

Why You Need the Local Church, Part 1: Shepherding, Care, and Prayer (James 5:14-20)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on April 11, 2010

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As we come to our final weeks in the final part of James 5:14-20, I want us to consider together how this passage intended for 1st century local churches highlights for us the importance of the local church, which is the context that this passage presupposes. When I speak of a local church, I don't mean a building (the NT never uses "church" to refer to a building), I mean a body of believers in Christ *who gather together for prayer and praise and preaching, and then scatter to serve*. The church is pre-eminent in God's program, a primary means of grace through which Christ is working in this age until He returns to gather up His church to Himself for a wedding supper that will be the universe's greatest party ever! Christ promised to build His church – it's the one institution on earth He has guaranteed and promised will not fail ultimately.

The church is called the flock of God which He purchased with His own precious blood. And those who are His sheep need to be in a flock with under-shepherds reporting to the Chief Shepherd. Sheep aren't designed to be independent of other sheep or shepherds. In the gospels we read whenever Jesus saw sheep without a shepherd, it saddened His heart. There are multitudes in our country today who for a variety of reasons intentionally want to be sheep without shepherds (Bible word for pastors/Elders). Many sheep aren't part of a flock, though they may come and feed with a flock at times. It must sadden the heart of Christ again today seeing multitudes of sheep who don't put themselves under shepherds or treat lightly the church that Christ shed His own precious life-blood to redeem.

Any number of excuses may be given by independent sheep:

- they haven't found a flock where the sheep are enough like them
- they've had bad experiences in the past with sheep or shepherds
- they think the food being offered doesn't match their tastebuds
- the shepherd won't get on *their agenda for which pasture is best*
- the music doesn't match their style or former flock or favorites
- there's not enough different types of programs for my interests

I don't have any individual here in mind in this place, but individualistic consumeristic mindsets need to be confronted, and if you have that mindset I'm coming after you in love because God's Word challenges you to commit to and be a part of a church despite its faults (and your faults)! We do fall short as a church, we're not friendly enough or always caring enough, and that's NOT ok – we need to not only commit to *be in church* (maybe a good start for some), by God's grace we also need to *be more like the church He calls us to be*. But praise God that despite our shortcomings, even sins, Christ loves the church! Christ gave Himself up for it, like a husband to a bride. Praise the Lord He's committed to His church, even though many church attendees are just dating the church with no serious thoughts of commitment. I want us to not only love Christ more, let's also love what He loves more. Many today say they love Jesus, but don't want to love His church or give up much of anything for it, or commit to it, or serve in it. Don't forget Jesus gave up everything for His bride/church, commits to build it no matter what powers of hell might endeavor to shake, and He Himself humbly served, foot-washed undeserving disciples, who weren't exactly always a marvelous group either!

I want you to know I love the church, too. I love this church. I love you and want us to love the church Christ loves and gave Himself up for, a bride that still has spots and wrinkles but that Christ is making beautiful and He graciously lovingly intends us (even us unlovely people!) to be a part of that process! Something far more grand and glorious is at stake in the church, far bigger than our pettiness and preferences and personal differences – we get to be a part of the mystery of the church which God planned before time began, the glorious plan of the Father to present a bride to His Son!

There are many biblical metaphors for the church and texts we can consider, but today I want us to simply consider the next text in our verse-by-verse study of James 5:14-20 in light of the local church. As I simply read the Word of God, I want you to let our Shepherd Christ speak: can you fulfill these commands apart from a flock?

James 5 (NKJV) ¹⁴ *Is anyone **among you** sick [or “weak”]? 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 [or restore] the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Confess your trespasses to **one another**, and **pray for one another**, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. ¹⁹ Brethren, if anyone **among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back,** ²⁰ let him know that **he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.***

Prayer is explicitly mentioned in every verse from 13-18, implicit in v. 19-20 (prayerful pursuit of a sheep straying from the flock). There are many aspects of prayer in Scripture, but the focus in this context is intercessory prayer, prayer for one another, a critical part of our spiritual growth and health in the context of Christ’s body.

We are not inherently strong and automatically flourishing without our church family, in fact the opposite quickly becomes the case if we isolate ourselves from the body and don’t pray for each other. We’re all weak needy sheep, and if we don’t humbly admit it to others and seek to be with and pray with a flock, we grow weaker and are more prone to wander. And it’s not just that we need to be in fellowship where we can share and ask for prayer for struggles and sins we have, but others here *need you to pray for them!*

It’s ok to also pray for yourself, in fact that’s the first foremost place you should go in need. Talk to God far more than to others.

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

This is the context leading up to v. 14. In the normal suffering or trials of life, pray to the Lord directly, and cast your cares on Him. Don’t use public prayer requests as a guise to just tell your story to people, or to complain, or to dump all your cares on others, when you can cast all your cares on the Lord who cares for you the most.

