

Anointing with Oil

Foreword

Anointing with oil, the sacred ordinance expounded in the Scriptures by James, is abused and misunderstood by some people. This was brought to my attention after my father was diagnosed with brain cancer, and he requested to be anointed with oil. After he was anointed someone remarked that practicing this ordinance is an unconditional fresh start, thus implying anointing is a substitute for repentance. Others believe the oil is like a fetish or charm that requires God to heal. Some of those involved with aromatic oils use James 5 as the basic of their products' validity, but they never mention using prayer or faith. My prayer is that the reader can find a clear understanding of this sacred ordinance.

~Lester Burkholder

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The Bible is a rich treasure of spiritual wealth and a guide for consistent Christian living. The book of James deals especially with practical Christian living.

In conclusion of his writings, James explains the ordinance of anointing with oil. He explains how we can go to God to request peace and physical healing. As our Creator, God recognized that in times of sickness, ailments, and distress we are prone to be dissatisfied with the solutions of our natural realm. In His wisdom and mercy, He made a way for man to petition his desire to God.

To fully grasp the merits of anointing with oil, we have to recognize God's reasons for allowing people to suffer from afflictions. Why are humans troubled with aches and pains? Why do physical ailments come our way? God is a God of love and mercy, yet we are afflicted with various sicknesses and ailments.

When God created Adam and Eve, they were blessed with perfect health and could have lived forever. However, because of their sin, they and all of humanity became susceptible to physical ailments. Disease, sickness, deterioration of the physical body, and the certainty of physical death became a reality. For this reason all sickness has its origin based in Adam and Eve's sin.

God has given us an amazing body that is not to be abused. It is our earthly abode, but for the Christian it is also the temple of the living God. God requires us to care for our bodies, not overworking them or violating the laws of proper hygiene. A well-balanced diet and adequate rest are essential to Good health. When these practices are not followed, sickness can be the result.

The human family is plagued with physical ailments for other reasons. Some diseases are the result of drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or an immoral lifestyle. Many diseases and ailments come with old age.

God plans some sickness (John 9:2-3, John 11:4) to turn people's faith to Him. Who can deny that when a person is ailing, our thoughts turn to eternity. It is a reminder that mortals are created out of the dust and will return to dust. When a believer is facing death and submits all into the hands of God, it is a powerful testimony of His glory.

Sometimes sickness and disease are sent as a judgment from God because of sin in our lives. God uses sickness as a way to remind people of their failures and to chasten His children. In 1 Corinthians 11 we see spiritual sickness because some failed to examine themselves in preparation for communion. Miriam, the sister of Moses, was stricken with leprosy because she was jealous of Moses' success (Numbers 12). The king of Judah, King Azariah, was afflicted because he failed to destroy the idols of Israel (II Kings 15:5).

Satan may send sickness when God lifts His protecting hand. (Job 2:5-6). Job, a righteous man, was afflicted with boils all over his body when God allowed Satan access to him.

Our bodies are not designed to live forever. Youthful vigor is gradually replaced with an aging and aching body. This is God's plan and order for His creation. One of the ways we mortals are ushered into eternity is by our failing bodies.

When God created man He placed within him a strong desire to live. When this will to live is fortified with a strong faith in God, it can cause mankind to bear unbelievable hardships and burdens. We are not promised a life free of affliction and suffering trials and tribulations by an ailing physical body.

God loves us so much that He has provided a divinely sanctioned approach by which He has promised to hear our plea when our bodies fail. When believers use this symbol of faith they acknowledge that He is in total control.

James 5:13-16

13 Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.

14 Is any sick among you? 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 shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.

16 Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

This particular gift, which Christ originally committed to His apostles (Mark 6:13), is being practiced in Christ professing churches to this day. Anointing is a special gift, a blessing from God, and is available for all Christians. This ordinance is not only for those who are close to death. An example might be a person who is facing a life-threatening surgery. He may be feeling fine, but because of the conditions he is facing it would be appropriate to request this ordinance. This would also be appropriate if a person has a physical ailment and the medical field is baffled. The sick person has nowhere to turn, except to God's ordinance of anointing with oil.

It can also be used for those who are weak in the spirit. They can participate in this ordinance and receive spiritual strength. Many view anointing with oil as an avenue for physical healing. However, it is much more than that. If done in the proper perspective, anointing can be an avenue for spiritual healing. The strong emotions from this outward ceremony instruct the mind and confirm the heart in peace even in times of trouble and tribulations.

It is a tangible ordinance, practiced by faith, by which Christians can have confidence that God has heard their plea. However it is not the outward arrangement of the ordinance that has the healing ability, but a divinely appointed method that God uses to help us to reach His holy realm.

“Is any among you afflicted? let him pray”

The word *afflicted* is derived from a Greek word meaning “to suffer misfortune, hardship, or bearing affliction”. It refers to various kinds of troubles. People who have difficult experiences or suffer misfortunes may respond in various ways. However, James tells us to pray to God Who can give us grace to bear it.

“Is any merry? let him sing psalms.”

