

Give Yourself to Ministry

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Growing Into Maturity

James 5:13-20

This morning I am going to finish up the series that I have been doing in the book of James. Every time I complete a series in a book, I start feeling sentimental. It is like I am going to be leaving a familiar friend. I hope through this series that James has become a friend of yours. That you have seen something of the richness of his thought and writing and have been inspired and encouraged, challenged and confronted. I do, I get a little sentimental. I am going to miss him. I, frankly, have very much enjoyed this series.

In any case, today we look at the last few paragraphs from the book of James. As we have been going through the book, you will remember that the theme has been entering into spiritual maturity. James wants us to grow up as Christians. Today, the final section of James' letter calls us to give ourselves to ministry. He uses a series of imperatives, but essentially the message in this last passage is give yourself to ministry. His message is directed to all Christians. James has told us that Christian maturity is not just a matter of knowing a lot of information or assent to certain truths or talking a good talk.

We have a certain view of this matter here in the Vineyard that causes us to be a little different than some churches. Some churches call their pastors "ministers." We do not. When you call the pastor the minister, what that implies is that the church, the ordinary Christian sits back like fans at a football game cheering on the real players, the ministers, as the ministers exhaust themselves in sharing the gospel, or praying for the sick, or visiting people at the hospital, or caring for the homeless. Whenever I hear that term, "you must be the minister" what comes to mind in my mind, at least, is a congregation full of folks who are sitting on the sidelines cheering on the pastor saying, "Go pastor, go." And if the pastor does well, they applaud his or her performance and if the pastor does poorly, they boo and call another minister.

Friends, I want to tell you today that that is a wholly unbiblical perspective on ministry, on pastors, on the responsibility of the congregation. Ephesians 4:11-12 is a theme verse here for us in this church. The apostle Paul says, *"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service [Some versions put it "to equip God's people for the ministry." Same phrase—works of service or the ministry.]. So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of God and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."*

Here is the perspective of James, here is the perspective of Paul and the perspective of the New Testament. Pastors are not the ministers. The people in the church are the ministers. Pastors are called to be equippers, trainers, and preparers. We function as coaches on the sideline cheering the team on.

Encouraging you, exhorting you, challenging you to do the ministry. Rather than the church cheering the pastor on saying, "Go, man, go," the pastor is to encourage the church saying, "Go, church, go. Get out there and do it. Be Christians." You don't hire a professional Christian to do the praying, to do the healing. You hire a trainer who encourages you to get yourself in shape so that you can do the praying and the healing. When we hire pastors here essentially what we are doing is hiring trainers, coaches, folks to prod us along and help us to live out our Christian lives.

See, throughout the book of James, he has told us that Christian maturity is not just a matter of talk or knowledge. It's a matter of doing. For some of you this is old hat. You knew that when you signed up for Christianity you were signing up to do works of service. Others of you having been raised in a variety of churches didn't know what you were signing up for. You didn't read the whole contract.

May I tell you, friend, what you have signed up for when you sign up for Jesus? A friend of yours shares with you that God loves you and he has made you to have relationship with himself. That God is a person and not a force. Not some energy that lives in all of us. God is a person. He has personal love for you and wants to be in relationship with you. Your friend shares with you that there is a problem, however, that blocks your connection with God and your relationship with him, namely that you frequently have tried to play God. You have gone your own way. You often have tried to appoint yourself ruler over your own life, the determiner of what is true, and the decider of what is good and what is bad. You haven't listened to what the real God has said and so you have independently created your own values and your own little world, blocked relationship with God because of your sin.

But, God in his love has opened up a way for you to have a relationship with him by sending his son, Jesus, to this earth. To die a bloody death on a cross. And in that death to remove the obstacle between you and God, namely your sin. Now, he makes you an offer of relationship and forgiveness. Based on what God has done, he offers you pardon for your sins, eternal relationship with him, a fulfilling life, inner peace, a clear conscience, answers to your prayers, a purpose for living, guidance, wisdom in decision making.

You hear about God's love and about what God has done. You hear about God's offer. You hear about all of the benefits. You say, "Great, where do I sign?" Many of you have signed up for Christianity without realizing what you were actually agreeing to. Friends, let me share with you what you are agreeing to when you sign up for Christianity.

You are agreeing, first of all, to the claims of Jesus Christ. That he is your Lord. When you say "yes" to God, yes I want to be saved, you are first of all agreeing to the claim that Jesus is Lord. You are giving up control of your life to Jesus Christ. You are saying that he from now on has the right to call the shots in all areas and over all things in your life.

