

## What About Anointing With Oil

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- I. (James 5:14-15)** James asked a question: **Is any one of you sick?** A great deal of misunderstanding has resulted from these verses.
- a. Some seem to teach from this passage that full physical health is always just a prayer away.
  - b. Others have found in this passage justification for “extreme unction” (a practice begun in the eighth century).
  - c. Still others have tried to relate the process outlined by James to the modern practice of invoking God (“pray over him”) and using medicine (“anoint him with oil”)—prayer plus a physician.
- II.** The heart of the problem lies in just what James meant when he referred to the “sick.” Actually there is no reason to consider “sick” as referring exclusively to physical illness.
- a. The word *asthenei* literally means “to be weak.” Though it is used in the Gospels for physical maladies, it is generally used in Acts and the Epistles to refer to a weak faith or a weak conscience (cf. Acts 20:35; Rom. 6:19; 14:1; 1 Cor. 8:9-12).
  - b. That it should be considered “weak” in this verse is clear in that another Greek word (*kamnonta*) in James 5:15, translated **sick person**, literally means “to be weary.”
    - i. The only other use in the New Testament (Heb. 12:3) of that word clearly emphasizes this same meaning.
  - c. James was not referring to the bedfast, the diseased, or the ill. Instead he wrote to those who had grown weary, who had become weak both morally and spiritually in the midst of suffering.
    - i. These are the ones who **should call** for the help of **the elders of the church**. The early church leaders were instructed (1 Thes. 5:14) to “encourage the timid” and “help the weak” (*asthenōn*).
- III.** James said that the elders should **pray over him and anoint him with oil**.
- a. It is significant that the word “anoint” is *aleipsantes* (“rub with oil”) not *chriō* (“ceremonially anoint”).
    - i. The former is the “mundane” word and the latter is “the sacred and religious word” (Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, ninth ed. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950, pp. 136-37).
    - ii. “Therefore James is not suggesting a ceremonial or ritual anointing as a means of divine healing; instead, he is referring to the common practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor, refreshment, and grooming” (Daniel R. Hayden, “Calling the Elders to Pray,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138. July/September 1981: 264).
      1. The woman “poured” (*aleiphō*) perfume on Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:38).
      2. A host “put oil” (*aleiphō*) on the head of his guest (Luke 7:46).
      3. A person who is fasting should not be sad and ungroomed, but should “put oil” (*aleiphō*) on his head, and wash his face (Matt. 6:17).

- b. Thus James' point is that the "weak" (*asthenei*) and "weary" (*kamnonta*) would be refreshed, encouraged, and uplifted by the elders who rubbed oil on the despondents' heads and prayed for them.
- IV.** For the fallen, discouraged, distressed weary believer, restoration is assured and the elders' **prayer offered in faith will make the sick person** (lit., "weary one") **well** (i.e., will restore him from discouragement and spiritual defeat), and **the Lord will raise him up.**
- a. That the restoration is spiritual, not physical, is further clarified by the assurance, **if he has sinned, he will be forgiven.**
  - b. Many physically ill Christians have called on elders to pray for them and to anoint them with oil, but a sizable percentage of them have remained sick.
    - i. This fact suggests that the passage may have been mistakenly understood as physical restoration rather than spiritual restoration.
- V. 5:16.** The conclusion is clear: **therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other.** A mutual concern for one another is the way to combat discouragement and downfall.
- a. The cure is in personal confession and prayerful concern.
  - b. The healing (**that you may be healed**) is not bodily healing but healing of the soul (*iathēte*; cf. Matt. 13:15; Heb. 12:13; 1 Peter 2:24).
  - c. It is the **powerful and effective . . . prayer of a righteous** person that brings the needed cure from God. This of course relates to the closing two verses of James' letter (5:19-20).
  - d. If James 5:14-16 refer to physical healing, then those verses seem disjointed with the verses before and after them.