

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance Church. As I begin my sermon this morning, I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles with me to James 5:13-20; if there is a Blue Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 980.

James began his letter by referencing the trials and temptations we face¹ as we follow Jesus and his letter concludes by returning to a variation of this theme—the trial of sickness, and the temptation to wander away from truth.

This concluding section of his letter contains an invitation to bring our frailties before God, asking for healing. In keeping with James' invitation, at the end of our service, there will be an opportunity for you to bring your healing need, or the need of loved one, before God. As I preach this morning, may the Holy Spirit be at work in our midst to lead us into a new encounter of healing and freedom.

“13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the

land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

Vs. 13: I'm going to make my way through this text, verse by verse, beginning with vs. 13. *“Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.”* These words are simple enough and they point to the fundamental orientation of our lives.

illus: When I'm in a new city and check in at a hotel, ideally, I like to get a map of the surrounding area and then get out onto the sidewalk; I need to orient myself. If I know where I am, I can figure out where I'm going.

These days the word “orientation” immediately triggers a conversation about gender and sexuality, and the prevailing thought is that one's own sense of maleness, femaleness, or attraction is the most fundamental thing about them. The Bible recognizes that there is something much more fundamental to being human—we are created to be in relationship with God.

We pick up this truth when we read vs. 13. The Greek word that James uses for “trouble” has a wide semantic range that encompasses difficulties like intense peer pressure, rejection, and false accusation;

¹ James 1:2-4, 12-15.

it also include things like the death of a loved one, divorce, or losing your job. The Greek word that James uses for “happy” conveys the modern sentiment that one finds themselves “in a good place”.

Are you in trouble? You should pray. Are you in a good place? You should sing songs of praise. With these few simple words, James maps out the entire spectrum of human experience and emotion; no matter where we are or how we feel, God is the Sun around which all of life orbits. If we are in trouble, we lift our voice to God in prayer; if we are happy, we lift our voice to God in praise.

If you are out and about in the next few days, and you take a moment to observe people’s posture, you will notice that many people make their way through life with their head down. On the couch or on the bus, standing in a line or walking on a crowded street, many people have their heads down, fixated on their cell phone. At times I want to shout, “*Look up!*,” or, “*look around you!*”

John Motyer writes, “Our whole life...should be so angled towards God that whatever strikes upon us, whether sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into his presence.”² God is the centre of all things—the Source of all life, love, wisdom, and rescue. When we neglect this basic orientation, we cut against the fundamental grain of reality.

Vs. 14-15: “*Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of*

the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.”

I recognize that when I talk about healing, I am treading on sacred ground. Healing is not an impersonal subject; we are all deeply invested because we, or someone we love, has (or had) a healing need. Perhaps you’ve prayed for healing and received it, and so, you have strong ideas about the subject. Or perhaps you’ve prayed for healing and have not received it, and so, you have strong ideas about the subject.

As I explore vs. 14-15, I want to talk about what I—and this church—teaches about divine healing.

a) First, *why does James call for the elders to pray?* In the first century, after Jesus ascended to the Father’s side, Christians made their way from city to city, bringing with them the good news concerning Jesus. As new churches began to form, “elders”—often those who were older, wise, and mature in their faith—gave leadership to these new communities. Elders aren’t the only ones who can pray for healing, but generally speaking, those who are mature in faith are prepared to pray for those in need.

b) Second, *why the instruction to anoint with oil?* In ancient times, oil was used medicinally³, but it was also used to anoint and

² J.A. Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James*, 188.

³ Cf. Isaiah 1:6; Luke 10:34.

bless⁴ people—in this way, oil came be understood as a symbol of the Holy Spirit presence and favour. When we pray for healing, at times we anoint the person with oil to symbolize the presence, power, and favour of the Holy Spirit. Every time we pray for a person, we want them to know that they are known and loved by God; He has not forgotten them.

c) Third, in vs. 15, the subjects of healing and forgiveness appear together; *what is the connection between the two?* Sometimes people wonder if the sickness they are experiencing is God’s way of punishing them for the things they have done. I want to be careful in how I answer this question, because there are two ideas that the Bible affirms at the same time.

First, the Bible affirms that all sickness, disease, and death are the direct consequences of sin’s presence in the world. Sin, sickness, and death entered the world when humanity first rebelled against God.

But **second**, the Bible rarely identifies a person’s individual sin as the root cause for their experience of sickness. Now, there are a few exceptions in the Scriptures⁵, but in each of the cases where God allowed sickness for the purpose of discipline, He spoke very clearly to the individual about their affliction and how they could repent and find healing.

⁴ 1 Samuel 16:13; Psalm 23:5; Cf. Luke 4:16-21; Acts 10:38.

