

Healing and Wholeness

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together, shall we, as we sit. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, and Lord, we thank you that the Lord Jesus taught that your word is truth, and that your truth can set people like us free.

And so, Father, we ask now that in this quiet hour you would send your Spirit, that we might discern your truth, and your truth would indeed free us to be the people you call us to be, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. I want to preach to you from that amazing verse in chapter 5 of James, which we just had read to us, where it tells us that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

I think in the authorised version of the Bible, which some of you are old enough to remember, it says, the fervent effectual prayer of the righteous man availeth much.

You're looking so blankly at me, that actually is English, right? And what I want to talk to you about this morning, and it's a bit like trying to, it's something about healing and wholeness, given that after communion, those of you who would like some prayer for healing will be invited to receive prayer for that.

[1 : 32] Perhaps I should just say to you that I have to, sadly, have to leave this service early, not because anybody has offended me, just to kind of kill speculation.

Before I realised the time of the church had changed to 11.30, we'd arranged to meet up with some people at 12.30, and we couldn't meet anyway.

So I'd be slipping out, but it's nothing personal. Atul Govander, in his excellent book called *On Being Mortal*, compares the death of his grandfather, who died at the age of 109, when he fell off his bicycle in New Delhi and was hit by a truck.

Compares that with the death of his aunt, who had emigrated to America and died on her own at the age of 71, in a side room in a hospital with tubes coming out of her every orifice, alone.

And he speculates at the beginning of the book, I should explain that he is a world-famous geriatrician. He looks after those of us who are in our senior years.

[2 : 59] One of his conclusions is, the reason why his grandfather lived such an amazing life to the age of 109, was that his social networks ran very deep and were very profuse.

Whereas his aunt who'd emigrated into another country, had virtually no social networks, and ended up dying young and dying alone.

So what I want to talk to you about today is something that is a little tricky for us to get our heads around, I think, in our nation where we're all so individualistic, and that is, what is the collective power of a local church in helping people be healed and become whole?

And when you start to think about becoming whole, it'd be a brave person that would put their hand up this morning and say, I don't need to be healed at all. You may not have a physical complaint, but the chances are, you've got your baggage, as we say, from the past that affects you today.

All of us needs to be healed in that sense. I think James, when he wrote his epistle, and you'll notice that it seems like, you know, like some of the epistles end with a bit of just kind of closing remarks, you know, give my love to Tychicus, you know, and that kind of comment.

[4 : 47] No, the last chapter of this epistle is actually the profound focus of the epistle. If we were to read the whole lot, and I know you wouldn't like that, but if we were to read the whole lot out loud, you would see that the first four and a half chapters of the epistle of James are describing something very significant, which I want you to try and catch a vision of this morning, and that is the amazing potential of a local church, which is righteous, and which is faithful.

That is to say, a local church where collectively we are committed to live the life that God wants for us together, and faithful, in that we start to believe in a way that's different than the way we previously believed.

The fervent, effectual prayer of the faithful man availeth much. The Bible says that if you're not feeling so great, and to be fair, there were no GPs at the time, and some of you speculate, no, there are any left today, I know that.

Were there any, there were no GPs there, but when you were sick, the natural thing for the Christian community was to invite the elders of the church around who would bring the oil of anointing with them, and would pray for you, and anoint you.

And clearly, James had this expectation that when that happens, in a righteous community, a church that's seeking to live righteously, James expected that those prayers would be heard, and that people would be healed.

[6 : 49] As so much one could say, I sometimes feel that talking about healing and wholeness is like trying to pray, pray see Tolstoy's War and Peace in 50 words.

But I just want to say two other things by way of introduction. The first is this. I want you to understand that there is something called common grace.

There are two kinds of grace in the New Testament. One is saving grace. That's what Paul's on about in Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, when he says, but it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

This is not of your own doing, so that none of you can boast. If you're a Christian, you are a Christian entirely at the initiative of God and his gracious approach to you.

That he loves you even though in your heart you know you don't deserve that love. But then there is common grace.

[7 : 56] Common grace explains why the Christian church doesn't have the monopoly on doing good in our society. There are lots of people who do great things in our society and we thank God for them.