Are any of you at all surprised that when you agreed, when you raised your hand or said yes to Christianity that you were saying yes to the claim of Christ, as Lord, over your whole life? Some people never heard that or they hear

it later on. James says that is what Christianity is all about. In fact, through the book of James we could say that the whole letter is summarized by the claim of Christ's Lordship over all things. You signed up for Christ as Lord.

And then when you signed that little card or prayed that little prayer, you were not only signing up for Christ as Lord, you were signing up for commitment to Christ's people—the church. To be in a committed relationship with other Christians. And to function in a church with brothers and sisters—resolving your disputes, speaking well of others, laying down your judgments, getting over past hurts. So many people in America sign up for Christ without realizing that you can't sign up for Christ without signing up for the church. It is like signing up to play quarterback on a football team, but not signing up to play on the team. The New Testament knows nothing of independent Christians unassociated and unaffiliated with the church. It is only our American spirit of independence that has created the situation where thousands and thousands of people sign up for Christianity and get all of their relationships through the TV, through the radio, through Christian chat lines on e-mail and maybe a few chosen Christian friends.

Part of the beauty of the church, by the way, is that we are plunged into some involuntary relationships with people that we didn't choose. People who we may not like. People whose temperaments rub us the wrong way. People who do things that bother us. I talk with Christians who say, "Well, I get all of my fellowship through a few chosen friends, that is my church." That's no church. Church is when you join up with people that you didn't select. Church is when you learn to love people who, frankly, you don't like. It is not a voluntary association of some like-minded people who all come from the same socio-economical class and who all have the same education level and interested in the same aerobics program and French cooking.

The church is God's choice of people, not our choice. God's choice where God selects people from every ethnic background and across age groups. It is not just my age group. It is across age groups. Across ethnicity's. Across economic lines. Across educational lines. God picks it. And when we signed up for Christianity, we were signing up for God's choice of who he would throw us in with.

Friends, you cannot be a mature Christian without signing up for a committed relationship with the church—this church or another. You sign up for Christ as Lord, you sign up for God's people, the church.

And you sign up for God's cause in the world—the ministry. To do works of service.

Again, in America there are just many, many people who are good moral Christians and good churchmen and ladies. You come and listen to messages and sing and maybe even tithe. But they don't understand that mature Christianity involves signing up for the cause of Christ, which is to spread the kingdom of God throughout the earth. You are called, as a Christian, to do works of service.

And so in this concluding paragraph in the book of James, James, ever the exhorter, ever the prophetic person, challenges us through a series of

imperatives to give yourself, Christian, to the work of the ministry. I have called today's talk, "Give Yourself to Ministry."

Let's pray.

James 5:13-20:

"Is there anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

You might say, "Well, what exactly does God want me to be involved in?" And this is for all Christians—what does he want me to give myself to? The first thing that James says is the ministry of prayer. In fact, he mentions prayer in every verse from verses 13-18. "Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray" verse 13. "Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray" verse 15. "The prayer offered in faith" verse 16. "Pray for one another that you might be healed" verse 17. "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed..." verse 18. "Again, he prayed..."

Do you get it? James says that all Christians are to be involved in the ministry of prayer. Do you know that this exhortation to pray is the way that virtually every letter in the New Testament concludes? For example, Paul in Colossians 4 says, *"Devote yourself to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us too that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. Pray that I might proclaim it clearly as I should."*

Paul invites the people to pray for him. Give yourself to prayer, he says.

Ephesians ends with an exhortation to pray. *"And pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me that whenever I open my mouth words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might declare it fearlessly as I should."*

One more example, although I could cite you 8 or 10. 1 Thessalonians 5:16: *"Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances."* Paul finishes up 1 Thessalonians by saying, "Brothers, pray for us."

You say, "When should I pray, Rich? When should I give myself to this ministry of prayer?"

James says all the time. Is anyone in trouble? Let him pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praises. Is anyone sick? Call for prayer. Pray all the time.

Now, let's break this down. Is anyone in trouble? Literally, is anyone suffering? The same word is used just a few verses earlier in verse 10 where James says, "Brother, as an example of patience in the face of suffering take the prophecy spoken in the name of the Lord." James goes on and says, "Is anyone of you suffering?" Same word.

He spoke to us about the suffering of the prophets. Of course, the prophets went through great suffering in fulfillment of their calling as followers of God. Jeremiah suffered rejection. He suffered opposition. He suffered in prison. Ezekiel suffered the loss of his wife. He became a widower. Hosea suffered the unfaithfulness of his wife. She was an adulteress and, yet, God required him to remain with her. Isaiah, at least according to Jewish tradition was martyred for his faith. He was sawn in two and according to tradition it was by a saw that had wooden teeth. They cut him in half.

