

Anointing with oil for the sick by Elders at Christ Fellowship

¹³Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is 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. ¹⁵And 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. ¹⁶Therefore 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. James 5:13-16 (NIV)

There are different views on the significance of the oil.

The oil is not medicinal but symbolic of the power of God. There is nothing magical about the oil. It does not have power in itself. It symbolizes faith and the presence of the Spirit in that moment to heal in his power. "It is best to take anointing, then, as a symbol of God's blessing attendant to intercessory prayer and possibly as 'consecrating' in the sense of reminding the sick that they belong to God."¹ "We conclude, therefore, that 'anoint' in [James 5:14] refers to a physical action with symbolic significance. As the elders pray, they are to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that that person is being set apart for God's special attention and care."² [In the end of the document there is a longer section from Doug Moo's commentary where he argues this position.]

There is no "right way" to anoint a person with oil.

The Bible gives no instructions. So here is a simple approach you can use, knowing there is not a wrong way to do it.

- When anointing someone else, wet your right thumb with a little of the anointing oil and use it to draw a cross in the middle of the other person's forehead.
- As you draw the cross, state the person's name and state, "I anoint you with oil in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
- Follow this with any prayers that are appropriate to the specific circumstances. This includes prayers for physical healing, spiritual healing, consecration, and general blessing.

Who are the "in trouble" (verse 13) and the "sick" (verse 14)?

Some argue that James is not referring to physical illness, but spiritual weariness; however, it appears to me that both are in view. We are holistic people, body, soul, mind, and spirit all interrelate. Since two different Greek words are used together with the broad term for healing, "make the sick person well," it seems clear that physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing are all included.

¹ McCartney, Dan G. *James*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

² Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James*. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000. Print. The Pillar New Testament Commentary.

The healing power is in God accessed by faith-filled prayer.

The power is not in the oil or in the elders, but in God.

Below are relevant excerpts from a good article on the topic

Article by David Mathis, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org

Such a practice may be strange to many of us who grew up in mainstream evangelical churches. [Mark 6:13](#) mentions Jesus's disciples anointing "with oil many who were sick," but [James 5:14-15](#) is the one passage that plainly prescribes this practice in the life of the church:

3. What should the elders do?

elders should pray. The emphasis in the passage is on prayer, not anointing. "Let them pray over him, anointing . . ." The grammar of the passage communicates that the central reason the elders have come is to pray. Prayer is primary; anointing is secondary. Anointing, as we'll see, accompanies prayer. The power is not in the oil, but in the God to whom we pray.

4. Why anoint with oil?

Here's the part that can seem strange to some today. The problem is that we may never have considered the place of oil, and the act of anointing, throughout the Scriptures.

Throughout the Bible, anointing with oil symbolizes consecration to God (as in [Exodus 28:41](#); [Luke 4:18](#); [Acts 4:27](#); [10:38](#); [2 Corinthians 1:21](#); [Hebrews 1:9](#)). The act of anointing does not, as some claim, automatically confer grace and remit sin. Rather, it is a "means of grace," which accompanies prayer, for those who believe. Like fasting, anointing is a kind of handmaid of prayer, or an intensifier of prayer—a way to reach beyond our daily patterns in unusual circumstances.

Anointing with oil is an external act of the body that accompanies, and gives expression to, the internal desire and disposition of faith to dedicate someone to God in a special way. It is not here simply medicinal, as some have claimed, with our application today being to apply modern medicine along with prayer. Such a view overlooks the wealth of theology across the Scriptures about the symbolism and significance of anointing.

In fact, anointing is so significant that God's long-promised King, who we eventually learn is God's own eternal Son, is called *Messiah* in Hebrew, *Christ* in Greek, which means *Anointed*. Christ himself is the greatest manifestation of consecration to God in his perfect human life, sacrificial human death, and victorious human resurrection from the grave.

So, here in James 5, as Douglas Moo writes, "As the elders pray, they are to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that that person is being set apart for God's special attention and care" (242). Anointing is not automatic in producing healing,

but serves as a prayerful expression, and intensifier of our plea, asking God, and waiting for him, to heal.

