

“ANOINTING WITH OIL - JAMES 5?”

By Dr. Hoyt W. Allen, Jr.

“Is any one of you sick?” “He should call for 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; and the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned he will be forgiven.” (James 5:14, 15).

Should elders, in connection with their prayers, be anointing the sick with oil? James, the inspired writer exhorts: The sick are still among us. And virtually no one questions the fact that the church should have elders today. Should elders do this today?

First, it ought to be noted that this reference to “anointing with oil” (Jas. 5:14) is extremely condensed. Nothing is specifically stated in the context as to the design of the practice.

Second, there are no indications in the context that this anointing with oil had any sort of spiritual basis that would make it universally appropriate or permanently compulsory. If this was to be a requirement for the universal church for all time, it would seem to be reasonable that some basis for the practice might have been provided. **Commentators are sharply divided as to the meaning of the passage.** Any teachings of this text which is contradicted by other clear Biblical information must be rejected. Several of the ideas that attempt to explain this uncertain text are as follows:

1) Some suggest that oil was employed as a **daily item of toiletry** in ancient times (much like cosmetics are used today). In periods of sickness, or fasting, this casual use of oil was suspended (Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam. 12:20; 14:2; Dan. 10:2, 3; Mic. 6:15; Mt. 6:16, 17). It is argued, therefore, that James may have been exhorting the brethren to accompany their prayers with the “anointing of oil,” i.e., the renewal of their normal activities. The oil would serve as a token of conviction in the power of their request. While this is possible, it does not commend itself to the ordinary reader. Also, it would not explain why elders would be called to administer the oil.

2) A number of writers contend that the oil of James 5:14 was barely a **therapeutic item** which, together with the prayer, would be providentially effective in the healing process. It is true that oil has a **medical value** for some ailments, and that it was employed to this end in ancient times (Isa. 1:6; Luke 10:34). However, oil, as a physical remedy, would be useless in many sicknesses. Moreover, it would appear rather unusual that “elders” would be sought for the administration of physical healing techniques, when there were

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good medical doctors available for that purpose (see Col. 4:14). One would hardly be inclined to call for elders today for the diagnosis and treatment of physical difficulties.

3) Some scholars think that the “anointing” referred to by James was simply a **refreshing, encouraging act of friendship**, much like when Mary anointed Jesus’ feet (John. 12:3; cf. Lk. 7:46). It is argued that the Greek word “aleipho” (“anoint”) has to do with earthly rituals rather than a religious ceremony (see Mark 6:13). In this sense James is recommending a call for the elders’ prayers, accompanied by the cultural courtesy of that day which reflected love and friendship. If such is the case, that ancient teaching would have no significance today.

4) **Many contend with me the use of oil**, as reflected in this passage, was a **symbolic act**. In Bible times the practice of anointing with oil was frequently representative of God’s approval (see 1 Sam. 10:1; Ps. 89:20). Many Biblical scholars are reasonably confident that the application of oil in James 5:14 was a symbolic act invoked in combination with supernatural healing. There is additional information in other Scriptures that associates with miraculous healing with the anointing of oil. In Mark 6:13 the record states: “And they (the Lord’s disciples who were either baptized with the Holy Spirit or had received the laying on of hands of those who had been baptized with Holy Spirit) cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them.” This may be the key verse that sheds light on James 5:14. **Not all Christians in the first century possessed the gift of healing** (1 Cor. 12:28-30). It would be most natural that the elders of local churches would be those who were granted the gift in their particular congregations. Ephesians 4:8-11 clearly indicates that some “pastors” (bishops, elders) were given spiritual gifts. **If this view is correct, and in this writer’s understanding it is the most reasonable**, then the act of anointing with oil would not be appropriate today for the simple reason that miraculous gifts, as was in the first century church, are not available to the church in this age (1 Cor. 13:8ff). See my article “Baptism Of The Holy Spirit” I contend that **God still heals today, but He does not need to use oil** as in our discussion. Some are determined to use oil in conjunction with a desire for healing. If that is their preference - Let God be their judge and send healing at His discretion. After all, He made the world and will have the final say in all matters. However, for this writer - I will continue to pray and have faith in the Great Healer to do as He sees fit (1 John 5:14).

No doubt many are very sincere in teaching this need of oil - yet, I contend they are **misunderstanding the meaning of this passage**. Then some may just be looking for a “new” experience of some sort, because they have grown tired of what they perceive as “traditional” service to God, and they seek something new.

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