

“Lone Rangers”
The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ September 29, 2024
James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

If you made a list of all the commands in the New Testament, would you be surprised to find out that one of them is this: call the elders of the church to your house? It is in James 5:14. God commands you, under certain circumstances, to summon the elders. And when you do so, we are supposed to come.

James 5:13-14: Is any one of you in trouble? Let him pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? let him call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the lord.

That is a controversial and difficult passage. It is difficult for a few reasons, not the least of which is the context. This seems like such an odd place for a discussion of physical healing. It doesn't appear to have anything to do with the rest of the book or the immediate context. A verse on integrity, then private prayer, then sickness and healing, then restoring a wandering sinner. It's no wonder that several commentators say this is just a jumble of completely unrelated thoughts at the end of the book. One of them said it's like when you are writing a letter, and you see the mailman coming so you quickly jot down all the rest of your miscellaneous thoughts. Is that what happened here? James saw the mailman walking down the street.

If you back up one verse you will see that James brings up three scenarios. Are you in this situation? Do this. This situation? Do this. This situation? Do this. And after the first two we think we know what's coming on the third one. But James throws a curveball. He says, are you suffering hardship? Go to God! Are you happy? Go to God! Everything in between – go to God! But then he says, “Are you sick? Go to... the elders of the church. Go to God, then go to people - the elders of the church. Then from there he starts talking about confessing our sins to one another in the church, and everyone praying for one another.

So, the reality that is staring us in the face here is this (and I know some of you just really don't want to hear this, but there is no escaping it) – your walk with God is a community project. That is the inescapable reality of this and countless other passages in the New Testament. We must reject the privatized “Jesus and me” religion of Western culture, where we prize our individualism and privacy. God has not equipped you to live the Christian life by yourself. In this spiritual war, lone rangers are dead rangers. God designed you to need the rest of the

body, and the body to need you. The more you cut yourself off from the body the more worthless you make yourself, and ultimately it is spiritual suicide.

James is very clear that health comes through the community, and where health is lacking, healing will come through the prayers of others.

If you are going to make it, you need to be prayed for in your weakness, but that is not going to happen if your life is so closed off that no one knows about your weakness and neediness. So, this is going to require some people to let go of pride, jettison the fantasy of your own self-sufficiency and strength, and let people know where you really need prayer. So many people come to church like a guy with massive internal bleeding coming into a hospital and saying, “I’m fine. Just give me an aspirin.” Why would you go to a hospital and hide your illness?

The Bible tells us that we are to love one another, be devoted to one another, care for one another, serve one another, encourage one another, bear one another’s burdens, confess your sins to one another, rebuke one another, teach one another, comfort one another, employ the gifts that God has given us for the benefit of one another, forgive one another, etc. And when we talk about those, for some of you, your attention might be mostly fixed on your responsibility to offer these things to others. You need to love people at church, you need to bear their burdens, you need to rebuke and encourage and strengthen and spur them on to love and good deeds, etc. And you might forget that you have just as much responsibility to not just give those things, but also to receive them. If the Bible commands us to bear one another’s burdens, that means you must not only bear those who need it, but you need to offer your burdens for others to bear. If the Bible says to encourage one another, you must encourage, but you must also receive encouragement. And if it says pray for one another – guess what? You need to do what this verse commands you to do and ask for prayer. If you are unwilling to receive those things, you’re fouling up the process.

Other people need to be reminded in the other direction. You are all about receiving but not giving. You are focused on being loved and being cared for, but you don’t realize your responsibility to love and care for others in the church. You come here, you want to be greeted, you want to be welcomed, you want to receive counsel when you need it, you want a bulletin, you want the church cleaned up after you, you want the microphones to work, you want the kids to be taught – but it’s not really on your radar that you have responsibility to serve and to wash the feet of other saints.

Every healthy body part is dependent on the rest of the body, and it exists to serve the rest of the body – giving and receiving. And so, guess what that rules out – privacy. God does not give His children the option of being private people. This is a family. That is what the Bible says we are, and you can't be in a family and be private. And the desire to do so reveals some serious heart problems.

Proverbs 18:1 one who isolates himself pursues selfish desires; he rebels against all sound judgment.

Privacy is out of the question in the church because privacy is always the enemy of intimacy. You can have either privacy or intimacy – never both.

James treats sickness differently than other suffering. There is a very clear and frequent connection in Scripture between physical sickness and healing, and spiritual sickness and healing.

The ravages of sin on the soul are compared to physical sickness because the effect sin has on you is like what disease does to your body. It weakens you, brings pain and misery, and makes it so your body doesn't work right. Sin does those same things to your soul. It gets all messed up and dysfunctional. Your desires get messed up, your attitudes and perspectives get messed up, your thought patterns, your reactions to things, your affections – what you love, what you hate – it all gets messed up. That is what God teaches us by comparing spiritual problems to physical disease and illness and injury.

That's why Jesus did so many healing miracles. When Almighty God became a man and entered this world, and then did miracles to prove who He was, He could have done anything. He could have re-arranged the stars. He could have called millions of angels and told them to do anything. Jesus did do some miracles to show His control over the creation, but by far, most of His miracles were miracles of healing. There was a reason for that. The Messiah came to bring spiritual restoration.

Now, James 5 starts to make more sense. He is not hop-scotching between random topics. Throughout the book, he exposed all their spiritual problems, and at the end of the book, he talks about the remedy. And if you look closely, you will see that he starts with physical healing and gradually moves in the direction of spiritual restoration.

And He wants it to happen through the ministry of the elders of the church. If it's just a matter of physical health, doctors would make sense. But if it is spiritual

healing and restoration, then it makes perfect sense for it to be a major part of the elder's job description.

When we get sick, isn't that when we tend to have the most trouble, spiritually? When you are really sick or you're in a lot of pain, isn't that when it's hardest to read your Bible? Isn't that when it's hardest to focus on prayer? Isn't that when you miss out on fellowship because you can't make it to church? How many times have you heard of someone turning away from God as a result of an illness? In verse 13 James tells us to take every situation to God in prayer, but when you're really sick, that's hard to do. And when you are really weak spiritually – depressed, discouraged, broken down, wearied, spiritually weak; it's hard to pray, and you need help. So, call the elders.

Today, we come in faith, and God will honor that. God will bestow on you, according to the prophet Isaiah, a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

What is our role in our healing? To trust, to believe, to hope and to never give up.

Our part is to trust God, to believe Jesus, to trust the community of faith, to hope against hope and to never give up. In other words, to do our part and let God do as he chooses to do. Amen.