**Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another**

Text: James 5:16

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Kings 18:41-46; James 5:13-18

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 262, 32, 130, 271, 525

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#12)

**Theme:** James writes about suffering and sickness to Christians dispersed by persecution, revealing the benefits of mutual confession of sins and prayer for healing.

**Proposition:** Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed

**Introduction**

When was the last time you confessed your sins to someone else in the church? What comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘confessional’? The Reformed Churches of New Zealand are ‘confessional’ churches – which means that we are united in a common understanding of the Scriptures, as expressed through the three creeds: Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian together with the four reformed confessions: The Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, The Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The English word ‘confession’ has two different dictionary definitions: a) A statement setting out essential religious doctrine and b) A formal statement admitting that one is guilty of a crime. When we say that we are ‘confessional’ churches we use the first meaning, but the word ‘confessional’ has the other meaning in Roman Catholic churches. In those churches there a ‘confessional’. This is a box, cabinet or booth in which a priest sits and hears the personal confessions of penitents.

Official Roman Catholic guidance for confessing your sins is as follows (catholic.org/prayers/confession):

1. Begin with stating when your last confession took place.
2. Say the sins that you remember. Start with the one that is most difficult to say. (In order to make a good confession the faithful must confess all mortal sins, according to kind and number.) After confessing all the sins you remember since your last good confession, you may conclude by saying, "I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life."
3. Listen to the words of the priest. He will assign you some penance. Doing the penance will diminish the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven. When invited, express some prayer of sorrow or Act of Contrition.
4. Listen to the words of absolution, the sacramental forgiveness of the Church through the ordained priest.

Our text this morning most certainly reveals the Lord’s will for the confession of sins but **not** as it is practiced in Roman Catholic, Lutheran and some Anglican churches. This is another of the ‘one another’ commands in Scripture, revealing one of the ways in which we, brothers and sisters, are called by Christ to “*love one another: just as I have loved you*” (John 13:34). We will look at the Lord’s command to “*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another*” (James 5:16) under three headings:

1. Sickness and sin
2. Confession and prayer
3. Healing and salvation
4. **Sickness and sin**

We have all been sick at one time or another. It is possible to grow in your mother’s womb without any illness and to live for some time as a new-born without sickness. However sooner or later you and I are affected by toxic bacteria, viruses or other microbes which enter our bodies, multiply and can then compromise our immune system. It was not this way in the beginning when this created world was without the effects of sin, but now, after the Fall, sickness is part of almost everyone’s life to a greater or lesser degree. Part of the ministry of Christ on this earth was the healing of diseases and afflictions that oppressed the sick (Matthew 4:23-24).

Today, if I asked you, our congregation, the question “*Is anyone among you sick?*” The likely answer would be ‘yes’ from some of us. Whilst we have the benefits of modern medical practices, pharmaceutical products and a government funded health system, there is sickness amongst us now just as there was within the scattered believing community to whom James writes, asking the same question “*Is anyone among you sick?*” (v14) James then reveals the response from those who are unwell: “*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*” (v14).

The phrase ‘pray over’ is not used elsewhere in the New Testament and could either refer to: a physical posture for prayer above sick person, or the laying on of hands when praying (ref. Mat 19:13). The anointing with oil most likely took place at the same time as the prayer. An obvious question is ‘what is the purpose of the anointing with oil?’ Broadly speaking, three answers have been given:

1. The oil was used for medicinal reasons. Remember how the Samaritan, in the parable Jesus taught, bound up the wounds of the man who had been attacked on the road to Jericho, pouring oil and wine on him (Luke 10:34).
2. The oil served a spiritual function. (Anointing with oil was turned into the sacrament of ‘extreme’ unction by the English Benedictine monk Bede).
3. The oil has a symbolic function – as it did in the Old Testament – for example in setting someone apart for special service (e.g. Ex 29:7).

Whilst oil was used medicinally in Bible times, it is not so used widely in the western world today. Anointing with oil is not a sign and a seal instituted by Christ as baptism and Lord’s Supper are. Anointing with oil is not an ordinance that **must** be followed, but a practice which **may** be followed. (Calvin and Luther took the use of oil to be restricted to apostolic age). In our churches, at times, people call for the elders to come and pray over them. I have done this with my fellow office-bearers on a number of occasions over my years of ordained ministry. James writes about a believer who is sick and has been prayed for “*if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*’(v15). This raises the question ‘what is the connection between sickness and sin?’