⁵ Miriam’s leprosy (Num. 12:1-13), Uzziah’s leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16-21), Elymas the Sorcerer’s blindness (Acts 13:8-11), and some of the sickness present in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:28-34).

Think about it in terms of parenting. If you were to discipline your children but never tell them what they were being disciplined for, you would contribute to their confusion and fear, but not to any positive formation. God is no different.

d) *What is the “prayer of faith”?* Some people live by what I describe as a “**Faith Formula**”. Those in this camp affirm that there is a straight, unambiguous, line between faith and healing. What we end up with is a kind of scientific formula: if the right people (the one asking and the one praying), have the right amount of faith, then healing is guaranteed. The Faith Formula is captured by the following equation: **A+B=C**.

illus: Naomi has an uncle that belongs to a faith-formula-church but a number of years ago, he went blind in one eye. Both he and his community prayed for healing again and again, but he remains blind in one eye to this day.

While I’ve never enjoyed solving mathematical equations, I am secretly drawn to them. I suppose the reason I am drawn to mathematical equations is because nearly everything can explained and solved. There’s no “*maybe*” when it comes to mathematics; there’s no “*I feel,*” or “*I wish.*” There may be great complexity involved, but not a lot of mystery.

The same can be said of the faith formula—there is very little mystery involved. This formula assumes that healing is guaranteed—that God will heal everyone this side of heaven—and with this “guarantee,” everyone else needs to play their part appropriately.

So let's get back to Naomi's uncle, and ask the all-important question: *what went wrong?* When we live by a faith formula there's only a few possibilities. Maybe he had unconfessed sin in his life. Maybe he didn't have enough faith. Maybe the person praying for him didn't have enough faith. Or maybe it wasn't a faith deficit at all, maybe the person praying for him didn't have the right spiritual gift or enough anointing.

But what Naomi's uncle can't bring himself to see is that there's something wrong with the formula. Ken Blue writes that when it comes to healing, “we are dealing with a mystery: we are interacting with a sovereign and free God; we are confronting sin, demonic beings, and a host of psychological, physical and spiritual factors.”⁶ He continues, “The ministry of healing, like all other aspects of Christian ministry and experience is partial, provisional, and ambiguous.”⁷

So then, *what is the prayer of faith?* We need to find the balance between confident, prayerful, expectation and demanding that God do what we think is best. We often don't know what to pray because we don't know what's needed, what's best, or what God intends to do. For this reason, much of the time prayer is simply entrusting our

⁶ Ken Blue, *Authority To* 40.

⁷ Blue, 91, 108.

⁸ Thomas Smail, *The Forgotten Father*, 154.

situation into God's capable hands—we place our faith in the Faithful One.

Thomas Smail writes, “When the prayer [offered] in faith is not answered and the healing for which many have sought does not come, we are not to look for someone to accuse of failure...Rather we are to remember that besides faith there is hope. Hope has to do with God's promises that are still future and hidden, just as faith has to do with God's promises that are here and now. To the person who has believed for today but has not seen the answer come today, there comes the call to hope. Hope says, ‘*Tomorrow also is God's. Enough has happened already to assure that the rest is on the way.*’”⁸

For the last 20 years of pastoral ministry, I've been regularly involved in prayer for healing. Over the years I've felt a greater and greater responsibility to pray for broken bodies, minds, emotions, and relationships. I cannot guarantee perfect, instant, healing, what I can guarantee is that God is loving and present—He knows your name and cares about your life.

Vs. 16a: “*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*” James continues to speak about healing but I believe he expands the circle to include another kind of healing. As we know full well, illness takes many forms—broken bodies, minds, and relationships. It seems that here, James

has the latter in mind—broken relationships—and he joins the practice of confession with prayer for healing.

James has in mind fractured families, a fractured church community, where people have wounded one another. A broken relationship is every bit as painful, and some times even more devastating, than a broken body. Confession and prayer make a way for God’s healing and reconciliation.

John Stott offers some helpful words concerning confession. “Confession must be made *to* the person *against* whom we have sinned, and *from* whom we need and desire to receive forgiveness... There is ‘secret confession’ to God because there are ‘secret sins’ committed against God alone. Next, there is “‘private confession’ because some of our sins are committed against... a private individual... and must be confessed to the offended party. Thirdly, there is “public confession”, because some sins are committed against a group... a community or the whole congregation, and therefore must be confessed publicly.”⁹

When we confess, we come in a spirit of godly sorrow—for what we’ve said or done to wound another. And in the one who hears our confession, we hope to find a spirit of reconciliation—a willingness to extend forgiveness. And then together, in a spirit of prayer, we commit ourselves to God, asking Him to heal our relationship, and lead us into greater love, understanding, and honour for one another.

Confession goes hand in hand with healing, not because sinlessness

is required, but because we want to be free from any barrier that exists between us, Jesus, and others. In the same way, forgiveness goes hand in hand with relational healing.