Some of those people are doctors and surgeons. And you might like to ask yourself this question and it's a kind of false dichotomy that's been set up in certain parts of the church.

But if you had appendicitis, would you be more likely to ask the elders of the church to come round and pray for you? Or would you get down the emergency room and get operated on?

My suspicion is that most of you would say the second and the really discerning amongst you would say both. Both.

Prayer and the doctor's stuff. You remember in John chapter 9 there was this sounds really awful to us doesn't it especially in kind of COVID times that here's a blind man and Jesus starts to heal him.

[9 : 06] Before he heals him Jesus spits in the mud and mixes up this paste and then can you believe this? Puts the paste on the guy's eyes. I mean I have such a clean enough obsession.

I would be retching at that point. Right? Why did Jesus do that? It's a great question and the answer is very simple and very profound.

Jesus did that because that was a common so far as they knew about medicine then that was a common medical practice. They believed that sliver and certainly alluvial mud had healing properties.

What's the meaning of that? It means that Jesus doesn't think that kind of medical practice is in opposition to prayers for healing.

Get appendicitis say your prayers but make sure you get down the emergency room and get operated on. It's not faith or medicine and yet I have been in meetings believe me when people have been told to give up their medication because to take it is being faithless.

[10 : 25] As a member of this church as a matter of fact I was in a meeting with him and the preacher told him that he needed to give up his diabetic medication. I mean how irresponsible is that?

Common grace explains why there is a lot of good that goes on in this world which Christians don't have their hands on and it also explains why God heals some people who have no faith whatsoever.

Directly. I've never forgotten when I was in Slough there's a place you know where they have a bumper sticker that says the best view of Slough is in your rear view mirror and I ministered there in an amazing little local church it truly was a spiritual experience being there but one morning I got a call from one of my older ladies who said she'd had a call from a lady on her estate who was going for an operation for breast cancer that morning I had never heard of her my old lady in the church knew of her because I think she cleaned for her at some point so we went around there and we laid hands on her and we anointed her and we prayed for her and she goes off to the hospital and she gets there and the anaesthetist in the room and the surgeons there all kind of gowned up in his scrubs and he gets his pencil out and starts to draw on her apparently that's what they do and then he says would you mind

I just want to give you a final medical examination physical examination just to make sure that we're going to do the right procedure so he gives her a physical examination and he goes out of the room comes back with the consultant the consultant gives her an examination he says where did you say the lump was she said in my right breast he said there is no lump there send her for a scan by lunchtime she was home no operation now I'd like to say we were so pumped up with faith when we prayed for her that that didn't surprise us at all truthfully we were shocked and as far as we know this woman had no faith whatsoever and of course our great expectation was now she's been healed by God she's going to throw herself at his feet at the throne of grace and she'll walk with him forever more never saw her again never clapped eyes common grace explains that

God delivers some grace into this wide world that explains a lot of things that in many ways seem inexplicable so what are we to learn from James chapter 5 the first thing that I want to say is and I can't emphasize this point enough is that I don't think James believed that trying to heal people was kind of manipulating them I would regard myself manipulative behavior as getting cross with somebody who was ill because they didn't have enough faith that would be a terrible thing to do and you know when I've been visiting the states I've often been jet lagged and wide awake in the middle of the night flicking through channels on the television and you come to the televangelists amazingly weird people as far as I can best see they'll tell you stuff like send in your hundred dollars put your hand on the television screen and receive your healing right

[14 : 41] I don't know how much money has been wasted doing that but I would clearly that is just very very manipulative and the ministry of healing is not about manipulating and yeah so let's just go on and think for a moment about James' advice here text is the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective do you believe that the local church could become a place that kind of accelerated healing and wholeness a bit like a greenhouse accelerates growth hopefully and protects the plants that are within it could a church could you imagine that our church could be like this that the strength of our social network as a congregation could in itself just be a healing thing could the church be a microcosm of a healthy and whole society which takes me to a very important question and that is does our society by the way it is make you ill today writing in the Sunday