The word *merry* does not refer to being lighthearted. It means things are going well and life is not a burden. In times of good health, pleasant fellowship with brethren, and prosperity it is easy to forget about God. How should a Christian respond in times of happiness? Singing songs of praise to God is a Good response. Hymns of praise sung from a thankful heart ascend to the throne of God. He is pleased with this kind of devotion. Because God originally granted the blessings, He deserves all honor and praise.

“Is any sick among you?”

The word *sick* is derived from a strong Greek word denoting, sickness, powerless, feeble. It does not mean the everyday aches and pains like the ordinary cold or stomach ache. Instead it refers to people who are in a state of physical, mental, or spiritual weakness and desire to draw nearer to God.

“let him call for the elders of the church;”

The ordinance of anointing with oil is a religious ceremony and should involve the ordained of the church. Just as with baptism or communion, the elders of the church have a God - given duty to administer the anointing with oil. The Scripture also instructs to call more than one elder, thus making sure the honor and glory goes to God and not to man.

The sick person shall initiate the call because he knows how the ailment is affecting him. Only he will be able to determine if it is in his interest.

“and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:”

The elders are to **“pray over”** (denoting a prayer of profound sincerity) while anointing him with oil. In our setting the deacon lightly pours a small amount of oil on the sick person’s head as a minister or bishop prays over him. The anointing is to be done **“in the name of the Lord”**. The service must be done according to God’s supreme will. An anointing service symbolizes that the one who is sick is placing the entire situation into the hands of the Lord. He recognizes that God’s plan is perfect. He will be content with the will of the Lord, whether or not he is healed.

“And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up”

It is important to note that *it is not the oil*, but the prayer of faith that will save the sick.

What is this prayer of faith that moves God to raise up the sick? The Greek word translated to “prayer” in this specific verse is used only three times in the Bible and once translated as prayer. The Greek word *euche* (Strong’s # 2171) means a “pledge or commitment”. God honors the prayer of faith that is a pledge or commitment of faithfulness to Him. What the sick person conveys by requesting an anointing service is the following: **I am suffering severe trials and anguish. I am at a loss of what to do, I have nowhere to turn, but to Thee O Lord. I am placing my total trust in Thee, knowing Thy way is perfect. Not my will but Thy will be done.**

The typical Greek words translated “pray” in the New Testament are *deesis* (Strong’s #1162) which means a “petition, a request”; or *proskaleomai* (Strong’s # 4336) meaning “to worship”.

All three kinds of prayer are to be used in this sacred anointing service. In verse 14, the elders are instructed to pray over the sick person, the word (*proskaleomai*, to worship) is used. In verse 16 the Bible declares the prayer (*deesis*, or petition) of the righteous man availeth much. The prayer of faith that saves the sick is not a worship service, or the petition to be healed. It is a complete resignation, a total commitment that the will of the Lord is the only way. This commitment of faith in the Lord brings a deep contentment and peace to the soul, even if physical healing is not present. All those involved in this sacred ceremony, especially the beneficiary, must have a deep and sincere commitment, placing all faith and trust in the will of God.

In the latter part of this verse we see it is not the elders, neither the oil, nor the prayer, but the Lord that raises the sick. The elders, the oil, and the prayer, are methods that God uses and honors. Only by the will and power of the Lord, are the sick raised.

“and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.”

Notice the words **“and if he have”**. Physical suffering may or may not be due to sin. (John 9:3). But, if it is, according to verse 16, confession is necessary for both spiritual and physical healing. This portion of Scripture has to be considered in the context of what is written next, **“Confess your faults”**. Let’s use the example of a person suffering from an ailment due to smoking, chewing tobacco, or drinking alcoholic beverages. It is inconsistent to believe God would heal the person’s ailment through the ordinance of anointing with oil, unless he would first repent of his sin.

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”

He must also address sin that is not related to his specific ailment. A person who is earnestly requesting the anointing ordinance will strive to have his heart right before the anointing begins. Unconfessed sin is unfaithfulness; it must be recognized. There cannot be a sincere prayer of faith, if there is sin in his life. Notice the words **“that ye may be healed”**. This is pointing to a definite condition which is required before God can grant the petition. This verse teaches the need of a clean heart. It also shows that the elders should give an opportunity for confessing sin before they perform the sacred ordinance.

Anointing with oil is not a substitute for repentance. Sinners are forgiven by repentance and saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, not by the oil used in anointing.

To have a **“prayer of faith”** (v.15) a person needs to be totally repentant, and broken in the sight of God. If there is sin in an ailing person’s life, it needs to be repented of and placed under the shed blood of Christ before the sacred anointing service. They are then cleansed by the blood, not the oil!

God grants different degrees of healing after anointing. He may restore complete health, or He may grant relief from a certain crisis. The anointed person may have healing of the spirit, but not of the body. As we view this ordinance, we need to consider that ultimately we all face death. If physical healing would be granted every time the “prayer of faith” is administered no one would face death. God retains His sovereignty, and His will is far beyond the understanding of man.

