

Series: What Is the Church to Do?

Text: James 5:13-20

Message #4 (July 4, 2010)

CARE-FILLED INTERVENTION

Introduction

1. Over the past three weeks we have been building a Biblical platform for dealing with sin in the life of the believer. We have considered the responsibility and the attitude that is essential if restoration is to happen. Part of the responsibility we have as believers is to bear the burden of others when they are caught in sin. That burden involves lovingly, humbly calling them back to Christ. It is the spiritual thing to do to restore them gently.
2. We then considered the process of that restoration as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18. The process begins in private and hopefully it will end there with good results. If it does not, the church is to bear the responsibility of making the attempt to restore the individual back to fellowship with the Lord and with His people. Sometimes the process fails. The person refuses to repent.
3. Sometimes the church fails, refusing to accept the responsibility. That happened in Corinth. Paul explained the seriousness of the responsibility in the frightening fifth chapter of his first letter. Unconfessed sin is nothing to mess around with. It will spread and contaminate the assembly and it can lead to an awful end for the one who refuses to repent and be restored. If the person who has refused to repent begins to bear the discipline of the Lord is the die cast? Is there no turning back; is restoration now impossible? To answer that question, we need to take a new look at James 5.
4. This is an intriguing paragraph that many understand to be the standard procedure for the church toward physical healing of individuals who are ill. It goes something like this. If you are ill, you call the elders of the church. They anoint you with oil and pray over you. If you do this in the right way, the passage seems to promise that you will be healed. No other conditions are given. Is that what this passage is teaching? And if so, why does it so infrequently appear to work? Are we missing something? And if it is the prescribed method for healing in the NT, why are we not practicing it with greater frequency? Maybe we have not clearly understood the passage.

5. I think there is a more accurate interpretation and I will support that from the text itself in a few minutes. But for now, let me simply state to you what I think James is saying and how that fits with our current study.
6. Last week we noted that one of the ways God deals with unrepentant believers is to allow physical suffering to come upon them. That was clearly the case in Corinth and that was true as well throughout the history of the OT. It appears that the man in question here was one who had sinned and refused to repent. Illness came as a result of divine discipline. The pressure of the sickness finally brought the man to the place where he was ready to repent. He called the elders (not the physicians) and they prayed with him and he confessed his sin. Once the man repented there was no longer a reason for the illness, so the man was restored to health. James summarizes what just happened with these words: ***My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.***
7. Let's follow James argument as we bring this process full circle. I want to start in the middle of the text with the illustration of Elijah.

I. THE ILLUSTRATION (17-18)

A. Who Elijah was

1. Elijah was a prophet of God who lived during the reign of King Ahab, the king of the northern tribes of Israel. Ahab was a wicked king who led Israel into all kinds of sins. Elijah was one of the few voices for God who continued to call Israel to repentance. Though he was a prophet, James reminds us that he was a man - just like us, but when he prayed things happened! In fact, when James says Elijah prayed, literally this could be translated, "Elijah prayed in his prayer." (A good reminder for all of us. May we actually pray when we pray)!
2. Perhaps one of the most familiar events in Elijah's life was the contest on Mount Carmel as recorded in 1 Kings 18. It is precisely that event that James refers to here. I think you know the story.

B. Why Elijah prayed

1. The OT law was clear. God promised some wonderful blessings to the nation of Israel if they obeyed. However, if they failed to obey, God promised that there would be some curses, consequences - physical ones.
2. Here are some examples from the pen of Moses: Deuteronomy 28:22-24; 29:22-27. These are reiterated through Solomon: 1 Kings 8:35-36 and 2 Chron. 6:26-27. Many years after King Ahab, other prophets spoke of the same judgments: Jeremiah 14:1-10 and Haggai 1:9-11. There were consequences for the unrepentant.
3. Many of you have heard this familiar text: 2 Chron. 7:13-14. This is the exact illustration that James uses here. Ahab had sinned greatly against God and had led the nation away from the Lord. God chastised the nation with drought, which continued for more than three years. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal and the prophets of Asherah to a contest on Mount Carmel, which led to a miraculous response by God in fire from heaven to consume the altar. The idolatrous prophets were killed and the people turned once again back to God. When the people confessed their sin, humbling themselves before God, the need for physical chastisement of the land no longer existed. So Elijah prayed again and it rained!

