

Ten Reasons Why I Don't Anoint with Oil in Church Ministry

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James 5:14-20

“Is any sick among you? 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: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit. Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

The anointing of oil has been used by some Christian groups and churches as part of a ritual and procedural process to promote physical healing in the lives of Christians. In this study I want to strongly stress that James is not referring to physical but spiritual healing. There is NO Scriptural promise given to the local churches in the Dispensation of Grace that Christians will be physically healed when placing oil on their skin or head. If James were promising physically healing every time oil is placed upon the heads of Christians, then we would never die (“and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up” - James 5:15).

James is guaranteeing a healing outcome but it cannot possibly be referencing physical healing for we know that no promise like this is given anywhere in Scripture. God only heals according to His will (1 John 5:14) and people do die! Even the so-called faith healers. What is promised here is the spiritual healing from the effects of sin. We can be healed of our depression, guilt, emotional instability, sorrows, and discouragement that sin brings into our lives when we confess our sins and get right with God.

Over the years I have been asked why I don't anoint sick people with oil who are part of my church congregation as James instructs elders to do in his epistle. Some pastors practice this procedure without knowing why they do it. I asked one of my

pastor friends if he anoints with oil and he told me, “I don’t know why I do it, I just follow what James tells me to do.” Of course, we should have a proper understanding about the procedure described in James 5, what is occurring, and why oil was used. We should also realize that some will claim the promise of physical healing for everyone who is anointed with oil.

There are ten reasons why I do not anoint with oil. Perhaps this study will help those who have questions regarding this procedure described in James chapter five.

#1

Oil was a cultural practice during Bible times (Luke 7:38, 46; Ps. 23:5) – not part of a specific apostolic command. The use of oil was cultural but the elder’s prayers for the *spiritual healing or restoration* of a sinning saint (James 5:14-15) was not cultural and therefore should continue to be practiced today by church elders. Sometimes cultural practices are integrated with apostolic instruction, such as women veiling (1 Cor. 11).

Roy B. Zuck has said something very interesting about cultural patterns mentioned in the Bible: “The Bible is its own authority, including the authority to set limits on which practices are culture-bound and which ones are not. One way to determine which commands are to be repeated (for today) is by examining whether the command or situation is paralleled in Scripture elsewhere.”

#2

There is no record of a continuous use of oil by church elders throughout the annals of church history. Roman Catholicism continues to use oil to promote its unscriptural practices such as the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, anointing the dead to secure forgiveness and prepare people for the afterlife. The Coptic and Armenian Church use what they call “holy anointing oil.” The fact that the practice of anointing with oil was not continued in the local churches reveals there was a historic and cultural use of oil that is no longer significant for today. Cultural practices like anointing with oil fade away, but Scriptural

principles continue to be used by the local churches throughout its ongoing history. The principles of praying elders, confession of sin, and restoration of believers are still valid. This is the real point in the teaching of James chapter five.

#3

Oil is not universally a symbol of the Holy Spirit's presence and healing power and should not be construed this way in the context of James 5. Bottles with oil do not represent the Holy Spirit. The oil was simply a cultural sign of friendship, acceptance, fellowship, and refreshment (Psalm 23:5; 45:7; 133:2; Luke 7:46). It was not the job of the elders through the passing centuries of the church to go around with little bottles of oil, doctoring sick people, by pouring healing oil on their foreheads and bringing about physical healing.

#4

Only in Mark 6:13 do we find the apostles anointing people with oil to create miraculous responses such as healing. Nevertheless, even during the days of apostolic Christianity there are multitudes of Biblical passages where there was NO oil involved in the person's healing (Acts 8:6-7, 9:36, 28:8-9). This tells us that the apostles themselves never believed that oil was a necessary requirement for healing. In this day, it was possibly used as a symbol to indicate a person's healing by the apostles (Acts 19:11-12), or to bring some medicinal, physical relief, and refreshment to the people (Luke 10:34). One thing is certain, there is no such thing as the apostolic succession of oil.

#5

The misconception of using an alleged magical "healing oil" or potion misleads people into thinking it is necessary for their healing. God heals *whenever* He wants to heal, *wherever* He wants to heal, and does so with *whomsoever* He wants to. Prayer and the will of God is the only condition for physical healing (1 John 5:14).

#6

You will notice that the Bible does not say to call for the faith healers of the church! Faith healers were not part of the early church, and the elders did not have the same apostolic “gifts of healing” as the apostles did (1 Cor. 12:9; 1 Cor. 12:30). We find no references in church history to faith healers or elders using some type of magical healing oil to bring about physical healing from things like stage four cancer, kidney stones, brain tumors, and such like.

The elders were NOT coming to physically heal this Christian man. They were coming to provide spiritual healing to this man who had fallen into a life of sin and was suffering the spiritual effects of his sin. They were coming to help restore his relationship with the Lord with the result of also delivering him from the various spiritual symptoms related to his departure from the Lord. This man was “sick” (James 5:14) because of sin - not sick because of some disease. He was suffering the spiritual trauma, heartache, conviction, depression, and weariness that sin brings with it (1 Tim. 6:10).

The oil of James 5 was not used in relation to the physical well-being of people since elders did not have the gifts of healing as the original apostles (1 Cor. 13:8-10) or they would not be asked to pray for the individual’s healing (James 5:14, 15). Since the elders were not the chosen apostles and did not possess the apostolic gifts of healing (Acts 2:43; 5:12), the necessity to use oil to bring about physical healing is not in the writer’s mind. The apostles healed everyone that they touched as indicated by Acts 5:16. The gift of divine healing had a 100% success rate. No one should claim that others can be healed all the time by simply pouring oil on them.

