and medicine.'²⁹ Generally said MacNutt suggests that we should pray over any medications that we ourselves use. He believes that this kind of prayer carries an extending meaning of the first-century custom of anointing with oil. 'Anointing with oil-especially if it has been blessed-seems also to have its own effect and to be very helpful in ministering healing.'³⁰

J. Parr explains the anointing in the following manner: The oil is the symbol of the Holy Spirit pouring upon the persons, altar or vessels (Genesis 28:18; 31:13, Leviticus 8:10-12; 1 Samuel 16:13).³¹ It is seen from these passages, that the anointing with oil was: 'an act of dedication, complete surrender to God of spirit, soul and body, and also symbolizing the power of the Holy Spirit as the quickener of our mortal bodies (Romans 8:11)'³²

²⁸ Bob Utley, 'Written Bible Commentaries', pp. 83-87
<<http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/pdf/VOL11.pdf>>

²⁹ Francis MacNutt, *Healing* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1989), p. 282

³⁰ MacNutt, *Healing*, p. 283

³¹ J. Nelson Parr, *Divine Healing* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1955) p. 35

³² *Ibid*, p. 127

From the practical side there is a question of the type of oil to be used for the anointing. The Greek word used in this passage, as well as in Mark 6:13, is the word commonly used for olive oil. This is the general practice used in the majority of churches. However, there are other cases when people have taken any available oil and their prayers were answered and the sick people were healed. As Doctor Petts writes 'The oil itself has no curative power and is not used as a medication of any kind. It simply represents the Holy Spirit who empowered both the Lord and those who followed Him to heal the sick.'³³

In the light of the lines above, it is clear that the same principle is applied concerning the amount of oil used. A small amount is sufficient as a symbol. A frequent practice consists of only a drop of oil upon the forehead or on the part of the body that is prayed for.

In the name of the Lord

James gives a clear instruction that the prayers are supposed to be claimed in the name of the Lord. The elders submit themselves to the Lord's will and Martin emphasizes the fact of Lord's presence in the middle of gathering under his name.³⁴ Additionally, Shogren explains that calling in the name of the Lord somehow 'stamps the use of oil.'³⁵ Furthermore, it opens the door for the healing power of the Lord.

On the contrary, there is no evidence that healing will always occur. Rather it is submitted to God's will. Therefore, it is a task of elders to pray for God's will and recognize it. In a practical way there is danger in using the phrase 'in the name of the Lord' as a habit, which may create a false attitude based on a magical formula rather than on God's will.

³³ David Petts, *Just a taste of heaven*, p. 127

³⁴ Martin, *James*, p. 208

³⁵ Shogren, *Will God Heal Us*, p. 101

Prayer offered in faith

The last part deals with prayer in faith. The exact verse states: And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. Immediately a question occupies our mind. Whose prayer will make the sick person well? Is it the prayer of the sick person or the prayer of the elders? What does it mean to pray in faith?

This issue is very strongly related to teaching doctrine about healing. Some suggest that supernatural healing is promised, guaranteed right of the believer. It is suggested that before God will heal, one has to believe that he is going to do so. 'Similarly, some have taught that prayer should result in believing that we have already received the answer to our prayer, even though the sickness remains and even when there is no sign of improvement.'³⁶

Even though that some churches teach it and practice this approach to sick people, this teaching was not supported in the healing ministry of Jesus. 'Jesus does not condemn doubt nor demand faith, there is no evidence of symptoms remaining after the healing, neither is it recorded that ongoing symptoms are a test of one's faith, nor does Jesus request gratitude before the healing occurs.'³⁷

Keith Warrington proves from the scripture that a lack of faith is not to be identified with an uncertainty as to whether God will heal or not. His final conclusion helps to understand the serious troubles when a person is not healed. He claims: 'Furthermore, evidence that God has provided an unconditional guarantee of healing in this life is not reflected in the Bible.'³⁸

Nevertheless, the responsibility of elders to pray in faith remains. In verse 15 James emphasizes again the power of prayer. The Greek word used in this

³⁶ Warrington, *Healing & Suffering*, p. 162

³⁷ Ibid, p. 162

³⁸ Ibid, p. 162

verse is *euchē* and is very special in the New Testament.³⁹ The meaning of it is prayer of faith.

According to the scripture it is not faith of the sick person, but the faith of the elders. In practice it means that the result might be influenced very much by their faith. In practice it means that the elders should seek God's guidance. The only possible way when praying for the sick is offered by Warrington when he says: 'Whilst one ear should be attuned to the person receiving prayer, the other should be available to the wisdom and guidance offered by God.'⁴⁰

Sometimes pastors might be forced to pray for the sick in faith even though they have no faith in that particular case. 'When we pray for the sick we are committing ourselves decisively and completely to the *will* of our Savior—including saving us from illness.'⁴¹ This is the only right approach that pastors should have, otherwise it might be based more on their will rather than God's will. Therefore, a pastor's ability to recognize whether it is God's will or their will plays an extremely important role in the issue of healing.

