

JAMES 5:19-20
Rescue the Wanderer

We've reached the final verses of James...

19 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mic drop.... James is outta here. No final benediction, no good-byes. His final verses are as short and direct as the rest of the letter.

For the 15th time James calls them "brethren." It is clear that he has a bond of affection with those to whom he is speaking.

Once again, we see that the issue is more serious and more dangerous than we might normally think.

THE DEATH OF A SOUL and having a multitude of sins covered are at stake. (1 Pet 4:8)

If we don't take this seriously, then we might as well shut the doors, go home, and never come back.

James gives a very sober admonition because the implication is that ANY one among his audience could possibly stray from the truth.

We live in an age where someone turning from the truth isn't seen as such a big deal in a negative sense. In fact, we're frequently getting reports of 'deconversion' stories of famous, or not so famous people, or the children of famous Christian people.

Wandering or turning from the truth is nothing new, and it is nothing to be trifled with. It is serious.

HOW SERIOUS?

v. 20 – if you turn a sinner from his error, you will SAVE his soul from DEATH and will cover a multitude of sins.

My guess is that as I read these verses, many of you had a name or a face pop into your head. Maybe it was you many days, months, or years ago. **MAYBE** it's you right now.

BEWARE of some false assumptions about straying:

- **It could never happen to me.**
- (If I just keep up the outward appearances – go to church, help out a little here and there- then it could never happen to me.)
- **If I stray, I'm sure I'll be able to get back on the right path by myself.**

What are the errors of his ways? What is involved?

It's not necessarily a full scale rejection of the truths of the faith, but it is a lifestyle that is no longer informed by and in line with Biblical truth in terms of how one invests his / her time, talent, and treasure. It often entails wandering from biblical values that promote real human flourishing while adopting the current trend of the age.

The biblical faith is not less than, but it is more than, a set of truths. The authentic life of a Jesus follower is demonstrated by following Jesus in what He commands.

Matt 28:18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The simplest definition of a Christ follower is “one who trusts Christ and is committed to observing all that He commands.”

Wandering from the truth may be a casual sort of “whatever” approach, or it may take on a more direct skeptical challenge to the truths of scripture.

It often sounds like...

“I just can’t believe in a God who would _____”

“I like to think of God as _____”

“That just doesn’t seem to be in line with where we are today.”

“I didn’t have a good experience with the church.”

The part that’s not said out loud may simply be, “The folks I want to hang out with won’t like me if they think I’m stuck in some religious prison.”

One author did a significant number of interviews with those who had wandered and found that rarely did it have to do with the actual content of the Christian faith. That may have been the cover story, but in reality, there were other social or personal factors involved. In my 40 years of “full-time” Jesus work, I’ve seen that it often involves a relationship with someone that is not a believer.

v. 19 The word used means to “wander, err, go astray, be deceived or seduced.” In other words, there are several ways that this can happen:

- “I just wanted to try out the other side of things. I was ready for some drugs, sex, and rock ‘n roll”
- There is a forsaking the assembling together that becomes a habit – **Heb 10:24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.**

** Can we talk? This is a real concern of pastors during the past year. COVID has provided a ready-made reason or excuse for NOT assembling with others. Without meaning to, one can get into the habit of forsaking the assembly. A lot of bad habits happen that way, but few good habits do. In general, things that are good for us require intentionality. Things that are bad for us come naturally.

Most people who wander, stray, err DO NOT do so intentionally. They drift that way. It is easy to drift into error and poor habits, but no one drifts into holiness.

The real issue isn’t that we drifted astray.

The problem is that we DIDN’T DO WHAT WAS NECESSARY TO KEEP FROM DRIFTING ASTRAY.

Spiritual growth is more like compound interest than striking it rich panning for gold or winning the big LOTTERY.

We want the get rich quick, but it rarely happens. Compound interest isn’t flashy, but it is more reliable for the long haul.

Spiritual growth is a long obedience in the same direction, to quote Eugene Peterson. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.

It’s not a one and done, i.e. strike a rich vein of gold and kick back for the rest of your life.

The issue is so serious and dangerous because it is not as easy to detect as the conditions James just addressed – those who are afflicted or who are seriously ill. Those are readily seen, and they are to pray and even call for the Elders to pray.

Those who are wandering may not even notice it at first. Others may sense that something is a bit off, but you don’t automatically jump to “OH NO, he/she is wandering from the truth.” MAYBE WE SHOULD go there faster, although it becomes very tricky, especially during a pandemic.

Here’s a pastoral inside baseball tension – “Is the person just in a slump, or is the person wandering from the truth?”

Most church members want to be given the benefit of the doubt. But the problem is that if he is wandering, he may not even know it yet. There's a tension that pastors, elders and other members live with.

Note what James DID NOT SAY – “call the elders to bring him/her back.”

YOU MAY BE THE SOMEONE. It is NOT restricted to Elders.

While it is sad to see someone go astray, I'm actually surprised that it doesn't happen more often.

Don't take that as an excuse or an encouragement to wander spiritually.

Who doesn't resonate with the verse, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.”

v. 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS and TENSIONS about turning a sinner from the error of his ways.