This suffering, same word, was Paul's lot in life. 2 Timothy 2:9, he says, *"Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead, descended from David, this is my gospel for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal."* And James, you will recall, is writing to Christians who were suffering.

Early on in this series, I told you that there were three kinds of suffering that we might undergo. First of all, there is suffering because of our unfaithfulness. We have walked away from God and we suffer the consequences of walking away from God. We suffer because we deserve it. In a certain sense, we are reaping what we sow. Perhaps we get a sexually transmitted disease because we have had sex outside of the exclusive bounds of marriage, or our partner has. Or we suffer through a relationship because we have dated or married outside the faith. Or we are suffering rebellion from our children because of our neglect of them or our harshness, our domineering spirit, our immaturity. Or maybe we are suffering marital separation because of the way we treated our spouses and now we are reaping the consequences of our behavior. They have left.

There is suffering that is simply the result of our own sin and our own mistakes. There is suffering on the other hand for the sake of Christ. You are a Christian and refuse to lie for your boss and you get fired because you have drawn a line. You have said, "I can't do this." You are a Christian and you refuse to go along with your spouse in some sin and they attack you for it. You are a Christian and your family comes against you. Or the kids at school make fun of you. Suffering for the sake of Christ.

There is, and I think this is what is primarily spoken about in James, a third kind of suffering which I would simply describe as suffering even as we follow Christ. You are reading the Bible, you are trying to live a life of integrity, you are sharing your faith as you have opportunity, you are tithing and while you row your boat along, gently down the stream, life is not a dream, but becomes a nightmare because from entirely out of the blue your little boat runs into some rocks. The boat is gashed and you are taking on water. From out of nowhere there is a financial crisis. You are being faithful. You are doing what you ought to be doing financially and work wise, but you are dismissed from your job because there are

lay-offs. Or you have an enormous unexpected bill. You have hit some sort of financial crisis.

Or relational crisis. You are being slandered by a person or a group of people for no reason. You are misunderstood and your motives are misunderstood. You are paddling along faithfully and then relational crisis hits.

Or a family crisis. One of your children gets ill. You have to sit with him or her in the hospital. Or your spouse has a heart attack or your mom has a stroke. Or you suddenly get a physical problem. You are healthy and all is well, and suddenly you throw your back out or you are in the car and someone hits it from behind and you get whiplash or worse. Or you find you need surgery.

In all these different types of suffering, there is a great temptation to draw away from God. So why does James say, "If anyone is suffering [and he is encompassing all three kinds of suffering]..." Suffering that we create, suffering because we are following Christ, suffering even as we follow Christ, why does he say you must remember to give yourself to prayer when you are suffering? Because in all three kinds of suffering there is a great temptation to steal ourselves away from God. If your suffering is a result of something that you have done, it is very tempting to give up in despair. To sink down in the mud and to not cry out to God for deliverance. Well, I am just reaping what I have sown. I made my bed and now God is going to make me lie down on it. God is not going to help me. God is not going to intervene. God is not going to heal. I deserve what I am getting.

Well, it may be that we deserve what we are getting. But there is no limit on the mercy of God. With God there is always hope. With God there is always a chance at redemption and healing. And so perhaps you have an illness that is the result of something that you did wrong. Don't turn away from God. Don't sink into despair. Turn to him.

Sometimes while we are following Christ we may suffer as a result. That can cause us to shrink back or to lash back. Well, I am trying to obey God and now these people are speaking against me. I am going to slander them. I am going to gossip about them. James says don't do that. Pray.

Or if you are suffering even as you follow Christ there is a great temptation to become rebellious. To say here I am, I am serving God. What is the point? I am still single. I am still sick. My body still hurts. I am still financially strapped. Things still haven't worked out in my marriage. My emotions are still not under control. Well, God, I am not going to serve you any more. If you are not going to help me, I am not going to follow you.

Friends, many Christians come to this place in their lives. Some of you are there. Maybe you have suffered in such way. You felt ripped off or disappointed in a relationship or in a church. You felt yourself misunderstood. You felt yourself not helped by God in some situation or other and here is what you did. You said, "Well, I am not going to completely forsake God, at least not outwardly, I will still be a nice person. I will still try to be fairly moral and go through some of the routines of Christianity. But I am never going to fully give myself to the church or to God again. I will steal myself away. I was a fool to be so radically committed. I was a fool to be so fanatical." We say forget it and a

wall has dropped in your heart where we keep God away from the core of our being.

