

The Road Back Home

James 5:19-20

Their stories inspire us, move us, encourage us, and in some ways change us.

Who wasn't touched by the heartwarming story of a dog who saw a fawn out in the lake floundering? The dog jumped in and swam out to the struggling deer, and brought it safely to shore.

Maybe you saw the story of a deer that had gotten stuck in deep mud at a construction site and couldn't free itself no matter how hard it struggled. A backhoe operator gently scooped the frightened deer out of the mud and placed it on dry ground.

The world watched as 33 trapped Chilean miners were rescued.

Twenty years ago, we watched first responders rush into the burning Twin towers that eventually collapsed.

An article in a recent issue of Reader's Digest told the story about two climbers. In the middle of the climb, the first was attacked by thousands of killer bees that swarmed his entire body as they relentlessly stung him. His friend rushed up to save his friend enduring the stinging insects as well.

Daring men and women brave all kinds of horrific circumstances to rescue others from burning buildings, raging floods, dangerous avalanches, and mud slides.

Many have received training in all kinds of scenarios to rush into danger for the purpose of rescuing those in trouble. Others say they just act out of instinct, unable or unwilling to stand by and do nothing. Fueled by adrenalin, they are unconcerned about the risk to themselves. They prefer not to be labeled a hero or receive accolades for their actions. They just know that in the moment it was the right and necessary thing to do.

As the book of James comes to a close, the author encourages the believer to action, action that demonstrates concern for the spiritual well-being of other believers who are in trouble. It is a call to

invest in the lives of others to rescue them and restore them to faith. James has written a manual about practical Christian living. He has dealt with such issues of faith in times of trial in which we endure with joy and patience. He has encouraged us to submit to God and resist temptation, to seek wisdom from God, to be a peacemaker, to guard our tongue and not show favoritism. Am I a friend of God or the world? Am I selfish or am I generous? Do I pray when in trouble? Do I pray for others? And now, what is my attitude toward those who are in trouble, those who have wandered from the faith?

With your Bibles turned to **James 5:19-20**, we bring our study of this letter to a close. It is a call for believers to be concerned about the spiritual well-being of a brother or sister in Christ who is floundering in their faith, paying no attention to the possible risk or inconvenience to ourselves in order to help that person.

You may recall me sharing that last year I stopped to help a pedestrian that I had witnessed getting hit by a vehicle. After my interview with the policeman about what I saw, he thanked me for taking time to help and said that many people don't want to get involved. It reminds me of the story Jesus told about the Good Samaritan. Two religious guys didn't want to be bothered. It was inconvenient. It wasn't their concern. They didn't see it happen. Someone else will stop. We don't want to defile ourselves.

Let me begin by saying that there is nothing in these two verses that connect them with the preceding verses. There is no "therefore" to see what it is there for. They are stand alone verses, meaning that their intent is independent though it fits well with the overall thread of the letter.

As we look at this passage, there are two primary views that are held by some very gifted Bible teachers and scholars.

One view is that the sinners mentioned in this passage are unbelievers and consider the context to be evangelistic. They see the term "**brothers**" in **verse 19** to be a broad view that refers to Jews in general not just to believing Jews. Those who

believe this to be evangelistic suggest that this is a referendum to the believer who should be concerned about the eternal destiny of the unbeliever, pursuing them with the gospel so that the “**sinner**” can be turned from the error of his ways and avoid eternal death or separation from God. His many sins will then be forgiven.

One view, then, is to see our need to be concerned with the eternal destiny of people who are lost, and I would agree with that. There are lots of passages which direct us to evangelize those who have yet to hear and believe the good news of salvation in Christ that promises eternal life. **Verse 20** implies that if the sinner is not turned from his sin, they will not be saved from the eternal death that awaits them nor will their sins be covered or forgiven.