It's ok to ask for prayer, but it's good to be brief and to ask prayer for the spiritual dynamic of the situation, not just the physical, like we see in v. 14-16. And it's good to share praises and sing praises, and the end of v. 13 also should be a regular part of private prayer.

But as we move into v. 14, there are some who are sick or weak in spirit, perhaps a more serious suffering than v. 13. It's hard to pray. In normal suffering, pray. But sometimes you're weak spiritually and so are your prayers. Then what? When cheerful, sing to God. But in moving from v. 13-14, there are some who aren't cheerful but are in need of cheer, encouragement and support. Then what?

Unfortunately, some in that condition withdraw from the church, nursing their wounds (real or perceived, some they may even feel from the church), rather than dealing with things as Scripture says we should. The language of v. 14-15 seems to be a serious and debilitating struggle – but Christ offers hope and help if that's you.

When my wife and I were members down at GCC Dr. MacArthur began a sermon on this text on the note we ended on 2 weeks ago: 'Even though you know all that theology [of what God does in suffering] you still somehow can't crawl out of the pit, you still somehow can't rise above your circumstance; you're still somehow buried underneath it and ... just cannot seem to rise above the difficult issues of life ... the 5th chapter of James ... is where you go when you can't pick yourself up. This is where you go when you sort of come to the end and you really understand the theology of all of it ... but you're still depressed, you're still under the pile, you're still in the pit, you're still in the hole, the issues of life are too devastating to you, an unfaithful spouse ... [broken relationship], a child that has rebelled against you and against the Lord and broken your heart, the loss of a job, economic instability, a huge debt that may have come in your life, physical illness, you just heard that you have cancer or you have a test coming up in a week or two that's going to find out what it is that's bothering you and you're fearful about that, or you're anticipating a surgery on your heart, or whatever it is you're really struggling to rise above it, what do you do? Where do you go? That's the question. When you can't find the resource within yourself where do you go? I think James 5 really addresses that'¹

We began to look at v. 14-16 of this passage last time, and I argued that the focus of this text in context and in the original language is far more spiritual in nature than physical (though sometimes spiritual issues can lead to physical issues and physical ailments have a spiritual component). The word for "sick" in v. 14 is literally in Greek "without strength." It basically means *weakness*, and the context defines whether physical or spiritual or emotional. Here the terms all around this text are very spiritual in nature. The original language word translated "sick" in v. 15 literally means *weary, losing heart*, which is how it's translated in Hebrews 12:3.

Jas 5:14 seems to be spiritual shepherds of a church (Elders) that a struggling sheep has asked to come pray, anoint, and help him/her spiritually. This passage is *not* a blank check promise for physical healing, and no Scripture is a guarantee of physical healing in this life, even with great faith or prayers. God can and does heal, but *this text* has much more to do with spiritual restoration of a soul, peace to emotions, and fullness of life and blessed honor from our Good Shepherd (Ps 23): *you lead me beside quiet waters, you restore my soul ... you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows*

The anointing of the head with oil is mentioned in Psalm 23 along with other spiritual metaphors, like peace, contentment, restoring of the soul. It may be that James has the same kind of things in mind speaking of the shepherds of a church in oil-anointing: peace-giving, soul-restoring, cup-overflowing goodness and mercy role.

I'm told that in Bible times, as the shepherd would bring the sheep into the sheepfold, he would anoint the sheep with oil to care for the sheep, help heal any cuts, scratches, or wounds it had received from outside the sheepfold, help prevent infection, etc. It was not a magical or mystical thing, but a practical and physical action that some psalms use spiritually, as David the shepherd knew literally and wrote of himself in Psalm 23 in the presence of his enemies. The Good Shepherd anoints David's hurts with oil, restoring his soul, and David rested refreshed in his all-sufficient soul-satisfying Shepherd. David was tempted to spiritual darkness through the valley of shadow, tempted to fear, but because of the presence of the Shepherd, he can say "*I will fear no evil, for You are with me.*"

And when James 5:14b says the Elders are to be with them and minister "*in the name of the Lord,*" that phrase signifies this work of shepherding is *as a representative of the Lord, doing what the Lord would do if He were present, physically, spiritually helping.* Our invisible Shepherd Lord should be sufficient, and He is, but sometimes some of us in weakness need visible shepherds as well, and God in His grace in this passage intends that for every church.

The book of James is probably the first book NT book written, and already in the decade after the church began, the norm is clearly a plurality of elders in local churches, v. 14 shows (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:6). "... *call for the elders (plural) of the church (singular),*" not a *solo pastor*, or priest, but elders, a team of male leaders / overseers / shepherds every congregation knew and sought for spiritual help.