James says, "If anyone of you is suffering let him pray." Wherever you are at now – pray, draw closer to God. Don't simply sink into despair. Don't rebel. Don't become bitter. Don't try to gut it out yourself. Don't become stoical. Don't become independent. Don't do all the things that you would normally do when you are under pressure. Rather, open the door to Jesus and let him into your suffering.

Ole Hallesby in his great little book on prayer used that line from Revelations 3:20: "*Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.*" And he says there is the perfect summary of prayer because prayer is nothing other than to open the door and invite Jesus into your situation. Come in Jesus. I welcome you into my financial crisis. Into the middle of my awful sin. My stupidity. My anger.

And of course, James adds if anyone of you is doing well, let him praise because James knows that when life goes well, we have a tendency to become self-sufficient, to attribute our ease to ourselves. Friends, must it always be the case that the only time we pray is when we are absolutely desperate? Must it always be the case that the only time we open the door to God is when our car is going over the cliff, when our house is on fire, when Jaws is chewing on our boat? Can't we open the door to God when we are having a party? When we are really in a good season of our lives? When God's blessing is on what we touch?

Some of you are doing really well now. Your home is at peace. Financially things have stabilized, God is using you to accomplish his purpose. Open the door to Jesus wide and praise him for it. Mature Christians devote themselves to prayer—prayer in suffering; prayer in wellness; and prayer in sickness.

Then we come to in many ways the most fascinating and perhaps the most difficult verses to interpret in the book of James, verses 14-15. "*Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint his with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up.*" Let's stop there.

Of course, in our culture we immediately will be confronted by the fact that James is offering a spiritual solution to a physical problem. That we are to pray about illness. "If anyone of you is sick, then he should call the elders of the church and they will pray over him."

Now, I need to point out that there is, according to Christianity, nothing wrong with reaching for the aspirin bottle when you have a headache or calling the doctor or getting an annual check up. My wife and I do that all the time. James tells us, in fact, in chapter 1 that every good and perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of Lights. So the Christian who understands that God is the creator receives medicine as a good gift from the Lord.

The problem of the biblical Christian is not with medicine. The problem of the biblical Christian is that as he or she looks out at the world, there is a neglect

of God's other great gift for healing, the gift of healing prayer. It is as if we were putting a rock band together and all that we used were guitars. No drums or keyboards or horns. Or a baseball pitcher who only had one pitch, a fastball. No change up. No curve. No slider. I mean guitars are great, but you get a lot better sound if you add instruments to your band. And fastballs are wonderful, especially a 98 mph fastball right under the chin, but the best pitchers in baseball always have several different pitches.

And so the biblical Christian says medicine is great, it is a gift from God, but we are going to see greater results in healing and much broader results if we add God's other great gift for healing the body, namely healing prayer. Very often, the way we do things here in the Vineyard is we will tell people to go ahead and go to the doctor and get treatment, get radiation, then we will treat you with healing prayer. We think you will get greater results even if you continue to use medicine.

Why healing prayer? Because prayer is one of the ways that God has ordained for sickness to be dealt with.

Why elders? James says, "Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church." You need to know that elders were an office in the New Testament church. They were following the practice of Judaism. Elders were, by the way, not necessarily elder, though some of them were. We read of Timothy who was a younger elder. Elders were not qualified by age, they were qualified by spiritual qualifications. They had to meet certain spiritual criteria. The Bible calls elders in the church by various titles—shepherds, pastors, bishop, overseer—they are all the same people.

I want to make an aside regarding church government. A lot of people throughout history have proclaimed that their particular form of church government is really the New Testament model. We have an eldership; or we have a presbytery or whatever they have. And some of these churches will look at the way other churches organize themselves and claim that everyone else is much less biblical than them. Or even non-biblical. We follow the Bible. We are not like these other guys who organize their church any old way.

But when it comes to church government, how a church exactly organizes itself, I personally think that a great biblical argument can be made for lots of different forms of church government. You can make a case for a Presbyterian model right out of the scriptures. And you can make a case for an Episcopal model and a Baptist model and a congregational model. The New Testament leaves a lot of room for a variety of forms of church government. I think that in the New Testament church government was primarily functional, needs based, ministry oriented. By needs based, I mean that they didn't appoint a bunch of people in the New Testament church to sit on non-functioning committees and boards and sessions because the church's 300 year old by-laws required that these slots be filled and someone's 3-year term was up, so you get slotted in. And we have elections.

That is not the way it worked in the New Testament. They didn't have a bunch of positions, they had ministers. People who understood that when they signed up for Christ, they were signing up to do the ministry. And so if there was

a need in the New Testament church, they searched around and prayed and found an appropriate person to fill the need. They became a leader.

