

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

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Don't you wish it were that easy?

We live in a land where we are blessed to have the healthcare system that we do have. But we all know that our healthcare system has its problems. We have an overburdened system. Wait times can be horrendous for some procedures—not to mention having to wait months for the diagnostic tests that are needed before you have surgery or treatment. Fewer beds are available in the hospitals. Costs continue to rise, and in an effort to reduce costs staff are cut, leaving nurses and caregivers overworked.

Some people might think that what James says to us in our text today could be a great solution to our health care woes. After all, he says: *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. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

I do wish it were that easy, but James isn't telling us how to relieve the burdens on our health care system. He is telling us how we can find relief for our burdened souls. He calls us to prayer—to fervent, faithful, trusting prayer. He calls us to pray in the troubled times of life and in our moments of joy. He calls us to pray for, and with, the sick. He calls us to pray for those who have wandered from the faith. He assures us that our prayers are powerful and effective, because in prayer we go to our loving God and Father, seeking His grace and help. God loves us with an everlasting love, made known so vividly through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can be sure that He who loves us will respond in accord with His perfect, loving, wise and holy will, to work all things for our good.

God wants us to pray. We need to pray! In a few moments we will sing, *“Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?” “Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?”* Well, there's one thing to do. You know that the hymn says it: *“take it to the Lord in prayer”*. (LSB 770, st. 2, 3)

We need to pray. ***Pray without ceasing***, (1 Thessalonians 5:17 - ESV) Scripture tells us. Our loving Father says: ***call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.***” (Psalm 50:15 - ESV) So often we tend to think of prayer as a cry for mercy in the troubled moments of life. There is no denying that prayer is important in our sorrows and suffering. But prayer isn't just about the bad times. As James talks to us about prayer, he looks at all the situations of our lives, and urges us to pray. We have often used the little anagram, ACTS as a reminder of prayer: A–Adoration; C–Confession; T–Thanksgiving; S–Supplication. James gets each of these into his encouragement of prayer in our text. In our joy, we sing praise and adore the God who loves us, blesses us and cares for us. We come with repentant hearts before Him who alone is holy, confessing our sins and weaknesses. We come, knowing His promise to us in Christ—the promise of forgiveness and life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We thank Him who continues to bless our lives in all things. And we come with our supplications, with the requests that we raise for ourselves and for those around us.

Prayer is the believer's trusting response to God's invitation to seek His help and strength. Prayer is not a means of grace. Prayer doesn't save. Prayer is not a gimmick or technique that a person uses in order to reach God or change His mind. Prayer is one expression of the Christian's faithful confidence in God, as we call on Him and trust Him to act because of the love He has for us as His people.

It is important to remember this, especially when we look at this text. It almost seems that James is giving a magic formula for healing. He says: *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. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

I have done this in the past. People have asked for this anointing. They have asked that faithful brothers and sisters in Christ pray with them and for them. I have stood with the elders of a church beside the bed of a patient, and we have prayed together. But most people—even those in the hospital—don't think of praying until other avenues like medical care have been exhausted.

The use of oil had great significance in biblical ritual. Prophets, priests and kings were anointed with oil as a symbol of their being “set apart” for a sacred work. Oil was also used for medicinal purposes. When the fellow we refer to as the Good Samaritan found that injured man along the side of the road, we are told: ***He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.*** (Luke 10:34 - ESV) Oil was used for both medical use and ritual use. We are looking at the ritual use here. Anointing oil is quite often fragrant. Even simple olive oil has an aroma. The use here is not that the oil is to be some sort of poultice or elixir that brings healing. God provides all sorts of ways for us to see, feel and grasp His grace for us. In his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed, Luther writes: *I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.* (SC, 1st Article) The God who gave us all our senses can use those senses in wonderful ways. If a sick patient is anointed, they have a physical reminder of the prayers that are offered. They will see the oil. They will smell it. They can feel it drip down their nose or whatever.

James makes it clear that what matters more than the oil is the prayer of faith. Prayer trusts in God's promises. Prayer comes before the throne of God's grace in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Prayer asks God to work in accordance with His holy will. Just as Jesus Himself prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion saying, ***“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”*** (Luke 22:42 - ESV), so we, too, pray in accordance with the will of God. We trust He will do what is right. We trust Him for healing. We trust Him, even if healing in this world is not present. More than anything else we put ourselves into His loving hands, because we know that He, who gave His Son to bring us forgiveness and life, will work for our good in all things in this world, until the day when He delivers His faithful people into the glory of His eternal kingdom.

I suppose that people want to know whether or not we have to follow this direction. Again, James isn't so concerned about the oil, but he does call us to pray. He calls us to pray in our suffering. He calls us to pray for one another. He calls us to pray in our illness. He calls us to pray in confession because of our sin. He calls us to pray in praise to God. James tells us something that is so important: ***The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*** We know this is true, because Jesus tells us: ***“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”*** (Luke 11:9–10, ESV)

The prayers of the righteous are the prayers of faith. God's faithful know their sinfulness. They know that they don't deserve even the smallest gift from the Lord's hands. But they also know that it isn't about them; it's all about Jesus. We look to the Saviour, who gave His life on the cross for our forgiveness. We look to the resurrection we have in Christ, who rose again from the dead. We see all of life: the good and the bad, the joyful and sad, in the shadow of His cross. That is why, in Christ, we come boldly before our Father in heaven in prayer. Through faith in Christ, we are able to offer righteous prayers. We pray in the confidence that God can, and will, do what needs to be done. We pray, knowing we have the victory in Christ.

Luther called prayer the heartbeat of the Christian: the stronger the prayer life, the stronger the life and faith of the Christian. Oh, how we need to pray! As we see the things that happen around us in the world, we need to pray that God would work in accordance with His divine purposes and that He would deliver us from evil. We need to pray for our church and its people, asking God to build us up so that we might serve Him as we love and serve one another. People have noted with some concern our lack of faithfulness in our attendance at worship and in our stewardship of God's blessings to us. We live in a day and age when it seems that people have less use for the church all the time, even though they need God's comfort and truth more than ever before. This should concern us, because when our brothers and sisters in Christ start to lose contact with the church, they often lose their contact with the saving Word of God. We need to pray in these times!

And we pray for the sick. We pray for the doctors and nurses and caregivers who tend to those who are ill. We need to pray for our children and youth, and all the more as the devil uses the world and its misguided understanding to lead them away from the only One who can give them forgiveness and life. With St. Paul, I ask that you pray for me and for Pastor Eric, ***that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.*** (Ephesians 6:19 - ESV).

Peter Marshall, the late chaplain of the US Senate, once said in a prayer, ***“O Lord, forgive us for thinking that prayer is a waste of time, and help us to see that without prayer our work is a waste of time.”*** God has promised to answer the faithful prayers of His people. At the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, God assured Solomon: ***if my people who are called by my name***

humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14 - ESV) Even when we don't get the answer we want or expect, we go on praying. We pray because our land needs it. We pray because our leaders need our prayers. We pray because our pastor, our church, our friends, our family and everyone around us needs our prayers. We pray boldly and confidently in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us on the cross. God will hear. He will answer. He will bless. You have His promise on that. Amen.