5. How should they pray?

Finally, we have specific and important clarity about how the elders should pray: “in the name of the Lord.” The power is not in the oil or the elders or even in their prayers, but in God, in the name of Jesus Christ. When God answers with healing, he does so not decisively because of the oil or the elders, but because of the work of his Son, Jesus.

Which means the elders can pray boldly and with confidence. Where two or three elders are gathered for special prayer, there they should be expectant that God will move. The “prayer of faith” in verse 15 is simply the prayer of the elders from verse 14: the prayer offered in faith that can, and often does, heal.

[End of excerpt from David Mathis]

Advanced: More from Douglas Moo’s commentary on the role of the oil

In addition to praying for the sick person, James also commands the elders to *anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord*. James might imply that the anointing is to precede the praying (since the participle *aleipsantes* is aorist), but he probably intends them to be taking place at the same time (a contemporaneous aorist).⁴⁷ But more important than the timing of the act is its meaning: What does James think that the anointing will accomplish? The practice is mentioned only one other time in the NT: Mark says that the Twelve “drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” (6:13). Unfortunately, Mark gives no more of an explanation for the anointing than does James. Theologians and scholars have debated the meaning of the practice for a long time. Interpretations can be divided into two main categories, with subdivisions in each.

1. A Practical Purpose

a. Medicinal

Oil was widely used in the ancient world both as a skin conditioner and as a medicine. An NT example is Luke 10:34, which describes the good Samaritan as coming to the aid of the man who had been beaten and robbed: “He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” Ancient sources testify to the usefulness of oil in curing everything from toothache to paralysis (the famous second-century physician Galen recommended oil as “the best of all remedies for paralysis” [*De simplicitate medicamentum temperatum* 2]). Considering this background, we might suppose that James is urging the elders to come to the bedside of the sick armed with both spiritual and natural resources—with prayer and with medicine. Both are administered with the Lord’s authority, and both together can be used by him in healing the sick.

b. Pastoral

As a different kind of practical purpose, others suggest that the anointing may have been intended as an outward, physical expression of concern and as a means to stimulate the faith of the sick person. Jesus sometimes used physical props in his healings, apparently with just such a purpose.

2. A Religious Purpose

a. Sacramental

A sacramental understanding of this practice arose early in the history of the church. On the basis of this text the early Greek church practiced what they called the *Euchelaion* (a combination of the words *euchē*, "prayer," and *elaion*, "oil," both used in this text), which had the purpose of strengthening the body and soul of the sick. The Western church continued this practice for many centuries, as well as using oil for anointing on other occasions. Later, the Roman church gave to the priest the exclusive right to perform this ceremony and developed the sacrament of extreme unction (in A.D. 852). This sacrament has the purpose of removing any remnant of sin and of strengthening the soul of the dying (healing is considered only a possibility). The Council of Trent (14.1) found this sacrament "insinuated" in Mark 6:13 and "promulgated" in Jas. 5:14. Since Vatican II, the rite has been called "the anointing of the sick." Clearly this developed sacrament has little basis in James's text: he recommends anointing for any illness and associates it with healing rather than with preparation for death. Nevertheless, the oil could have a sacramental function in that it acted as a "vehicle of divine power." Much as partaking of the Lord's Supper conveys to the believing participant a strengthening in grace, so anointing may be mandated by God as a physical element through which he works the grace of healing in the sick believer.

b. Symbolic

Anointing frequently symbolizes the consecration of persons or things for God's use and service in the OT. Typical is Exod. 28:41: "After you put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests." The same usage is continued and expanded in the NT, where anointing is often a metaphor for consecration to God's service (Luke 4:18 [= Isa. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [= Ps. 45:7]). If James has this background in mind, then he would be recommending that the elders anoint the sick person in order vividly to show how that person is being set apart for God's special attention in prayer.