It is clear from Scripture that sin **may** be the cause of sickness. For example, David experienced the effects of unconfessed sin in his body, revealing that “*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer*” (Ps 32:3-5). Speaking of the danger of eating and drinking judgement on yourself by participating in Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner, Paul explains to the Corinthians ‘*that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died*’ (1 Cor 11:30).

Yet, it is also clear from God’s Word that sickness is most certainly **not necessarily** the result of sin. Jesus explained to His disciples that a man born blind was not afflicted because he or his parents had sinned, but ‘*that the works of God might be displayed in him*’ (John 9:3).

It is also evident from the Bible that suffering and sickness may remain in a God-fearing person’s life, despite their fervent prayers. Job prayed, but remained in his suffering and sickness (e.g. Job 5:16-17). The Apostle Paul suffered bodily despite pleading with the Lord for healing (2 Cor 12:7-10).

So when you or I are sick it is good to ask ourselves – is there sin in my life that remains unconfessed, and which might be contributing to any bodily sickness I am experiencing? If we uncover sin within, the pathway to spiritual healing is repentance and faith in Christ. This may resolve all or part of the sickness, but it may not because sin may well not have been the cause. If we can discover, with the aid of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8), no unconfessed sin within, then we can and should be at peace within ourselves and accept our sickness and suffering as part of God’s good and mysterious providence for us.

Confessing our sin to the Lord privately always brings spiritual healing and may result in some bodily recovery from sickness too. Confession our sins to one another is also of great benefit, which brings us to our second point:

**2. Confession and prayer**

I started this sermon with the question: when was the last time you confessed yours sins to someone else? We’ve looked at 11 of the ‘one another’ commands over the past few months and I wonder if “*confess your sins to one another*” is the one we practice least? The tense of word (present imperative) translated ‘confess’ indicates an ongoing, habitual action. Mutual confession of ours sins to one another is therefore not to be infrequent or reserved for very special circumstances, but is to be part of the ongoing normal pattern of our lives together in Christ.

Yet over the decades of my life as a follower of Christ I have had only a small number of people confess their sins to me and I have likewise confessed some of my sins to only a few people over the years. Why do people like you and me find confessing our sins to one another so difficult that we seldom, if ever, do it? Here are some possible reasons:

* **Pride**. To confess sin it is necessary to overcome self-love and to be willing to humble yourself. Do you find it hard to admit to others that you have done wrong and failed to honour the Lord?
* **Fear for your reputation**. To confess sin to someone else puts you in a position of weakness and vulnerability. It reveals that you are not as honourable, faithful and holy as you fear they might have thought you were. Perhaps you fear disappointing others when they realise that you fail just as they do.
* **Lack of Trust**. There is a risk that the person you have confessed to may betray your confidence and gossip about you to others. Godly mutual confession of sins does require spiritual maturity, and a strong trusting relationship with others. We also need wisdom to know that there are some matters which we cannot hear in confidence but must speak to an elder or the civil government about (for example sexual abuse).

There are huge dangers in one person being the Confessor for many people, as a priest is in a Roman Catholic church, these include: becoming overburdened by the sins of many others, being tempted to sin by repeatedly hearing the dirty details of the indulgences of many others, and seeking to exert power over others in their weakness. Our text implies that those who listen to the confession of others should also practice confessing their own sins to others. Perhaps another reason why we may not confess our sins to one another is that we may be overreacting against the association in our minds with the Roman Catholic confessional?

This ‘one another’ command is a mutual activity for brothers and sisters in Christ and it is to be combined with prayer for one another, as James wisely writes: “*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another*”. Praying for others is a pattern of spiritual activity that we find throughout Scripture: e.g. Job prayed for his friends (Job 42:10); As James reminds his readers, Elijah prayed for rain that would benefit many others in the land who were suffering the effects of a three-and-a-half-year drought (James 5:17-18); Paul urges Timothy that ‘*supplications, prayers, intercessions...be made for all people*’ (1 Tim 2:1); Jesus prayed for all the elect who His Heavenly Father has given Him (John 17:9).

The ‘*prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*’ (v16) because the Almighty God is the One who answers this type of prayer. Even though you and I are not naturally righteous people, our prayers have power when we pray through Jesus Christ, trusting fully in His perfect righteousness and believing that God will graciously give what is needed. Brothers and sisters, we who belong to Christ have direct access to God’s throne of grace through our sympathetic Saviour who understands our weakness (Heb 4:15-16). Unbelieving friend, you also need a righteous person who can gain you access to the Power of God to heal and to save.

