

Anointing Oil Anyone?

How are we suppose to take these passages? Should we have anointing oil on hand like we have water, wine, and bread for other Sacraments? These passages have stirred controversy over the years. They wouldn't have, if they had been read in context. The context of the James passage isn't anointing oil but prayer. One glance at the verse right before tells you that. It forbids swearing which is the wrong use of God's name. Our text is the right use of God's name: praying. Every verse in our text mentions prayer. But you want to find out about anointing oil. And the Gospel lesson for today brings up the question: the disciples did it, why don't we?

The apostles did use anointing oil on people to heal bodies. Mark 6 says, "And the 12 went...and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them." This is the only reference we have to this practice, and it provides no details. We do know from sources outside the Bible that oil was a popular medicine in ancient times. But the 12 apostles didn't use it as a medicine, like we would a salve; they used it to perform miraculous healings, so why don't we? After the era of the apostles, about 100 A.D., miraculous healings were rarely reported following the use of anointing oil. Even though James wrote before that time, he doesn't tell people to use anointing oil like the 12 apostles did. James connects healing with the prayer of the pastors called to the scene not to the anointing oil they used. He says, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders [our pastors] of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the *prayer* offered in faith will restore the one who is sick..." In Mark, the healing done by the apostles is connected to anointing with oil.

Also when the apostles healed people, they commanded them to rise. right then and there. But what does James say? "The prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the *Lord will raise him up.*" James doesn't want the pastors of the 1st century church to mimic what the apostles did. He doesn't want them putting oil on the sick and then boldly commanding them, "Rise and walk!" the way the apostles did. No, James assures the pastors that the Lord will raise the sick up in His own good time. Maybe not right then and there; maybe not in this life at all, but certainly in the next.

Using oil to heal the body gradually disappeared after the 1st century. Charismatics and Pentecostals brought it back in the 20th. Many churches, even some conservative Lutherans, have healing services where they put oil on the sick for healing. Many bizarre claims of miraculous healing are attributed to anointing oil by Charismatics and Pentecostals, but, to my knowledge, not one has been verified by the medical community. The most bizarre claim I've ever heard, however, came from a charismatic within the LCMS. I quote from a newsletter published by International Lutheran Renewal, "I went upstairs and knelt down next to the toilet and anointed it with oil, asking the Lord to fix it" (Jay West, "Ask and You Shall Receive", Faith Lutheran Church, Sugarland Texas, 1986. See Maier, Walter, "Charismatic Renewal in the Lutheran Church", CTQ, 53 1-2, Jan-Apr. 1989, pp21-38). To make a long story short, the anointing oil healed his toilet. It was not, however, verified by a plumber.

At one time oil was used for the body. It was used by the 12 apostles for healing, and it accompanied the prayers of early church pastors. In our time, it's mainly the Charismatics and Pentecostals who see it as being for the body. Others see anointing oil as being primarily for the soul. This too goes back to the early church. Around 185 A.D. Irenaeus described how not long after the time of the apostles anointing the sick with oil was transformed to a different use. Since miraculous healings weren't taking place with any regularity in connection with the use of oil, the heretics, false teachers not considered part of the church, started to use the oil for the dying. Heretics believed that by anointing the dying with oil at the moment of their death they could redeem the soul.

Anointing the dying with oil for the benefit of the soul not the body was started by those *outside* the Church, but gradually, it found it's way into the church. Since anointing with oil wasn't producing healings, Pope Felix the IV in about 528 A.D. ordered that the sick should be anointed with oil before they died so that anointing oil would not cease to be used. In the 12th century Pope Innocent I declared that anointing with oil at death was the 5th of the 7 Sacraments. At the Council of Trent in the 16th century Extreme Unction, or what came to be called Last Rites, was formally established as a Sacrament for souls. A note should be added here. Vatican II and the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* backed away from the Sacrament of Last Rites. It's now officially referred to as "The Anointing of the Sick." No longer just for the dying but for the sick in general, and it can be received more than once. Furthermore, while the catechism continues to emphasize the benefits to the soul, it does say anointing with oil helps the body "if it is conducive to the salvation of the soul (1552)".