Prayer for the sick should always be accompanied by a time of heart-searching on the part of the sick person. 'Sickness is not always a direct result of sin, but there is such a possibility. "If we have committed sins," the apostle says.' He also exhorts us to confess our sins to one another and pray for each other for healing. This is spiritually healthy.⁴²

It is also important that the one who prays for the sick has compassion-empathy.⁴³ He puts himself in the place of the one who comes to him for help. If we are to do His work we should have the same compassionate spirit. It is when

³⁹ Moo, *The letter of James*, p. 242

⁴⁰ Warrington, *Healing & Suffering*, p. 159

⁴¹ Paul Kraul, 'James 5:14 and Healing', (2002),
<<http://www.gci.org/bible/james514>>

⁴² Jeter, *By His Stripes*, p. 128

⁴³ Ronzani, *Christian Healing*, p. 42

you are moved by their need that you will pray with intensity and fervor. Remember, it is the 'fervent' prayer of a righteous man that avails.⁴⁴

While speaking about the 'successful' prayer in faith, it is honest to say that there are also cases when the sick person is not healed. One fact that might evoke the situation of the sick is the faith of the elders, but there are other aspects to deal with. (such as the relationship between sin, forgiveness and healing).

Sometimes the doctrine is set into the frame of a personal right if a person is a Christian he has the right to be healed. The negative side of this doctrine carries many doubts for those who are not healed. In reality a Christian who is not healed begins to doubt his faith, God's love, forgiveness and even becomes lonely while surrounded by God's people. Gloria Copeland's statement is to the same approach. 'A Christian may continue to be sick...but he does not have to.'⁴⁵

The pastoral problems that arise from this connection might be divided into three areas. The first area is to doubt one's faith. According to this approach, faith plays the most important role. Therefore, if the sick person is not healed, he is led to the conclusion of not having enough faith. This might lead to the questioning of whether his sins have been forgiven or not.

The second area is the sense of guilt. This issue is extremely important. David Petts claims: 'if my faith is deficient with regard to healing (which according to the doctrine that healing is in the atonement it clearly might be if I am not healed) than how do I know that my faith for salvation, the forgiveness of my sins, is not also deficient?'⁴⁶ Therefore the sense of guilt plus the doubt concerning the forgiveness of sins may produce the outcome in the rejection of the Christian faith. In this case, it has a deep impact on the sick person, but also to those who

⁴⁴ Jeter, *By His Stripes*, p. 129

⁴⁵ Petts, *Just a Taste of Heaven*, p. 252

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 253

have been praying for the person and also for those who are in close relationship with the sick person.

From a practical point of view, it means that every pastor needs to be aware of these conditions that the sick person is facing. More than that it is necessary to stay around, to be in touch and take appropriate care of those who remain sick. In spite of these arguments, many times sick people who are not healed become quite lonely and desperate due to the consequences. After some time they become a kind of burden for pastors and all those who pray for them.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the pastoral contact, prayers and the positive approach together with an ongoing interest are probably the most important in these situations.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was an evaluation of James 5:14-16 and its relation to pastoral ministry today. The role of the elders in the 1st century compared to the elders' role today differs very little, due to the same instructions that are valid at any time: to take care of entrusted believers. Of course the practice has been formed by culture and the hierarchy. The paper describes how the definition of sickness has evolved during 2000 years. The healing ministry has grown from the physical level to mental level as well. A believer is seen from the perspective of wholeness, including body, soul and spirit. Therefore, physical healing is accompanied by counseling, pastoral care, positive approach and confession of sin. The elders commit the sick to the will of God and fulfill James's instruction. The sick person might expect a variety kinds of results from a complete immediate healing to no healing at all. In any case, the sick should be cared for according to the whole context of James's epistle.

To summarize, those who remain unhealed face serious crisis in their lives. Unfortunately, an unbalanced doctrine and the lack of pastoral approach

⁴⁷ Ken Blue, *Authority to Heal* (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1987), p. 44

makes it even worse. The balanced doctrine on healing eliminates the frustration and all the problems described above. It helps the sick to keep a healthy approach to faith, without a sense of guilt and to general positivism and enthusiasm. An appropriate pastoral care eliminates the loneliness and interruption of healthy relationship with pastors and the Christian congregation itself. Also it affects their positive approach to non-Christians based on faith and full acceptance of God's love during difficult life issues. All the sick people who were not healed need to be encouraged to trust the Lord. Committing oneself into the hands of our God is the best advice in hard situations. Our Lord is the one who takes care of every Christian and therefore a part of a pastoral care is to give a clear direction. God guarantees a new healthy body for eternity: until that day comes it is necessary to prove love and compassion to those who are suffering any form of sickness. The pastors and elders should be the ones who set the best example for the rest of the congregation, either by their personal approach or by setting the standard of pastoral care through other ministers within the local church.

The conclusion lies within a temporal prayer for those who are not healed and in the positive approach towards those in need. For God is the only one who can heal them and fulfill the deepest need or desire of their heart.

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