

# Healing and Sin

*A sermon on James 5: 13-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 September 2018*

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## Message

Sickness and sin are similar and related disorders from which Jesus comes to heal and save us.

## Sermon

Apart from the football itself, one of the entertaining things about yesterday's Grand Final, was watching the fans of the competing clubs. As a St Kilda supporter, it is now eight years since I went to a Grand Final as fan of one of the competing teams, but I certainly remember the special kind of madness that grips you in the lead up when you are a regular follower of one of the teams that made it. But each team's group of followers has its own unique culture, and yesterday's two have particularly big followings with particularly strong cultures. If you listen to the footy songs of Greg Champion, you will know how many of them are based on the stereotypic characteristics of the different supporter groups.

The journalist [Greg Baum once wrote](#) about the culture of St Kilda supporters like me and said that we were marked by a distinctive combination of fierce loyalty and resignation to fate, held together by an ability to laugh at ourselves. He said we were fiercer in our loyalty when we were losing and more resigned to impending disaster when we were winning, and I know exactly what he was talking about. I recognised myself immediately, and it got me thinking about the ways an inherited culture infects us and shapes us. How did I become like this? How did I catch the St Kilda bug? And wondering about that connected up with what I was thinking about today's bible readings.

I'm thinking particularly about the words of the Apostle James about praying for healing for those who are sick. It raises some interesting questions about inherited culture, but there is also some major cultural issues in how we read it and respond to it. Our reactions to it are culturally influenced.

This passage is the main foundation of the church's traditional sacramental rite of healing where we pray over the sick with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. That much is quite popular. But the passage also makes a connection that is common enough in the Bible, but far from popular. It makes a link between sickness and sin.

“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” And then it goes on to say “that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

Why does it bring sickness and sin together like this? On the one hand, our culture is all in favour of this link, so long as it only runs one way. We are very good at treating sin as a kind of sickness. We excuse all manner of bad behaviour on the grounds that the perpetrators are themselves victims, and that their behaviour proves that they have been damaged by forces that were outside of their control. We affirm that, and rightly so, up to a point.

But our culture is very against allowing the causal link to run in the other direction. We strongly object to any suggestion that sickness might be a symptom of sin. Our Christian version of the objection quickly reaches for Jesus saying “neither this man sinned, nor his parents, that he was born blind”, and for the book of Job which is a sustained argument that there can be no simple link between a person’s sin and their affliction by sickness or disaster.

In the aftermath of a disaster, Jesus asked, “Do you think the victims were greater sinners than everyone else, that this happened to them?” But even having pooh-poohed the idea that the disaster is evidence of guilt, Jesus warns people to stop sinning lest something worse happen to them. And he often heals sick people by telling them that their sins are forgiven. There are indeed many passages of scripture that do allow the link. And this passage from James is a clear example. So what are we to make of it?

Well, in fact, the Bible does teach that sickness is caused by sin, but it does so in a way that is still consistent with the words of Jesus and Job denying that sickness is evidence of personal guilt. To say that sickness is caused by sin is not the same as saying that this particular sickness is caused by the particular sins of this particular sick person. What it is saying is that in the big picture, the existence of sickness is a symptom of a fundamental disorder of the world which we call sin.

Now you might rightly object that that doesn’t explain why James says that if you are sick, you should seek prayer and anointing and confess your sins so that you might be made well. And that would be a fair question. But it is still not saying that my sickness is caused by my sins. Instead it is saying that my sickness and my sins are both symptoms of the same underlying sinful state of the world.

This is where I get back to my point about inherited culture. Biblically, I am not defined as a sinner because I have sinned. Rather, I have sinned because I am already, by definition, a sinner. Why am I already a sinner? Because I have been infected by the disease of sin that has been transmitted contagiously throughout the human race ever since Adam. I have caught it or inherited it. You could say that I caught it much the same way that I caught the St Kilda disease of becoming more loyal when we are on the bottom and bracing for self-destruction when we are on the top. I’ve been infected by the culture, without even realising it.

The disease metaphor is even stronger, because although you can choose not to be a St Kilda supporter, you can’t really choose whether or not you will get the flu. You might take some precautions, but you’ll probably get it anyway. So too with sin: you were infected before you had any chance to try taking precautions, so all you can do on your own now is try to manage the symptoms. We are, in the words of the old hymns, ‘sin-sick’.

We are not so much sick because we are sinful, or sinful because we are sick. Rather we are sick and sinful for the same reason, and that reason is that our whole world is sin-sick and we have been infected by the contagion of that sin-sickness. Sin-sickness has left us prone to falling ill, and prone to falling into sin. And as long as the underlying sin-sickness is there, we can manage our illnesses and our behaviours, but there is nothing we can do to render ourselves fully immune to either.

But that still doesn’t explain the link made by James, does it? Surely we could still pray for healing for the sick without needing to bring sin into the picture. Well, yes, we could. But that

would be to treat bodily healing as an end in itself. And while bodily healing, when it comes, is always something to be celebrated, it is never the end of the story and is never intended to be sought in isolation from the bigger picture. Partly because it is always temporary.

Healed of one illness, we will eventually succumb to another, and sooner or later, one of them will kill us. Our society seems to try to live in denial of this. Every medical advance is applauded as though it were part of a jigsaw that will one day be completed, and we talk of other countries as having higher mortality rates, closing our eyes to the reality that the mortality rate in our country is 100% just as it is in every country.

When we lay hands on the sick and pray for healing, we are not just seeking a healing of bodies, but a healing of people; not just a cure of illness, but a cure of sin-sick souls. The physical healings described in the Bible, and especially the ones done by Jesus described in the gospels, are there as signs of something more. They are not just historical accounts of someone being cured, they are signs of sin-sick people being saved. When we pray for healing for a sick person, we are not just staving off this illness to prolong life until the next illness gets them. We are praying for a taste of the first fruits of salvation, the first fruits of the coming day of joy and justice and eternal health and wholeness and life.

So James is not simply giving instructions for prayers that will deal with illnesses. Rather, he is saying that when you are sick, just as when you are guilt-ridden, it is a symptom that you and the world as a whole are yet to be saved from the contagious sin-sickness that robs us of health and freedom and joy, and so you should gather the church and pray for salvation.

There is this “already but not yet” quality to our salvation. Yes we have committed ourselves to Jesus in baptism and discipleship, but our salvation is not yet complete until we and all the world are healed and set free. We taste the first fruits when we lay hands on the sick and anoint them with oil and pray. We taste the first fruits in bread and wine at this table. And we have encountered the first fruits in Jesus the Messiah, who has revealed to us the perfectly healthy and good humanity in whose image we were created and to whose image we are destined to be restored.

And thus we pray when sickness comes, just as now we will in our prayers pray for the sickness and brokenness and dysfunction of a sin-sick world, and we will then gather around the Lord’s table to taste of the medicine of life. For it is in him and him alone that we will ultimately find our health and salvation.

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