The biblical portrait of Elders isn't *elderly* or *execs in a boardroom* but this scene is a *bedroom or home* of one in spiritual need asking for their church shepherds for help in their care and prayer to the Good Shepherd to nourish this troubled sheep in green pastures, to lead this troubled sheep to peaceful water, to restore the soul and anoint the head with oil and overflow His goodness and mercy. If there's sin involved, v. 15-16 speak of spiritual healing/restoration as sins are confessed, and Elders can pray for those among them and with them to gain victory in the valley spiritually. Note *healing* (v. 16) is only mentioned in relation to sins (spiritual healing?)

The image of a sheep presupposes humility, not someone angrily, arrogantly challenging or complaining about the imperfect church or its imperfect leaders. It's someone who recognizes he or she is also imperfect and therefore needs to be in the flock, because a sheep going off independently will invariably fall into trouble.

1 Peter 2:24 says Jesus, "*Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness— by whose stripes you were **healed [spiritual healing in context].***"²⁵ *For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the **Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.***

Notice that this passage, like James 5, is in the context of suffering and persecution (1 Pet 2:19-21). The focus is not mainly or only outward and external and physical, but like the end of v. 11 says, there is a spiritual battle within you taking place. Peter calls it in v. 11 “*war in your soul*” – these desires you have battle within you. Peter like James draws attention not to outer circumstances but to our inner responses to them; desires, feelings, thoughts, cravings – this is where the crucial battle is fought and won or lost, within us.

The good news is, as the end of v. 24 says, when we have lost the battle in our sinful thoughts and attitudes, we can find healing in Christ. In some ways, this *spiritual healing is more miraculous than physical healing*, and I think this subject deserves more focus than many give it. There is healing in Christ’s death for spiritually weak sheep, wounded sheep, even wandering sheep as v. 25 says all of us are and would continue to be without Jesus the “*Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*.” And v. 25 speaks of spiritual restoration or returning of the straying or wandering one, using the same Greek terms in James 5:19 for “straying” and “turning back.”

In 1 Pet 2:25 the terms used of Jesus, “Shepherd and Overseer” are synonyms for Elders in Scripture. Elders are spiritual leaders who shepherd, lead, and feed the sheep, with oversight over the flock, to protect, defend, guide, guard, love, care *for souls*. In this verse that’s the sphere Christ shepherds us in as our ultimate example to follow, a servant-leader and *Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*.

1 Pet 5 (NKJV) ¹ *The elders* [plural] **who are among you** [church] *I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:* ² **Shepherd the flock of God** [their primary word and work in NT] *which is among you, serving as overseers* [not just a title but a task], **not by compulsion but willingly** [not mere duty but a desire] *not for dishonest gain but eagerly* [pure motive]; ³ *nor as being lords over* [despot, Acts 19:16 beat down] *those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;* ⁴ *and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.* ⁵ *Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble” ...* ⁷ *casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you ...*

We all need shepherding, care, and prayer, and our Chief Shepherd in His care and kindness for us has given a context for that in the local church, a means of grace if you humble yourself to receive it. It’s humbling to admit your spiritual weakness and ask for help or to confess your sins to another to ask them to pray for you, but God gives grace to the humble and He cares for you. It’s a great comfort to me to know that even where we fail as humans, we have a never-failing always-caring perfect Shepherd in Jesus.

In tenderness He sought me, weary and weak with sin;
And on his shoulders brought me, back to His fold again

That’s what Christ is doing in James 5 in His flock, the local church. Before we turn back, our loving Lord gives us tangible expressions of His affection, ex: 1 Pet. 5:14: *Greet one another with a kiss of love*. In some cultures today, like parts of Russia, I’m told it’s normal for even Christian men to greet each other with a kiss, sometimes even on the lips, but we recognize not every culture has the same significance or appropriateness of affection or greetings.

I bring that up as we turn back to James 5, because the rubbing of oil on someone had a certain significance in biblical times that we need to be aware of – in fact, anointing someone with oil could be a cultural greeting as well when someone came to your house as a sign of love and honor (Lk 7:45-46). The word “anoint” that James uses is not the word for a religious ritual or sacrament, but is a more everyday word for rub, apply, put on.

