



## **Course Name: Shepherds/Elders (Ministering to the Sick)**

By Tommy South

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### **Course description:**

Scripture is clear about the role of shepherds/elders ministering to the sick (both spiritual and physical). How can shepherds/elders utilize this role in ways to support the sick and fulfill scriptural teaching? This lesson will examine scripture to consider the importance of this work and make suggestions on how to fulfill it in the church today.

### **Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have...**

- A. Identified the importance of ministering to the sick.
- B. Studied the context of James 5 and its teaching about the elder's role to the sick.
- C. Considered specific ways to fulfill this role in the church today.

### **Outline of the class:**

- A. During the first few minutes of the class divide the class into groups of three or four. Then ask each table to take 15-20 minutes to discuss the following.
  1. List at least three reasons it is important for elders to minister to the sick.
  2. How can shepherds/elders minister to those physically sick and spiritually sick?
  3. Read the text of James 5:13-18 and discuss the meaning of this text for today.
- B. The Importance of Ministering to the Sick
  1. When faced with serious illness, people feel vulnerable and need support and encouragement. They are also frequently isolated, so it is important for shepherds to reach out to them, even if they do not reach out to the shepherds.
  2. Visiting those who are ill is a wonderful way to become better acquainted with them. Conversations that might never take place when people are well and busy may happen when they are incapacitated.
  3. Tending to those who are ill is also a great way for them to get to know you. Most people will not forget the kindness of those who reach out to them when they are ill, and who offer prayer for them in their presence. Over many years, you will find that some people will recall visits that you do not even remember making.
  4. Ministering to the sick is more than a social call. As an occasion for prayer and encouragement, it is an opportunity to bring people closer to God, or perhaps to help them cope with doubts and fears regarding their illness and their mortality. What could be more important than helping people cope with the reality of eternity?

C. James 5:13-18

1. The fact that we have a text on ministering to the sick which directly involves “the elders of the church” shows the importance of such a ministry for those who would be shepherds of God’s people.
2. James 5:13-18 is often neglected, however, because it (1) has been so badly abused by so-called “faith healers,” and (2) it raises some questions that are not easily answered. Still, it should not be ignored.
3. Notice that the text is addressed to all Christians, not to the elders specifically, except by implication. We should encourage people to call on the elders, not assume that “they will find out some way” and then be offended if they do not. It is a good idea to let people know from time to time that you are available when they are ill and encourage them to call on you.
4. What are the elders to do?
  - a. “Pray over him” (v. 14). We should not hesitate to offer prayers for the healing of those who are sick. We should pray boldly and in faith, which will encourage the sick to do likewise.
  - b. “Anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (v. 14). What is the purpose of oil? In the New Testament it is sometimes medicinal (the Good Samaritan). In the Old Testament it is sometimes symbolic in nature, as a sign of the presence of God’s Spirit (as when kings and prophets were anointed). It could also be a sign of God’s blessing or the bestowal of honor (Psalm 23; Luke 7:44-47).
  - c. In James 5:14, the oil most likely has a symbolic function, not medicinal, since it is administered by the elders; medicinal oil could be applied by anyone. In James 5, it most likely is intended to serve as a physical reminder that God is present and hears our prayers for the sick.
5. Is James talking about a spiritual healing or a physical healing?
  - a. The word for “save” (*sozo*) in v. 15 is the usual New Testament word for spiritual salvation. Likewise, the word for “raise...up” (*egeiro*) is the word used for raising people from the dead. This has led some to conclude that what is being described is a spiritual healing (salvation), not a physical one, especially since the verse speaks of his being forgiven “if he has committed sins.”
  - b. However, notice that James says “*if*” he has committed sins, and describes the person as “sick,” not “lost.” So, it would seem that he is speaking of a case of physical healing that may include spiritual healing – or not.
  - c. Is the healing miraculous in nature The statement that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick” might seem to suggest this, since it appears to be an absolute promise. However, it may be that James is stating the normal outcome of illness and prayer, not what will happen every time. Notice that it is the “elders” who are to be called for, not someone with the

“gift” of healing, and they are to anoint the sick person with oil and to pray, not to exercise some miraculous gift.

