

James 5:13-14

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord (NRSV).

Today I'm going to talk about suffering, prayer, praise, and anointing. We disciples don't do a lot of anointing. I don't know why other than the fact that traditions develop over centuries and some end up being practiced more frequently than others. Anointing is not a sacrament like baptism and Holy Communion. So, it is not emphasized. However, it is biblical. So, I decided to do a message on anointing. This brings us to today's Scripture which covers a lot more than just anointing. The Scripture starts by addressing suffering. It is easy to find a place in the Bible that addresses suffering, pain, or some kind of trouble. These things are frequent in Bible providing us with multiple lessons.

The Scripture tells us what to do if we are suffering. We should pray. Once again I want to emphasize that we need to be careful with scriptural interpretation. It is easy to fall into the trap of human wants. What we want is an easy solution and sometimes we might be tempted to pray and then expect God to fix it. "Oh God please lift my suffering." It is easy to expect, even demand, a miracle. But reality is there is no magic fix. God does not promise you an easy and pain free life. To put it in real perspective just look at Jesus. Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, was not exempt from suffering. So, do not expect God to do for you what was not done for the Son of God. Prayer does not perform magic. What prayer does is strengthen the individual. Prayer builds faith. Prayer builds your relationship with God. Prayer brings comfort within the pain.

The next point is praise. If you are cheerful sing songs of praise. Singing songs of praise is a matter of attitude. It is a matter of expressing thanks to God. When the nation of Israel left Egypt and were safe after crossing the sea the first thing they did was to sing praises to God. Then the sister of Moses and Aaron continued the practice and led the women in songs of praise. Recently, while under coronavirus house arrest I was bummed out. Things were just not going my way so I went outside to take a break. All I had to do is look around at the environment. All around me was the beauty of God's creation: trees, grass, birds, and animals. It is all so awesome. When you take the time to reflect on the blessings that God provides, it is hard to be bummed out unless there is something truly serious going on. Emotions are a balancing act. I get bummed out when I focus on the bad. But, when I focus on good, it outweighs the bad. I find it hard to be bummed out when I am focused on the good. The Scripture tells us when you are cheerful to sing songs of praise because we are thankful to God for the many generous things that God has given. Everything that we have is from God.

The next point is what to do if you are sick. The Scripture says when you are sick call for the elders. When someone is sick the elders are to come together and pray for the sick person. The elders represent the community. This is a life of togetherness where we support the sick as an act of solidarity. The sick are not alone because they have a community of support. But there is even more to it. Along with the prayers of the elders is a petition for forgiveness - confessing your sins. The prayer is to be passionate, earnest, and sincere. It is not a quick fix and it is not just a matter of praying for those that are sick; it is a matter of being in a state of righteousness.

There is also a matter of anointing. Anointing is a ritual of pouring oil over the head or body of an individual. It originated in the earliest of times and continued as a Hebrew practice. Aaron was anointed high priest. Saul and David were anointed by Samuel the prophet. Anointing continued into the New Testament. It was included in the mission of the 12 disciples. They anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them (Mark 6:13). The Scripture does not say that anointing cured them. The Scripture says the disciples anointed them and cured them. We always need to be careful with interpretation because it is easy to project our own wants into the actual meaning. Anointing is no guarantee you will not be sick or that it will make you well. We also see in the New Testament where Jesus was anointed and it was not by the High Priest or by a prophet. The anointing of Jesus is recorded in all four of the gospels to honor him and prepare him for burial by someone who loved him dearly.

I will conclude by reminding you how important prayer is. I can't emphasize enough the importance of prayer. It is one on one communication with God. We may not be able to sing right now but we can be sure to praise God. We owe or thanks to God for everything. Though we might be bummed out and feel like we are under house arrest. We will feel much better and be engulfed with peace through determined discipline of prayer and praise.