C. Why Elijah's prayer was answered (after a three and one half year drought)

1. The fervent prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. When righteous people pray, they ask for that which is the will of God. And God delights to do His will!
2. When Elijah prayed that it would not rain, he knew that prayer was according to the will of God because it was recorded in the Word of God (1 Kings 17:1,7). Following the contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah prayed with confident assurance that it would rain, because he knew from God's Word that it was God's will to restore healing to the land when the people confessed their sins in accord with God's conditions (1 Kings 18:37,39-40,45). Now what does that have to do with healing and discipline in verses 13-16? With the illustration in mind, let's take this section apart and see what it really says.

II. THE APPLICATION (13-16)

- A. The primary issue – prayer (Notice how often James speaks here of prayer. "Let him pray" v. 13; "Let him call for the elders and let them pray" v. 14; "The prayer of faith..." v. 15; "Confess your sins...and pray" v. 16; "Elijah ... prayed fervently" v.17; "Then he prayed again..." v. 18. What do you suppose this last section is all about? Healing? No. Praying? I think so.

1. "Is any one of you in trouble?" This is the same word used in verse 10. It is a word for suffering. Many were in trouble in exile under persecution. Are you in trouble? Pray!
2. "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." What is praise? It is prayerful thanksgiving to God. So in effect, James is saying, "If you have a problem in your life because of circumstantial suffering, look to God in prayer. If everything is going well and you are cheerful, look to God with praise."
3. Is any one of you sick? This word means without strength. The best translation might be "weak." The term itself does not indicate the severity of the weakness, nor does it identify the source or the effect. If you are worn out and weary (the word was used to describe a document that was threadbare from use), perhaps physically sick, even to the point of death - what should you do? (Pray? ... Actually, you are to call the elders of the church to pray). What is the background for which James would make this command? I think he is describing...

B. The process of restoration

1. Call the elders to pray. These are the spiritual leaders of the local assembly. Their qualifications are spelled out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Please notice that it is the elders who pray. It is their prayer of faith that is effectual. The idea that someone is not healed because that one's faith was insufficient cannot be supported from this passage. It is not the faith of the sick, but of the spiritual leadership of the assembly that is in view here. (Would it not make more sense for a believer to be called who has the gift of healing? There is nothing to support the idea that all or even any elders have such a gift). Call the elders so they can pray.
2. Permit the elders to anoint. What is this? Is it medicinal or symbolic? The word James uses here is not the normal word for a ceremonial anointing. It actually describes a rubbing the oil on and into the skin. It was used for some medicinal care, but most physical problems are not cured by topical application of oil. More likely the oil is symbolic of health and wellbeing as in Psalm 23:5 and 133:2. There appears to be recognition of the need for intervention from a faithful God in order to bring about relief to this weary believer – who is weary because of the illness, but perhaps even more weary because of sin.
3. Confess your sins. Why is this here? This is where I see the illustration and the application coming together. A believer has wandered off into sin and has until now

refused to repent. God has chastised this believer, bringing sickness into his life as discipline to bring him back. (Consider illustrations such as David in Psalm 32:3-7 and the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:29-31). The believer here in James recognizes that his sin has brought on the sickness. The pressure has become too great. He cannot take it anymore, so he calls the elders and asks them to pray for him. It is at this meeting that he confesses his sin and they anoint him and pray over him. If God has caused the illness as chastisement for sin, when the believer repents, the reason for the illness no longer exists and God stays His hand and restores the believer to health!

4. This is the absolute promise of James 5:15 in the context of the passage and in harmony with the illustration of Elijah. When the people denounced their sinful worship of Baal and turned again to the Lord God, God ended the drought by bringing the precious rain that had been withheld for more than three years. God chose to end the drought because the conditions had been met. He chose to do so through the prayer of His prophet. God here in James chose to end the personal physical suffering that was His direct judgment on sin when this man confessed his sin and the elders acknowledged that before God. Do you understand now what is being said here? We are almost finished, but we still have a final admonition.

III. THE ADMONITION (19-20). James is driving home the application of how we ought to deal with sin and how we ought to intercede for one another. We need a renewed emphasis, not on healing, but on dealing with sin. We have so much to learn about prayer and confession. James acknowledges that this is likely to happen in our situation, so he explains what we should do and what will happen if we obey.

- A. When a brother wanders... We are called to bring them back. That was Paul's point in our first consideration of this issue in Galatians 6:1. "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." That is not our first inclination, but that is the spiritual thing to do. We so often fail to do it, but that is our assignment as those who belong to Christ. They might refuse our efforts, they may turn away from us or even turn on us, but we are called to make the attempt to bring them back. If we do nothing, they are not the only ones who will experience the discipline of God. We set ourselves up for His discipline as well. Remember that God disciplines those He loves, and that is a good thing, but that does not mean that it will be an easy thing or a painless thing. We need to bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters

who are caught in sin by calling them back and gently restoring them again to fellowship. And what happens to such a brother who responds to the Lord and to our pleas to return to Christ?