In order to reach a decision among these options, we need first to consider the force of the Greek word that James uses here. Scripture employs two Greek words that mean "anoint": *chriō* and *aleiphō*. James's choice of the latter word in v. 14 may shed light on the significance he attributes to the action. *Aleiphō* is used only twenty times in the Septuagint. Of dubious relevance are the seven times where the word refers to rubbing whitewash on a wall (all in Ezekiel, translating Heb. *th*). But the word frequently refers to the rubbing of oil on the face or body with a beautifying or hygienic purpose (nine times, usually with Heb. *š*k). And the verb has a ceremonial significance in four

verses. The precise meaning of Gen. 31:13 is unclear, but in Exod. 40:15 (twice) and Num. 3:3 *aleiphō* denotes the ceremonial anointing of the priests, whereby they were set apart for the service of God. This last usage is the regular significance of *chriō* in the Septuagint. In most of its seventy-eight occurrences, it designates the consecration of priests, sanctuary furnishings, or the king of Israel. Only three times does it refer to a cosmetic treatment. Significantly, neither word is used with reference to medicinal purposes in the Septuagint. The NT usage of *chriō* maintains this pattern and extends it. For the word never refers to a physical act but is always a metaphor for consecration (Luke 4:18 [= Isa. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [= Ps. 45:7]). As in the Septuagint, *aleiphō* most often designates a cosmetic or hygienic anointing (Matt. 6:17; Mark 16:1; Luke 7:38, 46 [twice]; John 11:2; 12:3). It is possible, however, that the word has some symbolic overtones in the account of Jesus' anointing (John 11:2; 12:3).

The significance of these data for Jas. 5:14 is not clear. One could argue that James would have used *chriō* if he had intended the anointing to have symbolic significance, since this is the word that most often has this connotation in Scripture. On the other hand, considering NT usage, *aleiphō* was the only word James could have chosen if he wanted to signify an actual physical act of anointing. And neither word has medicinal significance in Scripture (leaving aside for the moment the verses at issue, Mark 6:13 and Jas. 5:14). (In Luke 10:34, where oil [*elaion*] clearly has a medicinal use, the verb *epicheō*, "put on," is used.)

Lexicography does not, then, definitely rule in or out any of the four main options. But other factors suggest that James probably views the anointing as a physical action symbolizing consecration. Positively, as we have seen, this is by far the most common symbolic significance of anointing in the Bible. Negatively, each of the other views suffers from one or more serious difficulties. The medicinal view is problematic for two reasons. First, evidence that anointing with oil was used for *any* medical problem is not found—and why mention only one (albeit widespread) remedy when many different illnesses would be encountered? Second, why should the elders of the church do the anointing if its purpose were solely medical? Surely others would have done this already were it an appropriate remedy for the complaint. The pastoral interpretation of the anointing has much to be said for it, and can be incorporated into the view we are arguing. But the value of the anointing does not lie in any physical connection between the action and the malady, as was the case with most of Jesus' healings (e.g., he rubs the eyes of a blind man [Mark 8:23–26] and places his fingers in the ear of a deaf person [Mark 7:33]). It lies, rather, in the symbolic connotations of the anointing. One's attitude toward the sacramental view will depend considerably on one's view of sacraments in general. But James's insistence in v. 15 that the sick person is healed through "the prayer of faith" suggests that the anointing itself does not convey the grace of healing power.

We conclude, therefore, that "anoint" in v. 14 refers to a physical action with symbolic significance. The verb *aleiphō* can have this meaning, being used equivalently to *chriō* in the Septuagint with reference to the consecrating of priests

(Exod. 40:15; cf. *chriō* in 40:13; Num. 3:3). (Josephus can also use *aleiphō* with symbolic meaning, parallel to *chriō*; compare *Antiquities* 6.165 with 6.157.) And while *chriō* is usually used in these texts, James has probably chosen *aleiphō* because he refers to a physical action that the elders are to carry out. As the elders pray, they are to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that that person is being set apart for God's special attention and care. Calvin, Luther, and other expositors think that the practice of anointing, along with the power to heal, was confined to the apostolic age. But such a temporal restriction cannot be established. James's recommendation that regular church officers carry out the practice would seem to imply its permanent validity in the church. On the other hand, the fact that anointing a sick person is mentioned only here in the NT epistles, and that many healings were accomplished without anointing, shows that the practice is not a necessary accompaniment to the prayer for healing.³

³ Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James*. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000. Print. The Pillar New Testament Commentary.