

GOD AND MEDICINE

by A.T. Robertson

Robertson's biblical exposition on James 5:14-18 examining the relationship between faith, prayer, and medical treatment, arguing against both faith-healing extremes and secular dismissal of prayer's role, contending that God works through both medicine and prayer.

1 Chapters

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[Edited by using a few simpler more current English words and the Greek has been removed. His meaning has NOT been altered - aal]

Few subjects have excited more interest in recent years than the subject here presented. So many subsidiary issues, are raised that it is difficult to treat the question adequately in a few pages. . . . Many varieties of "faith-cures" have, been before the world. The so-called Christian Science movement is now the most prominent of them all, combining an idealistic philosophy and pantheistic religion. This combination takes up various aspects of Buddhism, Gnosticism, and a dash of Christian vocabulary, with the vital elements of Christianity gone, and uses some of the well-known ideas of modern psychology as to the influence of the mind on the body. As a whole it is a hopeless jumble of absurdities and inconsistencies and is hostile to the worship of Jesus. It leads astray a certain type of mind without clear reasoning processes and fattens on the fees for mental healing, a portion of which go to the Mother Church in Boston. There is only the most superficial parallel between what James describes and what the Christian Science "healer" practices. There is in James an absence of all mercenary ideas. There is no "commercialized use of prayer," to use the legal phrase of one of the New York courts. There is also the use of olive oil, the best medicine known to the ancient world, and still one of the best remedial agencies, whether used internally or externally. The disciples of Jesus on their tour of Galilee had the double ministry of preaching and healing [Matthew 10:7 f.] and they anointed the sick with oil [Mark 6:13]. In Isaiah 1:6 the prophet says that the bruises were "neither bound up, neither mollified with oil." The Good Samaritan bound up the wounds of the poor victim of the robbers and poured oil and wine upon him [Luke 10:34]. A number of questions come bristling for discussion as we proceed with this passage in James. The use of the word church [in James 5:14] rather than synagogue, as in James 2:2, is to be observed. The local church undoubtedly had a close kinship to the Jewish synagogue in origin and worship. The very phrase "elders" of the church occurs also in Acts 20:17 and in the plural like bishops at Philippi [Php 1:1]. There was a council of elders in the synagogue [Luke 7:3], and the word appears in an official sense in the Egyptian papyri [Deissmann, Bible Studies, pp. 154f., 233f.]. But a more vital question for our subject is whether these elders come in an official capacity to perform an ecclesiastical "anointing" with oil whether they come to pray as brothers in Christ and rub with the olive oil (cf. Isaiah 1:6) as medicine. Mayor quotes Philo (Sonm, M. i. 666), Pliny (N. H. xxiii. 34-50), and Galen (Med. Temp., Book ii) in praise of oil as a medicine. In Herod's last illness he was recommended a bath of oil (Jos., War i. 33, 5). There is therefore no doubt as to the ancient opinion about and use of oil as a medicine. It is probable that one will decide this question according to his predilections. For my own part, I incline to the view that we have here not a sacramental or priestly function on the part of these elders, but the double duty of ministry of the word and of medicine (with prayer). The nearest parallel in modern life is the medical missionary, who goes with the word of life and the healing balm of modern science. He heals the sick with the physician's skill and the prayer of faith. Paul helped the sick (Acts 20:35) at