B. What a brother receives ...

1. We save them from death. The word save can be redemptive salvation, but physical restoration fits better here. Remember, God will not allow a believer to continue in sin. He will turn up the pressure. If we resist, He may end our earthly life. That was true for some of the Corinthians. John hints in chapter 5 of his first letter that there is a sin unto death. The threat to the sinning brother in I Corinthians 5 was toward "the destruction of his flesh." That was Paul's way of describing death. I think James has in mind physical death here. There is much at stake in this process. But if the brother or sister turns from sin, he or she is spared because the reason for the discipline no longer exists.
2. We save them from a further entanglement of sin. Sin has a way of not only complicating our lives, but the lives of others around us. Like the leaven mentioned in I Corinthians 5, it permeates and corrupts and contaminates. Sin in the church not only affects the individual, but also impacts the whole assembly. If various individuals continue in sin and we fail to call them back to the truth, we open the door to further disaster and possible death. Do you understand how significant and serious this whole issue is? Do you understand how much God hates sin in the lives of His redeemed people – especially sin that we refuse to acknowledge and confess and forsake?

Conclusion

1. In a book called "The Healing Promise" by Richard Mayhue, (pp. 137-139), the following illustration is given. ***The person who was seriously ill was a believer who happened to be the wife of a medical doctor. She suffered from terrible, almost-unbearable pain all across her back. Physicians could not find the cause. Several competent orthopedic specialists worked together on her case all to no avail...Her incredible pain had led the physicians to begin intense medication... Finally they hospitalized the woman. Because we were longtime friends, she contacted me and asked, 'I wonder...if you could get together a group of elders from the church and if several of you could come and pray.' I responded, 'Certainly we'll come'... We walked into her hospital room on a Sunday night...she was in such pain she could hardly talk. 'I don't know what I'm going to do...I'm getting desperate...what can we do?' I replied, 'We can do what God instructed us to do...pray.***

We will pray that if it is God's sovereign will, He will save you, restore you, raise you up.' Several of us dropped to our knees and began to pray. I finished my prayer by pleading with God to bring relief and, if it were His will, to bring full restoration. As another man began to pray, the woman reached down and touched me on the shoulder. She was pushing on me as if she wanted to say something. I reached over to the man who was praying and took him by the knee and held tightly as if to say, 'Wait a minute.' He stopped. Spontaneously she said, 'Excuse me for interrupting, but the pain is all gone.' And she began to weep. Several of us wept as well. We were so grateful to God at that moment. 'I must tell all of you something,' the woman said as she sat up in bed, something she had not been able to do for days... 'I need to tell you something about my life.' Quietly, yet without hesitation, she began to unfold a story of sin that had been part of her lifestyle. It is not necessary that I go into details...only to say that she had been living a life of deception before us as well as before her family. But there had been something compelling about our prayer and the sincerity of our faith gathered around her that brought her to such a burning awareness of her sin she couldn't even let us finish. God heard her prayer of confession and desire for repentance.

2. The call here to prayer is important. We need to pray. There is also a reminder that we must be very careful how we live. James began early on in his book calling us to "be doers of the Word, not hearers only. We end the book being reminded to stay with the truth, to pursue the truth, and to be willing to call people back to the truth.
3. So, where are we? If we know Christ, we must be careful to confess our sins – to keep very short accounts with God. Unconfessed sin in the life of the believer is deadly. Don't allow it to go on any longer. Cry out to God for mercy and He will meet you and restore you. Please do not turn a blind eye to those who are walking away from Christ refusing to repent. Call them back. Plead with them to return to Christ. Their very life may depend on it. To fail to do so is to allow sin to spread and God to be belittled and disdained when He deserves to be honored and glorified.
4. We have traveled a difficult path up a long hill to discover how we should respond to sin – our own and sin in the lives of others who belong to Christ. It is not easy. Dealing with sin never is. Sin can so quickly become entrenched and entangled into our lives. We know to pull it out will hurt and tear and embarrass and so we coddle it and protect it and hide it and make excuses for it – all the while bringing reproach on Christ and placing ourselves

and our brothers and sisters in Christ in great danger. It is time for confession. It is time for repentance. It is time for restoration. May God grant that to us for our good and His glory!