For example, in the book of Acts, when there was a need for folks to help out with serving widows and there was a problem with the time and priority of the apostles, they found seven men to serve and become deacons.

You say, "Rich, what is your view of church leadership?"

Here are my views. I believe in a need-based, functional leadership. Leaders that do something. I don't believe in committees and boards and councils filled with people who are not actively doing ministry. Christian leadership is about service and doing. It is not about position and titles and meetings. I believe in need-based functional leadership.

I believe that leadership in the church ought to be plural. One person ought not to decide everything. That we have decision-making where it needs to happen commensurate with the responsibility given. So in many areas of the church, even though I am the senior pastor, someone else calls the shots because they have more information and more hands on experience than I do as the leader. I believe in plural leadership.

I believe that any time you get plural leadership, you need to have a point person. Well, we have a point person in women's ministry, Marlin Nathan. We have a point person in children's ministry. We have a point person overseeing our ministry to the poor. It ought to be team based, plural leadership with a point person. There is in the New Testament a gift of leadership.

You say, "In our church who would the elders be?"

We wouldn't use that title. We would use the title pastor. But certainly our ordained and licensed pastors would qualify. And they all must meet the 1 Timothy 3 requirements. Certainly, folks on our church council would qualify and people who have been given substantial authority in the church. Some of our ministry coordinators would qualify here in a broad way under the title elder.

Well, why does James say in some cases the elders should pray, these people who have authority and have met certain spiritual qualifications?

I don't believe that it is to shut out others from praying. I don't believe it is to set up a first and second class hierarchy in the church where only first class Christians, namely elders, pray for illness and everyone else says, "Go elders, go." In fact, a little later in verse 17 he says, "*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other.*" This is a general command. We are all to be involved in praying for each other. Why, in certain cases, does he say sometimes call the elders to pray?

Because, I think that the elders in the church represent the authority that Jesus vested in the church. I don't think that it is because elders are more gifted necessarily. Healing gifting was not part of the spiritual qualification of being an elder. But Jesus places authority in his church. Matthew 16:18 says, "I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Jesus placed authority in his church. The church has power to confront the gates of hell and overcome them.

And so to the extent that the leadership of the church represents the church, they move in the authority that Jesus gave to the church.

Why prayer? Because prayer is one of the gifts that God gives to bring about healing.

Why elders in some cases? Because in some cases we need to move out in the full authority that Jesus has vested in his church.

Now here's a tough one – Why oil? James says call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil. It may be that oil was thought to have certain medicinal properties. You see that with the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. The Good Samaritan used oil in binding up the wounds of that victimized traveler. And oil was used by the disciples in Mark 6:13 when the disciples were sent out two-by-two. It could be that oil was thought to have certain medicinal properties.

But I don't think that is what James is getting at here. I think the reason why oil would be used on some occasions is that oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit and it presents a physical sign to someone so as to stimulate faith in him or her.

See, Jesus has given the church some physical signs. He has given us communion. We could believe in Jesus and his death for us on the cross without communion. But I believe that the bread and the juice stimulate our faith in the cross of Jesus Christ. It gives us a point of contact for our faith. Likewise, I believe that baptism stimulates our understanding of our union with Christ as we use water, although we were united with Christ by faith before we ever were immersed in a pool. I think oil stimulates faith as it reminds me of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It calls to my attention that it is going to be the presence and power of God that will heal me.

But this business of using oil or water has become very complicated in the church. Let me share with you what the text doesn't say. There is nothing in here about a special prayer or rite said over the oil. That we need to pray some formal prayer or have the oil that we use consecrated by a bishop or specially formulated. I think they just used olive oil in that day. You can use olive oil. You can use corn oil. You can use 10W30. I don't think it really matters, except in terms of smell. But there is nothing in here about special prayers to consecrate the oil to give it some magical properties.

There is nothing in the text that supports the later church sacrament called extreme unction where anointing with oil was designed to prepare a dying person for death. The practice here is to anoint a sick person, not necessarily a dying person. And we anoint the sick person not so that we prepare to bury them, we anoint them so that they will get well and be raised up.

But most importantly, there is nothing in this text to suggest that every time an elder or pastor prays for a person or another person prays for an individual that they are to use oil. As you look through all of the healing passages in the Bible, except for this one in Mark 6:13, the thing that is most notable is that there are no rites, no formulas, no techniques, no special secret ritual. Jesus was amazingly free from formulaic, ritualized praying when he prayed for the sick. Sometimes he just commanded the illness to go. I mean his

prayers were very short on occasion. When he prayed for blind people, he just said, "See." It is a rather short prayer. See. See.

Hear. Or to lame people who were stretched out on a mat, "Get up.