Well how about it? Are the charismatics right who say anointing oil is for the body or are the old Catholics right who say it is for the soul? They both are. Let me explain. The James passage overall is about prayer, but

underlying that theme is one about the interrelationship between body and soul. James says, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." Forgiveness of sins for the soul and healing of illness for the body. James tells pastors to apply oil for the comforting of the body while they treat the soul by means of prayer and absolution. We all recognize this is good medicine, good theology and just plain good sense. If you want to "reach" the soul, you should do what you can to comfort the body. If a sick person is hungry, thirsty, cold or hot, you would not say, "Never mind that, let's talk about your spiritual condition." No, if able, you'd address the distracting need of the body before you did the soul.

Here is the main point. Oil was a major medicine when James wrote. It was as basic as our aspirin. In addition it was a soothing thing to do for someone. Like applying heat or ice to someone. I doubt oil is soothing to most sick people today, so it may or may not have medicinal or comfort value. Therefore, we're better off doing the physical things for the sick that we know to be medically and physically helpful. We shouldn't apply oil because we are under the mistaken impression that we have some divine command or promise from God that it's helpful to the body or the soul. We do, however, have command and promise that confession and absolution are good for the soul, and as James points out, by helping the soul we help the body.

Yes, an agitated soul gets in the way of bodily health. King David tells us this in Psalm 32. He says, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away..." And in Psalm 31 he says, "My strength has failed because of my iniquity, and my body has wasted away." We see this same thing in the NT. When 4 men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus for healing, they thought what the man needed was healing for his body. But when they lowered the man from the roof and plopped him in front of Jesus, He didn't heal his body right off. He healed his soul saying, "Son be of good cheer your sins are forgiven you."

The sick may or may not need oil, aspirin, blankets, or ice packs, but they definitely need the forgiveness of sins. They definitely need to know that God has put away their sins on His own dear Son, and that the suffering they are now going through is not to make them pay for their sins. There is only one place on earth where payment was made for sins. That was at the cross and it was done by Jesus. God declared the bill of sin paid in full centuries ago by raising Jesus from the dead on Easter. He isn't bill collecting in sick rooms and hospitals today.

That a person can lie in his or her sick bed totally forgiven, totally righteous before God is the real burden of this text. Consider the most often repeated verse from it. "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Who is being talked about here? The pastor who comes into the sickroom with some sort of personal holiness? The patient who led a particularly righteous life? No! 'a righteous man' is none other than one who has confessed his or her sins and been absolved, been forgiven for them. Translate here, as it can be, 'justified' rather than 'righteous': "The effective prayer of a justified person can accomplish much."

A justified person is one who stands before God covered by the forgiveness Jesus won. He prays to God, not because he's never sinned but because Jesus never did. He prays, not because he's paid for his sins by good works, but because Jesus paid for them by His suffering and death. He knows he's heard, not because he's suffering so much, but because Jesus suffered so much for him. A justified person believes they are heard, not for their sake, but for Jesus' sake. The 'effective prayer' that James talks about is one that flows from such faith in Jesus' Person and Work.

As an example of one who prayed effectively, James offers Elijah. He is quick to point out that Elijah was no holier than you or I. He didn't have a closer relationship to God than we do by faith. He was a man with a nature just like ours says James: a nature just as fallen, just as weak, just as sinful. So you can never look at yourself and say, "I'm too sinful to pray or to be heard by the holy God." No, you're not. It has always and only been poor, miserable sinners like you that God has invited to call upon Him in the day of trouble and promised to hear and deliver.

The James text is about prayer. In order to pray, the body should be made as comfortable as possible. If anointing with oil will help, go ahead and do it. But above all else the soul needs to be made comfortable with God. Oil won't do this. The waters of your Baptism will, the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion will, and the Word of forgiveness will too. Amen

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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (20210718), James 5:13-18; Mark 6:13