#7

The use of oil in James 5 was a cultural gesture, an act of kindness extending fellowship and acceptance to a believer that had sinned and was under church discipline. In the culture of James’ day, it was a sign of respect and friendship (Luke 7:46; Matt. 6:17-18), in this case it dealt with welcoming the repentant sinner back into the church fellowship (James 5:19-20). Many times, we forget

that people need to be restored spiritually instead of physically. In fact, spiritual restoration is more important than physical restoration.

#8

What kind of sickness is this? We must remember that people can be “afflicted” (James 5:13) and “sick” (James 5:14) from a spiritual standpoint and experience a spiritual weakness that is related to defeat, despair, weariness, discouragement, guilt, and many other inward spiritual symptoms of the soul. The word “sick” (kamno) can mean “to be faint, wearied, and exhausted” as in Hebrews 12:3 (“lest ye be wearied and faint”). We are not talking about PHYSICAL sickness in James 5 (sore throats, cancer, heart conditions, broken bones, vision loss, etc.) but the symptoms of SPIRITUAL sickness that is related to being out of fellowship with God. These symptoms are primarily spiritual in nature but can be accompanied by outward physical complications and effects that are related to the spiritual maladies such as depression, despair, emotional confusion, deep conviction, and the guilt of sin. Sin has its own effects and malady which it brings upon Christians who are out of fellowship with God.

This man in James 5 obviously needed spiritual healing – not physical healing! Hence, there is the forgiveness of sin and confessing of faults before one another in this passage (James 5:15-16). We are not in the doctor’s house in James chapter 5; we are in the revival house! There is no promise of physical healing but the sure promise of spiritual healing. God always promises to provide spiritual healing for sin-sick souls who are experiencing the wearisome effects of sin in their lives (Luke 4:18; Matt. 11:28). The healing begins with confession (1 John 1:9).

#9

Another reason to not use oil today in our church ministries is because a person’s faith should not cling to oil but to God alone for their physical or spiritual recovery (Mark 11:22). Some claim that the oil was used in the same manner that the Lord Jesus used spittle and clay (Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6) to

increase someone's faith for healing. Of course, this is a forced and unwarranted analogy. Jesus used the clay to illustrate He was the Creator – not to increase one's faith. Our faith should not be in something tangible but in God alone (Heb. 11:1-2; John 20:29). Here is the point. No person can claim physical healing for all their diseases while having oil poured on them. Likewise, they cannot even claim spiritual healing from the application of oil to their forehead. In this case, their faith must rest in God who is the healer of broken hearts and who can revive their souls (Ps. 23:3; 147:3).

#10

We are called upon to “comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). God has not given us a physical mandate to heal everyone. The view of physical healing seems to do injustice to what is actually being taught by James. The Bible suggests in this passage that the elders can actually claim a promise of healing (“the prayer of faith shall save the sick” – James 5:15). Can we claim this promise regarding physical healing? Is this an unconditional guarantee that every sick person will be physically healed when we use oil and pray in faith? I think not. If we could always be physically healed through this anointing procedure, then we would never die!

But James seems to be teaching that the healing will occur when the brother repents, and the elders pray. There seems to be a guaranteed result that the healing will take place. Of course, the only guaranteed healing that God grants to us through our prayers of faith is *spiritual healing* from the spiritual maladies that can be associated with sin or other disappointments in life (Psalm 34:18; 147:3; Philippians 4:7; 1 Peter 5:7; Matthew 11:28; Luke 4:18).

Should Christians use anointing oil today? There is nothing in Scripture that universally commands or even suggests that we should use oil today. The use of oil during Bible times was used as a customary practice. The *inward* anointing from the Holy Spirit is what we need today in our daily lives (1 John 2:20) – not the *outward* anointing of oil. We don't receive the promise of the Spirit's power and anointing when placing drops of oil on our foreheads. We

receive the Spirit's anointing as we depend upon His internal and continuous work occurring in our hearts and lives (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:25).

In conclusion, the writer is aware that some individuals and churches have adopted the practice of anointing with oil in good faith without adopting unscriptural promises and the modern-day charismatic teachings related to healing oil. This summary was not written to condemn but inform the reader. Since there is no symbolism, specific promise, or guarantee of physical healing attached to the cultural practice of pouring drops of oil on one's forehead, it seems inappropriate to use this procedure on those who are physically sick. It can lead to a misdirected faith in oil and false hopes for physical healing. Rather than using oil, we should pray in faith believing that nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37), while at the same time commit our sick friends and loved ones in the hands of God's providence (Ps. 115:3).

Summary Outline

1. **Pursuing the elders of the church** - "let him call for the elders of the church" – James 5:14
2. **Pouring of oil** – "anointing him with oil" - James 5:14
*A customary gesture of friendship, kindness & refreshment.
3. **Promised spiritual healing** – "the prayer of faith shall save the sick" -
"And the Lord shall raise him up" - James 5:15
*Spiritual healing from the effects of sin such as depression, discouragement, emotional instability, guilt, weariness, heavy conviction, battered lives, and guilt.
4. **Pardon and cleansing** – "and if he have committed sins they shall be forgiven him" – James 5:15
5. **Personal restoration and revival** – "that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way" – James 5:20
*A sinning Christian brought back into right fellowship with God and the local church.
6. **Possible deliverance from death** – "shall save a soul from death" – James 5:20 with 1 Cor. 11:30
*God's prerogative to take a sinning Christian home prematurely.

7. **Practice of forgiveness and forgetfulness** - “and shall hide a multitude of sins” – James 5:20