Ephesus and often healed the sick, and yet he worked side by side with Luke, the beloved physician, as in the island of Melita (Acts 28:8 f.). There is certainly no indication that what is called "extreme unction" was practiced or urged by James and the Apostolic Christians. That was a late development in the Greek and Roman Catholic churches that is foreign to the tone of this Epistle. There is here no such superstition as sending for a minister, when death is at hand, to perform a magical ritual ceremony to stave off death. Mayor has a full statement of the chief facts about the "sacrament" of unction in later centuries. Mayor suggests that the cases of the failure of the simple use of oil as a medicine probably led finally to the special consecration of the oil or the use of relics. But in James we seem to have not a ceremony or ecclesiastical function, but rather the simple use of oil as a medicine and prayer "in the name of the Lord." Today we have a more advanced medical science, which is, however, by no means final and infallible. We separate the functions, of the minister and the physician. We prefer the doctor to the oil, but we still need God with the doctor. It is a great error for one to think that God is not to be called upon because we have a skilled physician. The minister still has a place, and a very important place, in the problem of therapeutics, particularly in those many cases of a more or less nervous type when the influence of the mind on the body is very pronounced. Often in the most severe illness the deciding factor is not medicine, but hope, as any doctor will say. The minister should make friends with the physician and be at his service and cooperate with him. The minister needs to be careful to be a help, and not a hindrance, in cases of sickness. He should be a sedative and an inspiration to the patient, not an irritant or causing anxiety. It is a just ground of complaint that physicians have against those preachers who lend themselves to the schemes of "quack" doctors with patent medicines for all sorts of ills. But to come back to the use of prayer. James says: "And the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up". The credit is here given to prayer and the power of God. One is not to infer that James gives no credit to medicine. The oil was good, God works through medicines and without medicine. The best that we still know on this subject is just this: Prayer and medicine or God and the doctor. The promise of James is unconditioned, like those of Jesus in Mark 11:24; John 14:14. But the very essence of prayer is acquiescence in the will of God, not a demand on God's acquiescence with us. By "save" here James means "cure," as often in the Gospels (Mark 5:23; Mark 6:56; Mark 8:35, etc.). The prayer of faith is the only kind that is real prayer, and it is trust in God with full acknowledgment of God's power and love. Some men have always had the idea of a God so aloof from the world that He cared nothing about it or was powerless to help. There is nothing in modern scientific knowledge inconsistent with an immanent, yet transcendent, God who holds the key of life in Himself. The wondrous laws of nature are all of God and there are many more that we do not yet understand. Science has vastly increased our sense of wonder about God and His world. We have only skirted the fringes of knowledge. It is idle to say that God, if he really sent his Son to redeem men from sin and all earthly woe, does not care if we suffer in body and mind. The Father's hand rests upon us all. He can be reached. He is not far from any of us and He loves us.

"And if he have committed sins, it shall be forgiven him", not by being healed in body nor because he is healed of his sickness. The two things do not correspond nor does one follow because of the other. What James means, undoubtedly, is that the cured man, convicted of his sins and out of gratitude to God for his goodness, repents of his sins and is forgiven. This is what should always happen in such cases, but often it occurs that men who profess repentance on a bed of sickness forget it when they get up. This is sheer ingratitude and a horrible outcome. But certainly, if the

sick man is a sinner, he should be prayed for. It is the time of opportunity to get him to listen to the voice of God. No undue advantage need be taken of one's situation, and yet it is wise to speak plainly then. Sickness is a great leveler and brings us all down (Note: even if) here instead of [and if] and the rare periphrastic perfect subjunctive active. The condition is the third class (undetermined with prospect of determination)). Beyond any doubt, Roman Catholics have much good use of their asylums and hospitals. Other denominations are beginning to take a real interest in this aspect of Christian activity. In the hour of sickness it is a great mercy to fall into the hands of those who love God and where the love of Jesus is mingled with the highest medical science.

It is a good time to confess our sins to one another as well as to God, when we fall sick. "Confess therefore your sins one to another". Clearly if the sick man, conscious now of his own weakness, is not willing to confess his sins (trespasses, some MSS. have it) against others, God will not forgive him. As Mayor points out, James expands the words of Jesus about forgiving those who have trespassed against us [Matthew 5:23; Matthew 6:14], so as to bring out both sides of the subject. Let the sick man ask forgiveness of those whom he has wronged. Then let them forgive him and pray for him. "Pray one for another". The Roman Catholics sometimes appeal to this passage as a justification for auricular confession to the priest, Bellarmine, for instance, but Luther has a pointed answer: "A strange confessor. His name is 'One Another.'" Cajetan "speaks the language of common sense" (Mayor) and admits that James has no such custom in mind. What James urges is public confession, in particular to those wronged, not private and secret confession to a priest. The Roman Catholic Confessional is one of the most dangerous of ecclesiastical institutions. It puts untold power for harm into the hands of the priest. It is difficult to conceive how a husband or father could be willing for wife or daughter to make secret confession to a priest. The abuses of the confessional make a horrible chapter in human history. Not merely are things wrung out that should not be told, but evil is suggested that, would never be thought of. The original form of absolution was "precatory rather than declaratory" (Plummer). But it is a great good to the soul to open the heart and make a frank confession to the church or to the persons who have been injured. Great sorrow would be avoided if men would only have the manhood to do this thing. Tertullian (On Penance viii) well says: "Confession of sins lightens as much as concealment aggravates them." Confession of sin was one of the cardinal tenets in the preaching of John the Baptist. The Romanists demanded penance for sins publicly confessed and private enmity (Plummer) took advantage of it for purposes of revenge.