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”

This verse emphasizes the type of person praying a petition to God. It specifies a righteous man, a man justified by faith, who is fruitful in good works. It does not refer to his talent, learning, rank, wealth, or office; but the fact that he is a “righteous” man.

The "righteous man's" prayer, the effectual fervent prayer, could also be translated to energetic prayer. In this verse the word energetic is derived from the Greek word *energoumenh*. It means "that which has power". Thus the prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

James concludes his teachings on a righteous man's prayer by using Elijah as an example. Elijah, a man as we are, prayed earnestly that it would not rain and a drought of three years and six months prevailed. Elijah prayed again and it rained and the earth flourished. Through Elijah, a righteous man, God controlled the forces of nature. He also controls the forces of the Spirit and physical body. Through the prayer of a righteous man He can restore the health of man's spirit and physical body as well.

Is this ordinance a command from God?

When believers are instructed to be baptized, it is written

"Be baptized." Concerning communion, it says **"This do ye."** For feet-washing we are instructed **"I have given you an example, that ye should do."** As we study anointing with oil, we understand it as a divine suggestion, instead of a divine command.

God placed within man a desire to live. God recognizes the desperation of man when his physical body or mental capacity is failing. In spite of all man's knowledge, there is a deep inborn inclination to turn to the spiritual realm for physical healing of the body.

As Christians we also need to be aware of Satan's tactics. Since he is an imitator of God, he too offers spiritual methods and procedures relating to health, by which many are deceived.

God in His wisdom has made a way for mankind to plead his condition to the throne of Glory. For those troubled with their condition, anointing with oil is God's sanctified method for Christians to request healing of the body and mind by spiritual means.

Anointing with Oil, and the Medical Field

Is there a conflict between the sacred ordinance of anointing with oil and using the medical methods we have today? Should a Christian avoid the medical sciences and rely totally on anointing, or can believers avail themselves to both methods?

Many Biblical references suggest using effective medical therapies as completely appropriate. God's Word gives numerous examples of medical assistance with no condemnation. Some of those mentioned are cleansing, bandaging, soothing with oil (Isaiah 1:5-6) or balm (Jeremiah 8:22, 46:11, 51:8) and setting broken bones (Ezekiel 30:21). Consider the example of the Good Samaritan. He ministered to the physical body **"...bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine..."** (Luke 10:34). Physicians are not generally viewed negatively in the Scriptures (Jeremiah 8:22, Luke 5:31, Colossians 4:14).

When God created this world, He created more than we can physically see. He also created natural laws which the earth and all substance on it follow. Man has learned to use these natural laws. Let's look at one example. God allows bacteria to exist that causes infections and diseases. He created the ingredients to make antibiotics for counteracting infections and diseases. Man, by gaining an understanding of the interrelation between the two, learned to use them for the benefit of mankind.

For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven. Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth. They continue this day according to thine ordinances: for all are thy servants. Psalms 119:89-91

God's first words to Adam and Eve in the Garden were "***Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, . . .***" (Genesis 1:28) (Emphasis added). A word study of the word "subdue" used in this verse shows it means "to bring in subjection" We are instructed to use God's natural order for the betterment of humanity and to bring Him honor and glory. Christians are free to seek medical therapies that fall into God's natural order. We have to understand there are also other Biblical principles to abide by. For example: abortion, euthanasia and suicide are performed using the laws of nature as established by God, but violate Biblical principles. Generally, healing therapies that follow the laws of nature are not scripturally condemned.

Our knowledge of the physical body today is vastly increased from what was known in Bible times. The increase in knowledge is understanding how God created the natural laws in the beginning. Nothing new is created. Today our medical doctors can treat ailments that would have meant certain death in the past. The doctors don't do it of themselves, but from a knowledge and understanding of the physical order of God's creation. The medical doctor may not recognize this if he is not a God believing person. That does not alter the fact that the medical doctor is only applying God's physical laws to promote healing. He is the assistant, but the honor and glory go to God.

When a Christian needs medical help, it is ideal to have a doctor who recognizes that his work is not of himself, but of the Lord. However if the medical field fails to recognize God as the source of healing it is our duty as Christians to do so.

Since God created the natural laws the medical field uses, He can also use them to heal His people. Psalms 119:91 tells us these natural laws are His servants. If we do not recognize God as the author and creator of the tools and medicines the medical field uses, we are failing to give God the honor and glory that are due Him. Also if God desires to heal us by His natural realm and we refuse it we are missing a blessing. In current times it appears that God generally works His will through the natural realm, which is under His authority. How great it is to know that God is not limited to natural laws and can work miracles instantly!

In Conclusion

The Lord truly knows us better than we know ourselves. Christians should be grateful that the Lord has provided for those weak in body and spirit so they can have confidence God hears their plea. This gives a sweet assurance that all is well with their souls, regardless of their trials and suffering in the flesh. Those who receive healing of both body and soul are truly blessed. But God's plan for man's life still holds true. Until Jesus returns, all flesh must die for man's spirit and soul to reach its eternal home. May we have so strong a desire for our heavenly home, that we endure our earthly temptations and afflictions faithfully and view them as stepping stones to eternity.

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