

# Exegetical Brief: James 5:14—“Anoint Him With Oil”

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The command "anoint him with oil" cannot be an apostolic command that applies to all Christians of all time since there is no command of Jesus that this be done, nor did the apostles do it in any of the many healings that we read about in the book of Acts.

Is the use of the Greek verb ἀλείφω instead of χρίω or μυρίζω significant? Not necessarily. The verb χρίω is never used in the New Testament to speak of anointing with oil as a physical treatment. The verb μυρίζω refers to rubbing an ointment or oil on the body. James apparently does not use this verb since this is not the kind of application of oil he is speaking about. So it may be that ἀλείφω is used by James since it is the broadest term when olive oil is applied to the body.

In the context, the important thing is prayer. That is evident from the fact that this whole section from verse 13 to verse 18 is about God's powerful answer to prayer. The fact that the verb "anoint" here is an aorist participle modifying the main verb "pray" also indicates this. As an aorist participle it indicates an action that is to precede the prayer ("after you anoint with oil, pray"). If it were an action that is to accompany the prayer, it would have been a present participle. The main action is in the main verb. A secondary action is indicated by using a participle. The next verse (v15) confirms this. It does not say the anointing with oil will heal the person. Instead it says: "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well."

Is this meant to be a healing use of olive oil? That olive oil was used at times to help in healing is evident from various sources. Josephus (*Antiq XVII*, 172, vi 5) indicates King Herod was given a bath in oil when he was near death in the hope it would bring about a cure. Philo speaks about oil being used for healing (*Som II*, 58). Likewise the papyri have such references, and in rabbinic literature there are examples of oil being used in the treatment of bodily pains, skin diseases, headaches, and wounds (*Str—B 1*, 249). The well-known physician Galen said oil was the best of all remedies for paralysis (*De Simplicum Medicamentorum Temperamentis 2.10ff*). The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament also has numerous references to healing in the discussion of the verb "anoint" (ἀλείφω). The problem with having James' words refer to medical treatment is that it is the elders of the church who are to do this anointing. Why would such medical treatment be something James tells the sick person to ask the elders of the church to do and not also members of the family or friends?

Is it a soothing use of olive oil? That olive oil was used for a soothing purpose is clear from such passages as Psalm 55:21, Isaiah 1:6, and Luke 10:34. But again, the question arises why would this be something the sick person would ask the elders of the church to do and not also family members or friends?

Perhaps the best explanation is that this was a custom among the Jews that brought with it the symbolism of God's blessing. Several things point more strongly in this direction than any other. Visiting the sick was a custom the Jews practiced regularly (Mt 25:43). In addition, it was a custom that the elders in a Jewish community visit the sick on behalf of the whole community. James is writing to Jews (1:1). He urges the sick person to summon the elders "of the church" (5:14), not the elders of the community. So James is apparently encouraging his readers that the common Jewish practice be continued in their Christian congregation. In the Old Testament wine, honey, and olive oil were often referred to as symbols of God's blessing and of the joy and peace that blessing brings (Is 61:3, Mic 6:15, Ps 23:5, 45:7, 92:10, 133:2, Eccl 9:8, Mt 6:17). Obviously, only olive oil was used for anointing. James says the elders are to anoint with oil "in the name of the Lord." This, too, points to this anointing being done with the thought of God's blessing in mind. Acting as leaders of the church, the elders by anointing with oil in the name of the Lord would be indicating to

the sick person the confidence of the church that God is the source of all healing and that God's healing power would be brought to bear on the illness at hand. This anointing was then followed (cf. comments on the aorist participle above) by the elders' prayer that God would heal the sick person. Several comments made by church fathers suggest this was the meaning of the anointing with oil and so this custom was later practiced not just among Jewish Christians but in the church at large. Hilary (367) writes in his *introductory Tractate on the Letter of James* (PL Supp. 3.81): "The custom mentioned here is followed even today, for the grace of mercy is symbolized by oil." Oecumenius (6th century) says in his *Commentary On James* (PG 119:508): "The apostles did this even during the time when our Lord was still on earth. They anointed the sick with oil and healed them." The passage to which he is referring is Mt 6:13. Bede (735) in *Concerning The Epistle Of St. James* also includes a reference to this passage as he writes: "Just as he already advised the person who has been injured, so now James gives his advice to the one who is ill. In order to prevent the foolishness of complaining, he told the injured person to pray and sing, and now he tells the person who is sick (either in body or in faith) to call the elders . . . James does not advise this person to call the younger members of the church because they are less experienced in such matters and run the risk of saying or doing something which will make matters worse. We read in the New Testament that the apostles did this sort of thing, and the custom is retained in the church, that the priests will anoint a person who is ill, invoking the name of God over him, and pray for his healing." Note two of these quotes refer to this as a "custom" in the church, not an apostolic command. Note also that the implication in the anointing is understood as being symbolic of God's mercy and help.