Then it is a good time to pray "that you may be healed". Then the power of God is with men to heal both soul and body. Many a revival has started in a church because those who have been estranged have buried the hatchet and see eye to eye again. There is power in prayer when the soul is open to God as can be true only when hate disappears from the heart. "The supplication of a righteous man avails much in its working", "the prayers of the righteous have a powerful effect" (Moffatt). This short sentence is clearer in the Greek than in any of the English renderings. Plummer suggests "Great is the strength of a righteous man's supplication, in its earnestness." The word for "supplication" is more specific than the usual term (euch) and suggests a sense of need. But the crucial word is the participle, which may be either middle or passive (See extensive discussion in Mayor. The NT usage favors the middle, but the passive is also in use and either makes good sense). Our word "energetic" is derived from the verbal adjective of this word. The notion of "energy" is present at any rate. The great word in modern science is this very word

energy, which is made luminous by electricity and radium. The only prayer worth while is one with "energy" in it, whether "inwrought" (taking it as passive) by the Spirit of God or at work (middle voice) through the spiritual passion of the man's own soul. Such a prayer has much force in it and is not a mere ceremony nor rattle of meaningless words. The emphasis on "a righteous man" here does not mean that God will not hear the cry of a sinner for mercy, but probably that a righteous man is more likely to put the proper energy into his prayer. We may sadly reflect that our prayers often have no power with God because they have no energy when said. There is no power in the dynamo. The engine has gone dead. The steam is not high enough to move the driving wheel. Oesterley quotes aptly the words of Rabbi Ben Zakkai in Berachoth, 34b, when prayers for a sick child are desired: "Although I am greater in learning than Chaninah, he is more efficacious in prayer; I am indeed the Prince, but he is the Steward who has constant access to the King." There are men who have power in prayer. They have it because they live close to God. With a great price they have won this high prerogative. Oftentimes they are the humblest of men in earthly station and store. Very mechanical surely is the idea of Rabbi Isaac (Jebamoth, 64a), who says: "The prayer of the righteous is comparable to a pitchfork; as the pitchfork changes the position of the wheat so the prayer changes the disposition of God from wrath to mercy."

James has a typical case to illustrate his point. "Elijah was a man of like passions with us", "with a nature just like our own" (Moffatt). James emphasizes the human frailties of Elijah to show that he does not refer to ceremonial or sacramental rites when he urges prayer for the sick. Such prayer is the privilege, not merely of the elders of the church, but of any good man who has the ear of God. That power is not a function of ecclesiastical position, but the reward of holy living and trust in God. Elijah had his weaknesses as we all have, but God heard him. The point for us is that, if God heard Elijah, He will hear any of us who puts the same amount of spiritual energy into his prayer. "He prayed fervently" (This idiom, common in the LXX in translation from the Hebrew infinitive absolute, appears also in the common Greek). There is no use to pray in any other way. Elijah prayed seven times before the rain came. Half-hearted prayer defeats itself (cf. doubting; prayer in James 1:6 ff.). Many modern men have no faith in prayer of any kind save as a wholesome reaction on the mind of the one who prays. They scoff at the idea that the God of the universe would condescend to listen to the feeble chatter of such worms in the dust as men. They conceive it as impossible that God would alter in the least His will in any particular because of such insignificant requests. Least of all do they admit the possibility that God would change the weather in response to the prayer of one or many individuals. They argue that the laws of the weather are fixed by the laws of nature and that God does not alter his own laws. A very pretty network of impossibilities is fixed up, but all the same the experience of Christians breaks right through all these entanglements. A real God is greater than His own laws and His own will is the chief law of His nature. God is not an absentee God and He is our Father and loves for us to tell Him our troubles. Certainly God knows how to work His own laws. We do not have to think that Elijah had the matter of drought and rain in his own hands, at his beck and call. Far from it. Elijah won in prayer by strenuous prayer and perseverance, not by lightly informing God of his wishes. Besides, when rain came in response to the prayer of Elijah, it came out of clouds, as rain always does. God made the clouds gather from the west (the Mediterranean) till the rain came. As the hot winds from the east and the south brought the drought, so the west winds brought the rain. Many times in my own experience I have known people to pray for rain and the rain came. This very thing happened last summer (1914). The rain may not have come in response to the prayer. Of that I do

not know, but it came the very night in which prayer was made for it at the prayer meeting. The difficulty in the matter of rain is no greater than in cases of sickness. The root of the trouble is the lack of trust in God, the broken relation with God, the loss of power with God.

Robertson, A. T. , Practical and Social Aspects of Christianity - THE WISDOM OF JAMES. 1915, George H. Doran Company, NY: Hodder & Stoughton. Pages 254-264.

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