- **-Don't assume that God will automatically do it.** NO. We would all prefer that the Holy Spirit does the work of turning the Wayward sinner, but that's not how God has chosen to make things happen. It is clear that God uses secondary means – us, the body of Christ, or at least specific 'someones'. We feel the tension between our theology of “only God can change a person's heart” and the teaching that “someone can turn a sinner from the error of his ways. That's a healthy tension.
- **Don't assume that YOU ARE the one to turn the sinner from his ways.** Even if you want to be that person, you may not be the best person to do so. You may not have the relational capital with the person to do that particular ministry. If you are really eager to be the one, then you need to check your motives.
- **Don't assume that you're NOT the one to turn the sinner from his ways.** James DID NOT SAY – “call the elders to bring him/her back.” **YOU MAY BE THE SOMEONE.**

If you have a continual burden for a wandering sinner and have a nagging sense that “someone ought to talk with him/her”, then it may well be that you are the one.

To say that a multitude of sins will be covered is at the VERY CORE of what the Christian life is all about.

If you're ever looking for what Christianity is about, start there – Forgiveness of sin.

Matthew 1:21 She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. **THAT'S WHY Jesus CAME.**

There are lots of “isms” and social theories floating around in the culture and being absorbed into the church, but none of them offer the good news of FORGIVENESS from sins.

Multitude OF SINS = plethora – a large number. That is the REALITY of God's grace. He forgives a multitude of OUR sins.

For the one who returns from the error of his ways, there is forgiveness.

These words are also in 1 Pet 4:8 as they echo Prov 10:12

8Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

Prov 10 Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions.

When we love others, we are willing to overlook and forgive sin, just as God does with us.

The SOMEONE who is able to bring back the wanderer is one who knows the reality of the forgiveness of sin. It is God's grace and kindness that leads to repentance, not being smacked by the law.

James speaks of someone turning back the sinner who has gone astray, but we know that it is ultimately the grace of God that does the work. We are called and blessed to be used in the process. We must not make too much of our role, nor should we make too LITTLE of our role.

11For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,

Forgiveness that covers a multitude of sin is something that we ALL want and need, whether we will admit it or not. The idea that ‘we need forgiveness for sins’ is NOT a popular topic today. Even as believers, we have a hard time latching on to that. Non-believers just think it is silly, old fashioned, or a relic of a harmful guilt/shame culture.

But deep down, we all know we need forgiveness.

EX: Donna as psych nurse – many of the patients were there because they couldn’t deal with their guilty conscience. They wanted forgiveness but didn’t know where to find it. Many of the other patients were there because they thought they were God.

A question for spiritual conversations with friends is, “What do you do with your guilt?”

I’d bet the ranch that even the overeducated ones who say that “guilt is just a social construct handed down by religion” know deep down that they need forgiveness. Even if they don’t think that they are guilty, they talk and act as if others are guilty of something.

It’s odd that in a post-Christian culture, guilt is making a comeback. It may not be the old-time guilt based on personal actions, but it’s the progressive view of societal, racial, oppressive guilt. And while guilt is back in vogue, NO forgiveness is offered. There is no real way of bringing people back to a place of spiritual and relational health, i.e SHALOM.

The offender in today’s culture isn’t given a chance at forgiveness, even when there is confession; he or she is just scorned, doxed, and cancelled by those whose sin is just as real but who won’t admit it.

TWO PRACTICAL IDEAS

- Remember how much you have been forgiven – he who is forgiven much loves much.

If you know Christ then He has forgiven your multitude of sins.

Seeing a wanderer should be a cause of sorrow and prayer, not self-righteous gossip.

Remembering the grace of forgiveness and seeing the magnitude of forgiveness will cultivate greater love for Christ.

- Give – where your treasure is there will your heart be also. Matt 6:21

If you want to follow Christ and stay close to him in your heart, then give to his kingdom. Your heart will follow your money. If you don’t believe me, believe Jesus. He said it.

FIVE GROWTH CATALYSTS – or How to Keep from Wandering – discussion for SS next week

Andy Stanley

In listening to the faith stories of over 1000 people Five ingredients kept coming up. Those with a vibrant lasting faith saw all of these factors play out in the different seasons of their lives.

- Practical Teaching
- Providential Relationships
- Private Disciplines
- Personal Ministry
- Pivotal Circumstances

James himself is an example of these traits:

- ❖ He heard practical teaching from Jesus and the apostles; and he gives it as well
- ❖ Providential relationships – Jesus
- ❖ Private disciplines – he knows his OT
- ❖ Personal Ministry – yes
- ❖ Pivotal circumstance – crucifixion and resurrection 1 Cor 15:7 “then he appeared to James”

James is also an example of one who wandered or doubted and was brought back. MARK 3:21 (...his kinsmen thought he had lost his mind...)

Although he was a younger brother of Jesus, he didn't readily believe until after the resurrection, 1 Cor 15 "he appeared to James."

At some point, James must have thought, "How could I have been so blind? How did I miss it? What was I thinking? Jesus was my older brother and I thought he was crazy."

If you're here or watching and are wandering, then you're in good company. Jesus may not appear to you like he did to James, but some well-meaning brother or sister may show up in your life. Don't turn them away.

If you're not a believer, then ponder this question, "Do you have a sure fire way of covering your multitude of sins?"

If you think you're not a sinner, just ask anyone who knows you well. If you're sticking with "sin and guilt are just religious constructs that aren't real", then do you live that way with others? Do you ever criticize anyone for any reason at all? What if I were to ask your closest friends???

For believers, do you have a growing appreciation for the gracious work of Christ in forgiving your own multitude of sins? The more we appreciate His grace, the less likely we are to stray from the truth.

Just as James ends abruptly, so does this sermon.
AMEN

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