Times Rod Little who I know is strong stuff for some of you but writing there about how in the 70s we had a very different approach so there was you know the 70s was the birth of awfully unhealthy food sugar loaded fat loaded food and some of you remember those Finner's crispy pancakes I can see the look of ecstasy on your faces as I even mouth them and thick crust pizzas and all that stuff and yet back in the day only one child in 30 had obesity issues drive the clock forward to today it's one in three children who have those issues we know that mental health is on the increase of course this is in part because we're better at diagnosis of course it is there was a time when

I can remember in my school the kind of thing there was you eat what you're given you eat what you're given there's no kind of messing around saying well if you don't like that have a Mars bar or whatever eat what you're given and I can remember kids in our school and I can remember children around our table our own children and you know the message was sit there until you finished it we may have completely psychologically damaged them in the cause of that but somehow it worked and there is a well I mean this is a very telling verse here I think James is we didn't read this but it's in the early part of chapter 5 James writes this before he starts to write about healing he says the cries sorry you have lived on earth in luxury and self indulgence you have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter and he could have written that in the

Sunday Times today couldn't he see there is something fundamentally unhealthy about our society somebody once wrote to do well in a sick society isn't a big deal is it and what would be the antidote to that might it be a local church where people were committed to righteous living where people were committed to faithful discipleship and that in itself I think would just create a kind of micro climate for people to get better and remember we all need healing so I said that James if you look at it in terms of chapter 5 being the kind of key finale of his letter then the first four chapters talk about seeking wisdom about persevering faith about faith in action about how favoritism should not exist in the church how the church should not just bang on about faith but should go and do good works for people chapter 3 oh my goodness how many churches does this bring down watch your tongue eliminate gossip chapter 3 also talks about the two kinds of wisdom the wisdom that leads to wholeness and the wisdom that leads to destruction chapter 4 submit to

God and be humble excuse me if we could make just small changes in the way we are together and understand that discipleship is a collective responsibility of course it's about you but it's about us it's about us together and the way we are with each other so what could you do well you could honestly face up to the question is my life truly righteous life or are there behaviors and habits that I keep away from the rest of the world that I don't talk to anybody about because basically if I even start to focus on them

[21 : 29] I just feel ashamed do you live a righteous life because you have some feel for God's word and therefore you know what God expects of you if you want to walk with him maybe you could step up your commitment to read a bit more of that Bible and apply it to your life and what about faithfulness how many times have you have I said amen to a prayer thinking to ourselves quietly good luck with that how can we develop together the kind of faith that was expectant that truly believed that God through Christ in the power of his Holy Spirit can work through vessels like us and do his work here on earth wouldn't that be a different kind of church wouldn't that be a church where there was openness and transparency

I note there that James says confess your sins to one another you're an ex-Roman catholic you know that the only person you're supposed to go and confess your sins to is the priest notice James confess your sins to one another that church in Slough I kid you not we went through a short time it was just a season that happened in our worship where people did start to confess their sins to one another and it could get out of hand if I'm being truthful about it it's not helpful if there's a man sitting opposite a girl in the group who starts to confess his lust and sin for that particular girl by name it wasn't great but there is something about that kind of openness and transparency you know we live in a culture don't we now where we have to talk about everything but we find it most difficult to talk about the things that might really be messing us up and some of you are sitting here saying well you've got to be careful with this ministry of healing stuff you really do because you can't let people's expectations down well I get that it's understandable anxiety but on the other hand even when we go to the doctors the doctor doesn't always make us better doesn't it it doesn't mean we won't go back to the doctor ever again might think about changing our doctor why are we oversensitive about that bearing in mind that I said we're not here to manipulate people we're here to try and allow God to work through us to deliver healing and wholeness

I can't promise that you will all live to the age of 109 and be cycling through Cleveland when you die for I would love to believe love to think love to see that as a member of this church you made your contribution to ensure that this house was a house of healing and a house of wholeness where people got better where people's behaviors were refashioned in the power of the spirit and I can't think anybody would be against that so why don't we go and do in the name of our amazing God Father Son and Holy Spirit the people who agreed said together Amen Amen Thank you.