In one sense, the reason we forgive others is because God has forgiven us. No doubt God’s forgiveness has come at a great price: Jesus died in our place, for our sake, that we might be reconciled to God. In the same way, the forgiveness we extend to others comes at a cost, but equally, there is a cost to us and to others in refusing to forgive. When it comes to the reconciling of a relationship, the one who has been wounded may need to experience God’s healing in order to forgive, but alternatively, you may not experience God’s healing until you forgive.

In a little while, as our service concludes, you may want to seek healing prayer for a relationship in which you have wounded someone else, or, been wounded yourself.

Vs. 16b-18: “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*”

This word “powerful” speaks of a strength beyond our own—God’s strength—coming to bear on our lives, but the rest of the phrase is what causes us to lose heart. James says, “*the prayer of a righteous person is powerful.*” Since most of us don’t think of ourselves as “righteous,” we conclude that our prayers won’t elicit much power.

⁹ J.R.W. Stott, *Confess Your Sins*, 12; as quoted by Motyer, 202.

But James is making the exact opposite point; Elijah was just like us. Those of us who know Elijah's story tend to focus on the impressive parts—the powerful prophetic utterances, the miracles, but there is more to his story than that. Elijah was both a person of great faith *and* a person who experienced depression and despair. At times he displayed tremendous courage, at other times he was ruled by fear. Elijah could be selfless *and* at other times he wallowed in self-pity. What made Elijah “righteous” was the fact that when he was at his best *and* at his worst, his life was angled towards God.

The point James makes is that human prayer brings about divine results. Elijah was just like us—human, frail, and dependant. He didn't have any special aptitude for God, or an inherent giftedness that set him apart. Elijah simply walked with God in trust-filled dependence just as we must.

Vs. 19-20: As we turn our attention to the last two verses in James, I want to read Eugene Peterson's commentary on these verses. He writes, “*My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.*”

At first glance it may seem as though James has moved on from the subject of healing, but if we look closer we see that he has once again expanded the circle. We may experience sickness in mind, body, or relationships, but sickness of the soul is just as real. Soul sickness takes place every time we wander away from what is true about God, or, from what God has said that is true.

People wander away from God—and truth—for all kinds of reasons. Some people get so busy with other things—good things, innocent things—that God is crowded out of their lives. They didn't intend to walk away, it was a long, slow, drift. Some people ignore God's truth because it's inconvenient, costly, or stands in the way of what they want. Others discard their faith in God because they couldn't reconcile God's goodness with the pain they were experiencing.

What does James say? When someone wanders off are we to ignore them, judge them, or write them off? No! We are to go after them, to love them, pray for them, and encourage them to return.

James writes, “*Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*” Jesus is the one who rescues and saves, but often it is we who act as His agents of His reconciliation—God makes His appeal through us.¹⁰ James says if *anyone* departs from the truth, *anyone* can bring them back, even frail, dependent people like us.

Conclusion: In keeping with our Scripture this morning, I want to conclude by inviting you to bring your difficulties, frailty, and sickness before God, asking for healing. Perhaps you have a personal need this morning, or perhaps you want to come bearing the need of someone you love.

When it comes to healing, we are dealing with God, and when we are dealing with God there is always mystery. We don't always know what God will do; this side of heaven, healing is partial and

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

provisional. But why wouldn't we bring our brokenness to God and ask for His healing touch?

Instead of singing a song of response this morning, I've asked Paul to come and play instrumentally as our service concludes. As Paul plays, I want to invite you to be quiet before the Lord, to take time to confess anything you've said or done that might have come between you.

Perhaps as you sit in silence, the Holy Spirit will bring to mind a relationship that has become fractured; you may need to go to the person and confess, or, to extend forgiveness—whether they've asked for it or not. If God brings someone, or a situation to mind, commit it your heart to do your part to make things right as soon as possible. After a few minutes I will break the silence by praying.

Pray

Now is your opportunity to receive prayer from one of our prayer teams—there will be three teams up front, one in the balcony, and our pastoral staff and elders will jump in if there is need. There isn't a limit on the amount of times you can ask God for healing; if you've brought your need to God before, you can bring it to Him again this morning.

I'm anticipating that there may be quite a number of people wanting to receive prayer this morning and so...as you come, state simply your request—we don't need a medical history—and we will pray ask the Lord for healing.

We have plenty of time before the end of the service and there is no need to rush out; if you have a need, or want prayer on behalf of a loved one, then come. If you don't plan to come, you don't need to leave—please remain and sit in the Lord's presence, or you can pray for those who are coming forward. When we get to 10:15/12:15 I will speak a final word of benediction.

Benediction: *May you be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.*¹¹

¹¹ Romans 12:12