I. PRAYER PROVIDES. When you get in trouble prayer provides a way out. James simply says in 5:13 “Is any of you in trouble? He should pray.” For food, clothing, shelter, a good job, the meeting of your daily needs, the Lord uses prayer to provide.

II. PRAYER ELEVATES JOY. It multiplies our sense of joy. “Is any one of you happy? Let him sing songs of praise”[5:13]

III. PRAYER WORKS. “You want something but don’t get it…You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” [James 4:2-3]. Think about it? Why should God bother to meet our heart’s desire if we don’t care enough to ask? We read in the text before us: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would rain and it did rain on the land for th..." [James 5:16-18]. James is referring to an absolutely staggering event. God responded to a ordinary man’s prayer to demonstrate His sovereignty in a world that believed the supreme God is the God who controlled the weather. The prophets of Baal were supposed to have the advantage. After all Baal was the storm god. He should have been able to ignite the sacrifice and usher in a season of rain. But Yahweh is the Superpower. He wants people to experience the reality and the power of His presence in their lives. He does not just want people to experience His presence, He wants them to experience His power.

IV. PRAYER HEALS. Here the text gets more involved. “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” Our first response when we contract disease, are wounded in an accident, are afflicted with serious disappointment is this: we should pray and ask others to pray for us. When visiting the sick James tells us, the elders must do two things: First we must pray over the sick one and secondly, we are to anoint the one who is sick with oil in the name of the Lord.

Now the first requirement is straightforward. The Lord demands that we as elders pray over patients who are ill. But the second practice is quite foreign to our experience. We better spend some time here unpacking exactly what James means here.

Medicine Matters. The practice of anointing with oil in ancient times was used first of all for medicinal purposes. Just as we apply first-aid treatments (iodine, Neosporin, anti-biotics) to a cut or a burn, ancient people handled disease. There are not only a medicinal use, it was also used symbolically. It seems to do nothing of himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blisteringly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye” [Atlantic Monthly]. I take that to mean that God ordinarily doesn’t use extraordinary means when ordinary means are available. So pray, yes. Earnestly. But visit your doctor as well. Make use of the ordinary means of healing at your disposal. In the first century oil and ointments were used for normal medicinal healing. It’s valid for today as well.

Mark of Deliverance. But the practice of anointing with oil in ancient times had not only a medicinal use, but it was also used symbolically. It was an ancient ritual used to drive away the power of the Evil One from the life of the sick one. It was all part of a procedure called exorcism. James is speaking of a healing form of exorcism [cf. Dibelius/Greeven, The Mark of Deliverance]. One new servant of Jesus is given the power to cast out demons who have been badly hurt so also in ancient times for the purpose of healing the elders of the church were called upon to practice a little medicine. We all know the story of the good Samaritan who poured wine and oil into the wounds of the man who was beaten up and half-dead. Now then, elders need no longer concern themselves much with this aspect of healing. Physicians are so much more qualified to do that for us now. C.S. Lewis says, “God seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blisteringly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye.”

Now I’m convinced we have an impoverished Enlightenment view of sickness and unfortunately look at the body as merely a complicated machine. Don’t get me wrong, there are mechanisms involved, absolutely. But the Bible tells us to look more deeply and acknowledge the connection of Satan to sickness. We read in Acts 10:38 “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and heal those who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” We read in Luke 13 of a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years, terribly bent over and couldn’t straighten up. Jesus heals the woman on the Sabbath. “He put His hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God” [Luke 13:13]. The synagogue ruler objected. You don’t do that stuff on the Sabbath. Jesus argued that if we untie a donkey or oxen on the Sabbath to give it water, “Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” [Luke 13:16]. God’s
Kingdom has three major enemies: Satan, sin, and disease. Sin and disease are consequences of our fall and reinforced with Satan's rule of men. If the entire purpose of the Kingdom of God is to crush and destroy the dominion of Satan, then it is clear also that God's ultimate design is to wipe out sickness, disease, and death. All the miracles of healing performed by Christ and His Apostles prove, are signs that God's Kingdom has erupted in history.

James is convinced that that power of the Kingdom is also made available for the Church. Now we may not think that anointing with oil was the only method used to drive away the power of Satan and bring healing. Many were healed by touch, by the passing of a shadow of Peter, by handkerchief, by laying on of hands, by word of mouth. James was merely recommending this ceremony for the use of the churches under his care. I think it's a good practice. And I would suggest that every elder among us should regularly use olive oil in their ministry to the sick. Not because it is magic or because healing is automatically guaranteed, but just out of obedience to the Word of the Lord. Let me give you a somewhat more modern example of a healing that followed an anointing with oil.

Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry is professor emeritus of Islamic Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. After being ordained and serving as a missionary in Pakistan and Afghanistan he worked for a few years as a professor at Reformed Bible College and then later at Fuller. Dr. Woodbury comes from a long line of servants who have devoted their lives to missions. A Fuller Focus magazine talks about his grandfather. "Dr. Woodberry's grandfather, John Vander Werf, who changed the family name to Woodberry [I always thought he was Dutch], was a successful businessman who upon his conversion, was called to mission work in China in 1895. Although Kitty [his wife] fought going to Shanghai, her husband—and God—prevailed. The first year they were there, their little boy drowned, their daughter came down with a case of crippling polio, and John contracted smallpox, went into a coma, and came near death. Kitty [read James 5:14-15]. In desperation [she] anointed her husband's head with oil and began singing the Doxology at a loss for another prayer. Midway through, he awoke from his coma, sat up and finished singing the song of prayer with her" [Fuller Focus, Spring 1992, p. 6]. God used here extraordinary means to this man since ordinary means were not available.

James 5:15 tells us more. That prayer actually brings healing. "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Prayer for the sick is not only the responsibility of the elders. We're all called to pray for each other that we may be healed. God doesn't call us to ask that God's hidden providential will be done. We are only called upon to submit to God's revealed will and until we know what God's purpose for our brother or sister is, we are to relentlessly, persistently pray, "Lord God heal her, heal him."

Prayer works. Prayer is powerful. We're told, "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. . . . The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." In Mark 6 we are told that Jesus could hardly heal any in his home town because of their profound unbelief. We're told in James 1 when we ask for wisdom we "must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does" [James 5:6-8]. Here's the problem. We are so infected by the Enlightenment model of medicine and healing that we buy into a Reformed rationalism. And so when we hear of terminal cancer, severe heart problems our faith shrivels up. We become more impressed with the power of disease than with the power of God. What kind of God do we have anyway? Some puny deity? A thousand times no. "Our help is in the name of the Lord the Maker of heaven and earth!" [Psalm 124:8]. That's the kind of God we have. If we are to see our prayers answered affirmatively, then our vision of God must be enlarged. We must begin to see how vast and powerful our God really is.

Does God still heal today? Has He suddenly opted out of the healing business? Some people think so. Even some good Reformed theologians are convinced that after the apostolic era, God stopped healing. But James tells us that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well and the Lord will raise him up. Who are we to believe? Some Christian rationalists who put God in a box, limit Him, doubt His power to heal. Christ is the same Yesterday, Today, and Forever. If He healed in the OT, healed in the NT, He certainly heals today. God uses prayer to provide, elevate joy. Prayer works and prayer heals. God wants us to feel like we're making a contribution, we're involved in the process. Through prayer, God gives us the dignity of causality.