6. Above all, we should not miss the point that these verses (13-18) are primarily about *prayer* and are an encouragement to approach all of life in a spiritual manner, whether through singing praises or through prayer. Verses 16-18 promote faith in the power of prayer; occasions of illness are only one application.
7. Although anointing the sick with oil is not usually done in the church today, there is no reason that it should not be. Shepherds would be wise to be prepared in case someone requests this, and to make it known publicly that they would be happy to follow James’ teaching. Although we may not fully understand the purpose of the application of oil, and healing comes in response to prayer and not oil, we may be missing something by not doing as James says. We do not have to fully understand in order to obey.

D. Suggestions for Ministering to the Sick

1. When you know that someone has major surgery or serious medical tests coming up, try to get with them beforehand to offer prayer (especially if you cannot be present on the day of the surgery or testing). This could be done by meeting with them after worship, by a visit to their home, or even by phone. If possible, have all of the elders participate in the meeting/prayer.
2. Do not hesitate to pray boldly for the success of their surgery, or in the case of other illnesses, for complete healing. James 5 certainly encourages this approach.
3. Be sensitive to what intervention from you the individual is open to.
  - a. For some, illness is a very private affair, and they may simply want your prayers at a distance. If they make it clear that they do not welcome your presence at the hospital, in their home, etc., respect their wishes while assuring them of your prayers.
  - b. If possible, for you to do so, most people appreciate the presence of one or more shepherds at the hospital when they check in for surgery, to offer prayer and encouragement. Some family members will appreciate you staying with them through the surgery, while others may not. It is good to offer to do so if you are able.
  - c. In the case of hospital visits, it is usually best (unless requested otherwise) not to go the day after major surgery. The second day after surgery will usually find the patient much better able to receive visitors. It is always safe to ask family members if visits are advisable.
  - d. Keep visits brief. Even if the patient seems to be enjoying your being there, be careful not to overdo it by staying more than 15-20 minutes. You want them to be glad you came, not glad you finally left!
  - e. Keep your conversation as upbeat as possible. Do not second-guess the medical treatment being given or share experiences similar to theirs that turned out badly.

- f. Interject faith into the conversation as much as possible. Always offer to pray with them. They may want this, but for some reason be reluctant to ask. In your prayer, refer to the person's faith and speak of God's constant presence and love.
  - g. Do not awaken someone who is sleeping. Their sleep may be medication-induced and awakening them could be detrimental. If possible, leave a card or note to let them know you were there, or just let them or a family member know later.
  - h. Text messages and emails are good ways of checking up on those who have been ill, especially if you do not have time or opportunity for a phone call or visit.
4. Do not shy away from the topic of death if the sick person wants to talk about it.
- a. Serious illness brings people face to face with the reality of mortality, and Christians should not be reluctant to face this reality. Do not suggest by your words or actions that this is a topic to be avoided; it is not. If they speak of dying, do not assure them they will not, since you do not know this, and there may be something going on medically that you are unaware of.
  - b. Gently ask questions to try to determine if the person is afraid, and if so, why. If they are not afraid, but are confident of their relationship with the Lord, reinforce that in your comments and prayers.
  - c. Read Scriptures with them such as John 11:21-27 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, both of which assure us that death is not the end for the believer, and that the promises made by Jesus apply directly to them because of their faith in Him.
  - d. If the sick person expresses fear based on some sin from the past, encourage them to either (1) believe that God has forgiven them if they have asked Him to, or (2) repent now and be confident of His forgiveness. See 1 John 1:5-10. You may want to read this with them, and offer to pray with them regarding their repentance, after asking if they would like for you to do so.

**Conclusion:**

- A. When someone in the spiritual family is facing serious illness, see it as an opportunity to help increase their faith, as well as to build a closer relationship with them.
- B. Shepherding – ministering to the sick is one of the most important things you can do in ministering to God's people.
- C. Read through James 5:13-18 and reflect on how you can better apply this passage in the context of your own congregation. Focus on increasing your faith in the boldness of prayer.