## Anointing of Oil

"Is anyone among you sick? 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 offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" (James 5:14-15, NASB)

This reminded me of an occasion when there was one who inquired about this. As far as I know, the one who inquired was a member of the church. The inquiry was with the intent to be anointed with oil for a physical ailment. When it became apparent that this was something I did not think was necessary, this individual sought out the elders. I was not an elder nor am I today. The elders at that time agreed to have prayer, but did not anoint with oil.

This particular incident brought up an event from Martha's and my past. We were discussing this request and both of us had the same memories of a family we were well acquainted with when we were in the Christian Church. This couple was approximately the same age as us and had joined the Christian Church about the same time I did. We enjoyed many social activities with them. This rapport began to fray when the husband fell under the spell of a man with whom he worked. This fellow worker was heavily involved in what is often called "the deliverance ministry." This is a branch of Pentecostalism that believes physical illnesses and other problems are caused by demon possession. Whatever demon(s) are the source must then be cast out in order to "deliver" the one who is suffering. This is done through some alleged power granted by the Holy Spirit accompanied by the laying on of hands and anointing with oil (must be olive oil). Our friends went after this like a starving hound after a biscuit! We disagreed over this and as they delved more and more into Pentecostalism our association decreased.

I mention this because most people believe the anointing with oil to be associated with something miraculous. This is especially the case with James 5:14-15. However, let me say that there is no reason to believe this except someone wants to believe it and does so! Our friends in the Christian Church wanted to believe such a thing and they did. So do some, even in the church, today.

The passages in James ask, "Is anyone among you sick?" What kind of illness is this - - physical or spiritual? I must admit to going back and forth on this, but am settled now that it indeed does refer to physical sickness. Notice how James says, "if he has committed sins." This is necessary to include if the subject is physical illness. Sin may or may not be involved in a physical illness. Hence, you have the word "if." If it is spiritual sickness, then sin is already involved and there is no "if" about it. It would for sure be a spiritual illness and little reason to think otherwise.

Also it is the one who has the sickness who calls for the elders. Those who are physically sick will do so, but those in spiritual illness will hardly do such a thing. Those who are spiritually ill are almost always elusive and rarely seek out spiritual help. So, now that we are able to determine the nature of the sickness, we can move on to some of the other details.

The elders who are called are to "pray over him." "Over" does not describe a position to be taken. It comes from a word that has many possible translations in other places, such as: "on, upon, about, for, etc." Please note that it is the prayer offered in faith that will "restore the one who is sick" and that "the Lord will raise him up."

What about the oil? Oil had a significance in New Testament times that is not recognized today. A. T. Robertson says that oil was "one of the best remedial agencies known to the ancients." The Expositor's Bible Commentary says, "oil was the most common medicine in biblical times." This will explain why the Samaritan treated the wounded man by bandaging his wounds while treating his wounds with oil and wine (Lk. 10:34). The wine would have been antiseptic and the oil would have been to cover like an ointment.

The word in the Greek used to denote anointing in James is interesting. It is not the usual CHRIO, but is ALEIPSANTES meaning "to daub or smear." Normally it is the former word that is used in a divine anointing (so says Trench). The only way one sees some miraculous action in the oil is because they want to see it there. Also, I think that this idea of a miracle may very well be in the back of some minds (even those of a few brethren).

This is a good time to remind the reader that miracles were a temporary thing. They were for the time of initiating the gospel and confirmation of the message and those who preached it (Mk. 16:20; 1 Cor. 13:8-10). This means that once the New Testament was completed there was a discontinuation of miracles. This coincided with the phasing out of the apostleship. Even if the anointing in James was miraculous (and I do not understand that to be the case), the absence of miracles today preclude that application.

Let me also say something about the involvement of elders in this. The physical sickness here is a serious one. "Raise him up" means "to rouse, waken from sleep." That would suggest a very serious illness where one appears to be "on the deathbed." In such serious circumstances, the elders ought to be called in. However, due to the important business of tending the flock in spiritual matters, they should not be distracted with calls for headaches, toothaches, hangnails, sore muscles, or any other minor problem that is a temporary discomfort. Hopefully clear thinking people can understand how that kind of a thing could be an enormous problem to the work of elders.

~Terry Sanders~