That is pretty simple and right to the point. Not a lot of wasted words. "Get up." Or Lazarus, "Come forth." Again very straight forward.

Sometimes Jesus knelt down and prayed over people. And his prayers were longer and were directed to God rather than to the person. Sometimes he stuck mud in people's eyes. Not oil, but mud. Sometimes he spit in people's mouths or spit in their ears. You try to do that sometime with one of your non-believing friends. Oh, I hear you are not feeling well, may I spit on you?"

The point is that the New Testament gives very little support for rituals, techniques, consecrated oil or water. Occasionally, as God leads, we might use oil or water to stimulate faith in the Holy Spirit. But based on the weight of the New Testament, I would say that those occasions ought to be rare. Any ritual in praying should be minimal because the key to effectiveness in prayer is not the oil, nor even the person praying. The key to effectiveness in praying in the New Testament is what James says here, "They are to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and the prayer offered in faith [or the prayer of faith] will make the sick person well."

Do you know why people get well in the New Testament? Because they have been prayed for in the name of the Lord. Jesus tells us to pray in his name in John 14:13, "I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

To pray in the name of Jesus is not just to use the word "Jesus" or tack onto the end of your prayer, "in Jesus' name, Amen." To pray in the name of Christ is to pray invoking the authority of Jesus and the presence of Jesus as you pray. We Christians know that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to the risen Christ. Christ has authority over every illness, over all cancer, over MS, over strokes, over deafness, over mental disabilities, over mental illness. Christ has been given all authority. And when we pray in the name of Christ, what we are saying is, "Lord, Jesus Christ, we want you to come and be present here. And we invoke your authority over this particular illness or disability or demonic problem."

You know that Jesus Christ has given his authority to the church. He gave his authority first to the 12 in Matthew 10. He gave his authority to the 72 and then he passed on his authority to the rest of us in Matthew 28, when he told the disciples to tell us to do everything that he commanded them to do.

You know, I think that we Christians have no idea of how much authority has been given to us. When Jesus calls us to himself and then sends us out to do ministry, he gives us the authority to do ministry. When you become a Christian, you are like someone graduating from the police academy. You are given a badge. And because you have this badge, you can do things in the name of the law. Or in our case, the name of the lawgiver, namely the name of Jesus. You as a Christian have a right to invoke the name of Christ. It is the name of Christ that makes your prayers for healing effective.

It is also the prayer of faith that makes prayer effective. Not oil. Not the people. The name of Christ and the prayer of faith. Prayers of specific faith that Christ is going to heal. You know, faith is used many different ways in the New Testament. Sometimes we speak of the faith. The body of doctrine that contains orthodox Christian teaching. The faith. Jude uses it that way.

Sometimes we are talking about saving faith. The simple trust in Christ to save us.

Sometimes faith is used to speak of what I would call general faith for healing that is the faith that you have been given the authority to heal. That you have a badge. That you have a hunting license. I think that is a minimum for you to pray the prayer of faith. That you begin to operate in and realize the authority that Jesus has given to you as a Christian.

Then, I think occasionally, the Lord gives you a special faith, a special unction of faith, where you are given a specific leading and a strong direction to pray certain ways and declare certain things, but this is solely at the leading and discretion of the Lord. Much of the time, when I pray for the sick, I don't have a feeling of faith. I just have a certainty based on what God has said and who God is and the authority that he has given to me that in this situation God may use me to heal. Every once in a while, I will get a special feeling of faith, if you will, a strong leading by the Spirit that in this moment that something is absolutely going to happen, and I will be able to speak authoritatively to something and it will happen. I think we can build this faith by reading God's word and experiencing God's word, meditating on the authority we have, and doing the ministry.

Faith is not something that gives us a blank check to write in any amount that we want or to write our own ticket with God. Faith is always submitted to the leading of God and the will of God. You can declare a thousand things and pray a hundred thousand things, but the answer is always subject to the discretion of God.

Christians are involved in the ministry of healing. Now, James goes on to say that there is a ministry of confession that we also would be involved in. When James tells us to do the ministry, we are to be involved in the ministry of prayer, the ministry of healing and the ministry of confession. Verses 15-16: *"If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain and it didn't rain on the land for 3½ years. Again, he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops."*

The ministry of confession. Why does James raise the issue of sin here? He has been talking with us about praying for the sick. Why does he immediately add on "and if he has sinned, he will be forgiven" and then the encouragement to confess our sins and to pray for each other that you may be healed. Why does James speak to us in the context of healing about the issue of sin?