Notice that the prayer of the elders is referred to as a ‘prayer of faith’ that ‘*will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up*’ (v15). This brings us to our third point: healing and salvation.

**3. Healing and salvation**

Health and wellbeing are generally on our minds when we, or others we know, are sick or if we think that we, or they, might become unwell. When we are sick, we naturally desire to be healed and thereby restored back to being well again.

God, through His Word commands us, brothers and sisters to “*confess your sins to one another and pray for one another,* ***that you may be healed***”.The stated purpose for this command then is so that we can be healed, cured, restored back to good health. We have already seen that sin **may** be the cause of sickness, but that it may not. So, it makes sense that in some circumstances, confession of sin (both to the Lord and to others) will result in some physical healing. When David kept silent about his sin, he suffered bodily and spiritually, Psalm 32 indicates that he experienced relief when he confessed his sin to God. Likewise with prayer, **sometimes** God is pleased to answer our intercessory prayers for each other by granting healing and health, but **sometimes** His will is for us to continue to be unwell. We don’t know what Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ – it may have been a bodily affliction. However, despite his repeated pleas for relief from his debilitation condition, the Lord said ‘*my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*’ (2 Cor 12:9).

As we’ve already noted, oil was used in Bible times for medicinal purposes. Whilst we can’t be certain that the ‘anointing with oil’ was therapeutic as well as symbolic, the Scriptures do not teach that we should **only** rely on prayer for healing and not take any medications. Paul encouraged Timothy to ‘*use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments*’ (1 Tim 5:23).

So we may not experience any change to our bodily health as a result of confessing our sins and having others pray for us, but we will most certainly will benefit spiritually in these ways:

* Confession to one another brings previously hidden sin into the light (cf. John 3:19) where it can be conquered in the strength of the Lord.
* Confession to one another means that we are no longer alone in our sin.
* Confession to one another helps in confessing sin to the Lord.
* Confession of sin draws us closer to the Lord (e.g. Ps 66:18; Isaiah 59:1).
* Confession, repentance and trust in Christ brings great relief from the burden of sin.

“*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).* Through confession and prayer God is pleased to bring healing to the soul troubled by sin.

If you silently answered the opening question in this sermon ‘*when was the last time you confessed your sins to someone else in the church?*’ with something like ‘a long time ago’ or even perhaps ‘never’ what should you do?

If you have not already done so in the past, come to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, believing in your heart that He has secured you complete peace with God by living a perfect life for you and dying in your place. Ultimately the healing and restoration that we all need is salvation, and this is only possible by faith in Christ alone. If you are not sure how to come to Christ, please speak to me, one of the elders, or any spiritually mature believer in this church. You might wish to confess your sins to one of us so that we can pray for you.

If you are already a Christian, saved by God’ grace, then firstly accept that God’s will for you is that you are in the habit of confessing your sins to others in the church and having them pray for you. If you are already a Christian, then secondly accept that God’s will for you is that you are in the habit of being available to others in the church so that they can confess their sins to you and have you pray for them.

Then you and I need to address any obstacles in our walk with Christ that may have prevented us from willingly obeying this command of God:

* **Pride.** James wisely says, “*Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you*.” (James 4:10)
* Peter writes ‘*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*’ (1 Pet 5:5)
* **Fear for your reputation.** As you humble yourself both before the Lord and others, trust the Lord. Ultimately, what is important is the reputation, the honour of Christ and we honour Him when we willingly obey His commands. As we cast all our anxieties on Him, knowing that He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7) we are set free from our fears and enabled to be open, honest and authentic with others.
* It is much healthier to be who you are than to try to live your life pretending to be someone you are not.
* **Lack of Trust.** Strive to build close trusting relationship with others in the church. I would recommend that in general it is wise to confess our sins to others of the same gender (apart from within a marriage). Men with men, women with women. This is especially true if we are confessing sins of a sexual nature.

The ‘one another’ command we have focussed on today does not teach us that we should confess our sins to everyone. It is wise to choose those with whom we have a close trusting relationship so that we can have confidence that what is said will not be sinfully or unwisely distributed to others. Confessing our sins to one another is not easy, but it is God’s good will for us. He doesn’t ask us to do works which he does not provide the means to enact (Eph 2:10).

Imagine that you heard this sermon again in six months’ time, how would you like to be able to answer the question: ‘When was the last time you confessed your sins to someone else in the church?’ I hope that your silent answer then would be something like ‘a few days, weeks, or months ago’. I hope that mine would be also, because we are all called, brothers and sisters, to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another, that we may be healed.

AMEN.