

THE LORD HEALS

James 5:12-20

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B; Proper 21)

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The epistle lesson for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Epistle of James*, chapter 5, verses 12 through 20. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From James 5, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

¹² But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

One word is not enough to describe the benefits of Jesus' cross. One word can be accurate. But no single word can really do it justice. In this passage, James uses four: save, raise, forgive, and heal. These are things we pray for, and God has promised to grant our requests.

James closes his letter by encouraging Christians to pray. I'm sorry; "encourage" is too weak of a word. James closes his letter by *commanding* Christians to pray. So we're going to talk about prayer, and the different occasions for prayer James speaks of. But first, James addresses how we use the Lord's name. He says, "Above all, my brothers, do not swear" (5:12).

Verses 12 and 13 have to do with the Second Commandment. The Second Commandment is the one that says, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11).

Each of the commandments protect some gift that God has given to us. For example, the Fifth Commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17), protects God's gift of life. The other commandments all do something similar. So let's think about the Second Commandment that way. When God says, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain," what gift is that protecting? He's protecting the gift of his name. God has given his name

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to us, and the commandment protects this gift. So there is a negative side and a positive side of every commandment. The negative side is the “Thou shalt not.” Most of the commandments are stated in this negative way. But there is also a positive side to them. If there is a wrong way to use God’s name, then there is also a right way to use it.

In verse 12 James gives us the negative side of the commandment, and in verse 13 he gives us the positive side.

The negative side is, “Do not swear.” Now James is not talking about those four-letter words our parents tell us not to use. We call that “profanity” or “coarse language,” and there are passages about those (Eph. 4:26; Col. 4:6), but swearing is something else. Swearing is when we invoke God’s name, or something else that is valuable, in order to validate our words. It’s when someone says, “I swear to God I’m telling the truth.” That is a misuse of God’s name.

And it’s actually quite dangerous. If someone says, “I swear to God,” that means, “Let God judge me.” You are literally asking God to condemn you if you are being false or if you are unable to keep your vow. This is a risk that no person should voluntarily take. It is a fearfully dangerous thing to swear by God’s name.

But James also says that we should not swear by anything, either by heaven or by earth or by anything else. And this is simply a matter of honesty. If “yes” is true, say, “Yes.” If “no” is true, say, “No.” Whenever someone swears, and it could be, “I swear to God,” or, “I swear on my mother’s grave,” that’s a clue that we’re not really dealing with an honest person. Here’s why: If someone feels the need to distinguish between the way they usually speak, and the way they are speaking now, they’re admitting that they don’t always tell the truth. But if you stick to a simple “yes” or “no,” and if that’s the truth, then you prove yourself to be reliable, and you will never feel the need to swear. Moreover, no one will ever ask you to, because they will know that your word is true. So that’s the negative side of the Second Commandment. Do not swear by God’s name or by anything else.

But God has given us his name for a good reason. So there is a positive side of the commandment. And James describes this in verse 13. “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.” This is the positive use of God’s name. Prayer is calling upon God’s name. And praise is magnifying his name.

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther explains both the negative and positive sides of the commandment by saying, “We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, conjure, lie, or deceive by His Name, but call upon Him in every time of need and worship Him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.”

God’s name is a great gift to us. He has given it to us as an invitation to seek his help. “Is anyone among you suffering?” James says, “Let him pray.” That’s actually a little bit of a weak translation. It’s not wrong, but the form of the verb is a bit stronger. It’s an imperative. This is actually a command. “Is anyone among you suffering? He *should* pray.” Or we could even translate it, “He *must* pray.” God commands us to pray. But this is not a burdensome command. This is the most gracious command. It’s like when a child is struggling with their homework, so mom or dad says, “Ask me for help.” It’s a command, but it is the most gracious command. God commands us to ask him for help.

Then in verse 14 James says, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church.” This, again, is a command. We can translate it, “He *should* call for the elders,” or even, “He *must* call for the elders.”

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The office of elder in the early church was very similar to our office pastor. They taught the Word of God, administered the sacraments, and visited the sick. We assign these duties to the pastor and the deacons, whom you have chosen to assist in this work. So when James says, “Let him call for the elders,” you obey that biblical command by calling your pastor when you’re sick. It’s not just *permission* to call your pastor. It’s actually a *command*.

Many people do this, and I am quite thankful for that. But I want everyone to do it. Sometimes we’re too polite. We think, *Oh, I don’t want to bother anyone with my problems*. Get that out of your mind. When we ask someone for help, we’re giving them the privilege of serving. I don’t know if this is true for everyone, but many people are honestly happy when they get the privilege to serve another person.

When I talk to other pastors, they all feel the same way. Sometimes we learn later that someone was in the hospital. And it’s not just that we *would have* visited, but we *wanted* to visit. Call me when you are sick.

I should remind you that the hospital does not inform pastors when members are in the hospital. Privacy laws prevent them from doing so. Our hospital used to keep a list that pastors could access. Every so often I would find one of you on that list and visit. I’m very thankful that Altru held onto that practice as long as they could, but eventually they had to stop. Government frowns upon such things. Now, even if I were to call the front desk and ask if anyone from Trinity is in the hospital, they can’t tell me. Even if someone from church works at the hospital, and you see them while you are there, you might assume they would tell me, but they can’t. If you ask someone to tell me, then they can. If you happen to see the chaplain while you are there, you can ask him to call me, and he will. But if you don’t ask, they can’t say anything. The only way I can know is if you tell me, or you ask someone to tell me. And I want you to do that.