I think James understands what modern psychologists and doctors are just beginning to understand. That there is a strong body/soul connection that is undeniable. That we human beings are a unity. That what happens to our souls affects our bodies and vice versa. It is important to see, I might add, that the

Bible does not say that all sickness is caused by our personal sin, as if the sickest person must be the most sinful person and the healthiest is the most righteous. The whole book of Job is written, in part, to break this equation up. Sickness and sin. Job's friends kept saying, "Job, you are suffering because it must be your sin. You must have done something wrong." Job did something wrong, but not what his friends thought. That he deserved his suffering. That as a result of his sin, God was punishing him by his suffering. Job's wrong was in his extraordinary over estimate of his capacity to understand the ways of God. He thought his little mind could understand what God was up to. But he absolutely did not do wrong in terms of deserving the illness or being punished for his sins.

John 9 makes the same point. The disciples came up to Jesus and asked him why a certain person was born blind. Was it because of his sin or the sins of his parents? Jesus says, "Neither." We must cut that cord and the thought that all illness is produced by personal sin. There is no equation.

Nevertheless, the Bible says that some illnesses, on occasion, are related to a person's sin. In Mark 2, there was a man brought to Jesus who was a paralytic and Jesus forgives his sins and then Jesus goes ahead and heals the man. As you read the text in Mark 2, there was apparently some connection between the man's sins and the man's illness. You see the same thing in John 5 where there was another paralyzed man who Jesus heals and then forgives his sins and tells him to go sin no more. The Bible does link sin and sickness on occasion. By that I mean not just the condition of sin that we all find ourselves in, not just our inherited fallenness and pollution based on our connection with Adam and Eve, but our personal sin. It does connect up on occasion.

Of course, we all see that. We can see an obvious link between repeated drunkenness and cirrhosis of the liver. Or sex outside of marriage producing a sexually transmitted disease. Or gluttony producing obesity and high blood pressure and heart problems.

But you know there is a more subtle link that I want to talk about. There is a profound body/soul connection that the Bible has always understood and modern medicine is just beginning to understand. Five or six years ago a psychologist wrote a profound book called *Opening Up*. It is a secular book and I don't necessarily agree with all that is in it. But the psychologist named James Pennebaker received some grants from the National Institute of Health and the National Science Foundation. He had the opportunity to conduct a wide-ranging series of studies on the effect of hidden shame, emotional turmoil, childhood traumas, and guilt. Things that wound our souls. He had the opportunity to study their effects on present health.

What he discovered was the soul/body connection is powerful. When a person does something wrong and experiences significant shame, or a person undergoes some sort of trauma—the loss of a spouse, the loss of a parent, or perhaps childhood traumas like sexual molestation or a rape or an abortion—that unhealed shame or unhealed trauma according to Dr. Pennebaker's studies actually scientifically does suppress the immunological system. The body's defenses against disease and viruses is actually weakened by unhealed trauma

and unhealed shame. The result is and he has quite a bit of evidence to back it up, a significant rise of illness.

Psychology Today, several years ago, did a wide-ranging questionnaire of 24,000 of its women readers. One of the significant things that came out of this survey of 24,000 women across the country, was that the finding that those who had suffered childhood sexual traumas—molestation, rape—were much more unhealthy than others who were demographically in the same place. That is others who were similar in age and social class, lifestyles. That unhealed trauma in the past created a much higher incidence of infection, heart problems, and virtually every other problem. And in fact that people who had suffered these traumas were twice as likely to have had a hospital visit in the last year than those who didn't have these traumas.

Now the police have known for years about this body/soul connection. That is the whole basis of lie detector tests. When you are suppressing something, when you are guilty, your skin becomes much more conductive. You have sweaty palms and your heart rate goes up and your blood pressure goes up. This is all measurable. Thus, sin doesn't just necessarily affect the soul, it also may affect our bodies, and so we must deal with sin. How? Confess.

Why does James say that if you have sinned you will be forgiven and confess your sins. What is confession all about? The Greek word for confession is *homolego*. It comes from actually two words—*homo*; *homo* means same and *lego* means speak. Literally, it means to say the same things as, to agree with. When we confess guilt, what we are saying is that we agree with the charge that the Lord has brought against us. We will say the same thing as the indictment.

When God tells us that we have sinned and the charge is read, we hear the indictment against us, to confess means that we say the same thing as. We agree with it. We say it is true. Amen. Every word, every statement, every sentence. When you confess you are singing in perfect harmony with God's spirit and what God is saying in his word about you. Confession is the opposite of denial. Covering up, rationalization. When you do those things you are not saying the same things as God is saying. You are singing your own tune. You are singing a different tune.