In Bible times, it’s also true oil was used for medicine on wounds (in Lk 10, the Good Samaritan applied oil to the wounds of the man who had been beaten). Both literally and figuratively, oil was used in Scripture. Isaiah 1 addressed sinful rebellious Israel who had wandered: ⁵ *Where will you be stricken again, As you continue in your rebellion? **The whole head is sick And the whole heart is faint.*** ⁶ *From the sole of the foot even to the head There is nothing sound in it, **Only bruises, welts and raw wounds, Not pressed out or bandaged, Nor softened with oil.***

So various hurts like bruises, welts, and raw wounds were softened by oil, and the language of Isaiah 1 is physical but with spiritual connotations, a sickness or weakness related to sin (cf. Jas. 5:16?). So the use of oil may be physical and/or symbolic or spiritual. Scholars suggest some in the original audience of James may have been actually beaten, wounded and in need of such physical help (James 2:6 said the ungodly rich were laying hands on poor believers, and 5:6 says some of them were even killing the innocent unjustly). Remember the Good Samaritan story Jesus told was directed to a religious leader or expert in God’s Law as an application of how the greatest commandment of love should be manifested. In context, that story rebukes those who should have been spiritual shepherds in the story (a priest and a Levite) but who loved themselves and not their neighbors that were not like them, and therefore revealed their lack of God’s love and eternal life.

So, while the spiritual is most important in Scripture, the physical is also important, and true Christians with living saving faith and the love of God within them, will express His love to others, not just with words, but with a desire to help practically if they can. The significance of oil in Scripture can also in other places be that of encouragement or gladness or refreshment or honor or setting apart for special care.

I think the principle of this passage could include things besides oil that communicate similar things in our day. Still, anointing with actual oil is ok, too, and Pastor Dale and Pastor Jerry, and I have done so before for one among us who asked, and so we did what this passage said. And as we did so, we explained an understanding of healing biblically, that oil isn’t miraculous, mystical, or magical.

The focus is not a liquid, but the Lord, and our prayers to him. This portion of Scripture that has been a source of controversy and confusion for centuries was originally intended to be a source of comfort to God’s people in the context of the local church, by the means of grace our loving God has intended for each flock through shepherding, care, and prayer, to those who humbly seek help. The spiritually depressed or despairing aren’t told to call professional help outside the church to make sure no one at church knows the spiritual issues you’re struggling with. It says call for the Elders / shepherds (at our church that’s Cliff, John, Ron, Mark, Jerry, Phil).

We are not professionals, as John Piper says, we are shepherds. It's not that we have all the answers, but we can help pray to the God who does, and we invest together many hours a week studying the Word and will of God in His Word and sharpening each other in it, and if the Scriptures have bearing on your situation, we hope to bring their help and hope to you, or seek further help among us.

It's not that we've experienced everything you're going through to be able to help you, but we can point you to a sufficient Savior, and we can search the Scriptures and every resource at our disposal to find more help for you. Please don't view us as executives or a ruling body detached from this body, please forgive us if we have been that way! We truly love you and want to be this passage more

If someone likes to preach, or plan, or pontificate, or have power in business decisions, but doesn't want to or seek to pray for and with hurting people or visit or disciple or counsel or help people with sin or shepherd wandering sheep, that doesn't fit the biblical picture of an Elder.

Paul told the Elders in Ephesus in Acts 20:28 (NKJV) *Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.*

Our Good Shepherd manifests His care through caring under-shepherds who are imperfect but trying to point people to the perfect Savior. In the same message I mentioned at the start of this message, John MacArthur told a story of a young man at The Master's College:

'passed me on the campus and he said, "can I come into your office and see you?" [John] said sure, just come in, the door is open and he came in and he said "I'm struggling, really struggling in my life. I want to serve the Lord, I want to minister, I want to give my life ministry to the Lord, but I'm just, I'm struggling. I've lost my interest in the Scripture, I've lost my desire to pray, I just feel like I've been utterly defeated by besetting sin, I really don't know what to do and I've come to you because I need you to pray for me." That's exactly what I think this passage is talking about.

In the midst of his spiritual weakness he sought someone who was spiritually strong, who could lift him up before the Lord. [John says] I'll never forget what happened, I pulled two chairs that I have in the office at the college together, and I asked if he would kneel next to me? I said I'll pray for you, so we knelt down on the chairs. I knelt down in the chair and much to my surprise he knelt but he didn't kneel into the chair, he turned sideways and laid himself across my back, and at first I was sort of stunned by it but it didn't take me long to realize that that was a physical illustration of what his soul was attempting to do was to rest his weakness on my strength.

So for a rather long time I prayed in his behalf and poured out my heart to the Lord and then after that time of prayer, he prayed a brief prayer and we met one other time and prayed and he told me within a few days he came to see me again with a shining face and reported how the Lord had restored his joy and he was beginning to get back in the Word and all of that. I think that's what this is all about. He flourished in the remainder of his time there and went on from the school to serve the Lord.'²

God has ordained that those in spiritual weakness enlist the shepherding, care, and prayer of others with spiritual strength. That's one reason we need the body of Christ, but there's more we'll look at next time, including fellowship and discipleship.

¹ John MacArthur, "Bearing Up the Weak in Prayer," GYT 90-202 <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/90-202>

² MacArthur, *Ibid.*