And this doesn’t just apply to when you are in the hospital. In general, and I know this is true for other pastors as well, we are overjoyed when you ask us to visit. You might think, *Oh, he’s too busy*. I’m not really that busy. And part of the reason I became a pastor is because I want to be a pastor. I enjoy visiting you, and it’s what I’m called to do. The challenge is that I don’t always know who wants a visit, especially during Covid. I also don’t know when a good time is. The other problem is that, sometimes, I’m just lazy.

So if you’re sick. You should call me. Or if you just want a visit, for any reason or no reason, I want you to tell me.

Regarding the sick, James goes on to say, “Let [the elders] pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (5:14). When I visit the sick, I always pray for them, and I always read Scripture. Sometimes it’s very short, depending on the circumstances. But we don’t do a lot of anointing with oil anymore, and I’ll explain why. I’ve done it before, and I’ll do it whenever someone requests it. But the word that our English Bibles usually translate as “anointing” (ἀλείφω) isn’t the same word that refers to the ceremony of anointing (χρίω). The word for a ceremonial anointing is related to the New Testament word “Christ” or the Old Testament word “Messiah.” But the word James uses here is actually a medical term, not a religious term. In the ancient world, before modern medicine, olive oil was commonly used for medicinal purposes. So was wine. You might remember in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan poured oil and wine on the man’s wounds (Luke 10:34). That was for physical healing.

They didn’t have hospitals back then, and only the rich could afford doctors, so most medicine was performed by ordinary people. And it was done with simple, everyday materials,

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like oil and wine. There aren't really any side effects to rubbing oil on the part of the body that is broken, and it might help.

So when James says that the elders should pray for a person, anointing him with oil, the point is that we must care for bodies as well as souls. It's similar to what he says in chapter 2: "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (2:15-16). So in the age of modern medicine, we let the physicians do their work, and the Church steps up to provide other physical care. It could be financial help, because modern medicine isn't cheap. Or it could be bringing meals over or helping with things around the house while a person heals. The point is that we don't just pray for a person and ignore their physical ailment. We care for people in body and soul.

Then James says, "The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick" (5:15). He does not credit the oil with healing. He credits prayer. And we should still do the same thing with modern medicine. If we pray for a person, and a physician treats them at the same time, and they get better, we should say that prayer saved the person. This takes nothing away from physicians. The physician is Jesus' instrument to deliver that healing. But it recognizes that the Lord Jesus is the source of all healing. And the Lord Jesus is the only source of perfect healing. James says, "And the Lord will raise him up." The word "raise" (ἐγείρω) is often used to speak of the Resurrection of the Dead on the Last Day. When we pray for healing, especially for Christians, we have confidence that God will hear and answer that prayer. Even if that person dies, God will answer that prayer by raising them on the Last Day. And we should not think of that as a backup plan. The resurrection on the Last Day is plan A. If we also receive healing in this life, that is a shadow of the perfect healing on the Last Day. We should always have this in our mind and in our prayers when we pray for the sick.

If a person is sick, the worst thing that can happen is not death. The worst thing that can happen is that they despair of God and fall away from the faith. So the chief thing we pray for is that the Holy Spirit would preserve them and keep them in Jesus Christ. This is at least part of what James means when he says, "The prayer of faith will *save* the one who is sick." We should be praying for their salvation.

Then James goes on to talk about the forgiveness of sins. "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (5:15-16).

Part of this confession of sin is what Luther teaches in the Small Catechism. In the Lutheran Church we retain the practice of private confession, because it is a biblical practice (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23). We confess our sins against God in the presence of another person. The Catechism teaches it this way: "Confession consists of two parts: the one is that we confess our sins, the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself, in no way doubting, but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven." We do this corporately in our worship service, but we also retain the practice of private confession. And if your conscience troubles you, I would suggest that you come and do this. It can be a little intimidating the first time, but you will also find it to be incredibly liberating. We make no requirement about this, but it's there for your comfort.

What is not optional is that we confess our sins to the person we sinned against. This, along with praying for one another, brings healing. When we have unconfessed sin within the Body of Christ, it causes harm. But when we confess it to one another, it brings healing.

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And it's hard not to think back to chapter 3, where James speaks of the sins of the tongue. A simple word, spoken in a flash of anger, can bring such harm to the Church. Confessing these sins to one another is not optional, but God commands us to confess them in order that healing may come.

But people say, "I don't need to confess my sins to another person. I confess my sins to God." If they mean that they don't need to confess their sin to the person they sin against, that is completely false 100% of the time. Or they might mean the Christian practice of private confession. If that's the case, I think, *Okay. That's not required, and the pastor doesn't really need to know all your darkest secrets. But if you're afraid to confess your sin in the presence of another person, whom you know is a sinner and has no right to condemn you, are you really willing to confess your sin to the Almighty Creator of the universe, who does have the right to condemn you? And if you are confessing your sin to God, is he anything more than an imaginary god to you? Probably not.* If we truly felt the gravity of confessing our sin the righteous and all-powerful God, confessing before another person would be nothing.

We confess our sins with real, audible words, so that we can hear real forgiveness in real, audible words. It is always God who forgives sin. Pastors are simply called to announce that forgiveness to you.

This is all about what Jesus does. When it says, "The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick," that simply means that Jesus saves. It's not the power of our prayers. It's not the strength of our faith. It's all about the one we pray to and the one we trust in. To say, "The prayer of faith will save," simply means, "Jesus saves."

And it is Jesus who raises us. From illness in this life? We pray so. From death on the Last Day? Most certainly.

And it is Jesus who forgives. The blood of his cross covers every sin you could possibly confess. So God invites you to come in full confidence that the answer is already a sure and certain "yes."

And it is Jesus who heals. That word means so much. It means that he makes us whole, the way God created in the beginning. He heals our bodies. He heals our hearts. He sets us at peace with God. He sets us at peace with his Church. These are the benefits of Jesus' cross. He saves. He raises. He forgives. And he heals. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.