Someone accuses you of taking the chocolate from his or her office and you took it, to confess would mean that you are wrong. I did take the chocolate from your office. You say the same thing that they say. But if you say, "Well, everyone takes your chocolate and you took some of my candy last week and I was hungry" there is no confession.

You say, "Rich, why does James tell us to confess to each other? Isn't it enough to confess our sins to God?"

The New Testament doesn't know anything about human intermediaries between people and God. In fact, the New Testament is quite clear that there is only one God and only one mediator between people and God, the man Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 2:5. There is no priesthood or intermediaries other than Christ in the New Testament. We are all priests together and can all directly approach God through Christ.

So why does James tell us to confess our sins to each other? I don't think I could say it any better than the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in a wonderful little book called *Life Together*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered by Hitler. But before he was murdered he set up a little Christian community as a protest to Nazism. And he wrote this book called *Life Together* out of his experience in this little Christian community. Here is what Bonhoeffer says: "Does this mean that confession to a brother is a divine law? No, confession is not a law. It is an offer of divine health for the sinner. It is possible for a person made by God's grace break through to certainty, to new life, the cross, fellowship without the benefits of ever confessing to a brother or a sister. It is possible that a person may never know what it is to doubt his own forgiveness and to despair of his own confession of sin. That he may be given everything that he needs through private confession to God. But I am writing here to those who cannot make that assertion. Martin Luther himself was one of those for whom the Christian life was unthinkable without mutual brotherly confession. In the large catechism he said, 'Therefore, when I admonish you to confession, I am admonishing you to be a Christian.' Those who despite all their seeking and trying cannot find the great joy of fellowship, the cross, the new life, in certainty should be shown the blessing that God offers us in mutual confession. Confession is within the liberty of the Christian. Who can refuse without suffering loss a help that God deemed necessary to offer?"

The point is, friends that often we don't receive the assurance that we ought to when we confess our sins simply to God. At times, we lack certainty. At times, we get fearful. At times we doubt our forgiveness. Sometimes we receive an enormous amount of benefit by disclosing before a brother or sister what troubles our consciences.

I have often seen in praying for someone that they have suffered for years with unhealed shame, unhealed trauma, and unhealed guilt. And that underlying their present problems, their physical problems, their emotional or spiritual problems is this unhealed sin whether committed by them or another person. And as the Lord raises these issues to the surface, I have seen God come in great power to bring about emotional healing and physical healing, occasionally deliverance from demonic bondage that a person has been in for years.

Let me share with you a simple plan I have in preparing this church for the holidays. I asked the entire pastoral staff to be available this Tuesday to pray for people for either physical illnesses or to receive confessions and to pray for people. If you would like to receive prayer from one of the pastors, we have sign up sheets out in the lobby. You put your name down there. We have broken up the day in one-half hour slots and we have lots of slots open. There are 10 or 11 of the pastors that are going to be available at different times. If you say, "I would really like to get some prayer for an illness." "I would like to receive prayer regarding being able to actualize forgiveness over a particular problem." "I feel like there is some bondage."

This is not a counseling time. Counseling is great. We love the counselors that we have in the church. But this is purely a prayer time and confession time. If you find the need for that then sign up out in the lobby for a

slot. There are some evening hours, but most of the hours are unfortunately during the day.

The last thing that I am going to say is that when James wants to underline for all of us the call to do ministry, to do the ministry of prayer and healing and to do the ministry of confession where we receive each other's confession in confidentiality, without an air of superiority or haughtiness, it is interesting that he doesn't hold up Elijah as a hero. He says that Elijah is simply a person like us. Some of the Jews in James' day made Elijah a hero. They put him up on a pedestal. There was so much mythology around Elijah that some of the Jews believed that you actually prayed to Elijah for healing like people would pray to a Saint like Saint Anthony.

James says, "No. I want to get rid of this hero mentality, this putting people on pedestals mentality because I want you mature Christians to do the ministry." It can be faith robbing to have all of these heroes do all of the praying and hear all of the confessions and do all the healing. He underlines for us no heroes. Elijah was a man just like us. He suffered from long bouts of depression, doubt.

Here is the bottom line, friends. The way we proceed in this church is that we do not accept one man or one woman ministries. Or one faith healer where everyone needs to be prayed for by one person. All that we are designed to do is to equip you to do the work of the ministry. To say that if I am ever to mature as a Christian, I have to get my hands dirty. I have to share my faith. I have to be involved in prayer praying for people. I must give myself to learning about how to heal. To receiving confessions.

You Christians, when you signed up, you signed up for maturity. It involves the Lordship of Christ, healthy relationships with each other, and the spread of the kingdom of God throughout the world.

Let's pray.