The second view regarding this passage is that the person referred to as a sinner is a believer who has wandered from his or her faith. At one time they were active and engaged in their walk with Christ, but somewhere along the way something happened that caused their faith to cool and their walk with Christ to wane. Some would argue that the person wasn't truly saved to begin with, hence the need to evangelize. They might cite Demas as an example. On one occasion Paul listed him among those involved in his ministry, very active in the faith as a Christian, perhaps even living an exemplary Christian life, but somewhere along the way, he lost his way and Paul later described him as someone who left him having loved this present world. Paul implies that Demas left the faith. So we are left to wonder if he was genuinely saved in the first place.

But I think there is another example from Scripture that supports the idea that this passage is speaking about a believer who has sinned, was confronted about his sin, and restored to fellowship with God.

David is described in Scripture as a man after God's own heart. I truly believe he lived to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He is the one who courageously stood opposed to Goliath who had defied the army of the living God, who sought to honor God. But there was a time his heart and faith waxed cold toward God. There was a

complacency in his faith that caused his heart and eyes to wander, and he committed adultery. I don't think anyone would argue that prior this sin, David wasn't a faithful God follower. He sinned and wandered from his faith, and it wasn't until Nathan confronted him that he confessed, was forgiven, and restored to his relationship with God.

It is my belief that the sinner referred to in our passage is a believer whose faith has cooled, and James is directing the believer to pursue that person for the purpose of restoration with the Lord. What I see first, is a path that is wayward.

I. A PATH THAT IS WAYWARD – v. 19a

Throughout his letter, James has referred to his audience as believers scattered among the nation, I believe his closing comments are again, directed to those same believers. He is encouraging them to be concerned about those whose walk of faith has cooled and they have wandered from the truth. They are to take an active role in keeping each other on track. Notice what James says:

“If one of you should wander from the truth.”

In previous sections of his letter James addressed issues of concern in the church. He directed his comments to specific groups of people. Those who weren't finding joy in trials.

Those who were just listeners of the Word.

Those who were showing favoritism.

Those who needed to tame their tongue.

But this is different. He isn't saying that someone ***had*** wandered from the faith. He is saying that ***if*** someone wandered from the faith this is what you should do. His letter has addressed issues of practical Christian living, guidelines for godly character that believers should exhibit. But at the end of the day, how should you handle someone in the church who has sinned, causing their faith to cool where they no longer believe or walk with the Lord as they once did? Somewhere along the way there has been a crisis of faith.

There is in any body of believers, the likelihood that someone will fall into this category – someone who has wandered from the faith.

Let me suggest three reasons that may happen.

The first is what I will call **a crisis of faith**.

The second I will call **a calloused faith**.

The third I will call **a complacent faith**.

Anyone of us at any time can stray from the Lord for any of those three reasons. When I spoke recently in chapel at David's school, my lesson was on the prodigal son from **Luke 15**. I talked about the rebellious son and the religious son. I told the kids to never say that will never happen to them. As one speaking from experience, it doesn't take much to get off course and wander from the faith.

A ship that is only one degree off course when it leaves port will find that it is miles off course after traveling the day at sea.

A crisis of faith can cause us to go off course. Some event that takes us completely off guard, can cause us to question our faith in or love for God and we choose instead to wander away.

A calloused faith can also move us away from what was once a vibrant faith. We can get involved in a sin that leaves us hardened to the truth. We're going to do it and no one is going to tell us otherwise. A calloused heart doesn't happen overnight or suddenly, it is a slow degree of compromise where we let one little sin go unconfessed and then a bigger one and a bigger one. Before we know it, our heart is calloused and we have little or no concern for walking with God.

A complacent faith is one that is content to stay right where you are. We are happy with the status quo of our Christian life. I have said before that there is no such thing as a static faith. Our faith is either growing or declining.

We have a term we use in Christian circles for a person who has wandered from the faith. We call it backslidden. It refers to someone who has moved away from Christ rather than toward Him. They are headed in the wrong spiritual direction. He is not progressing as a Christian. At one time there was a commitment to and love for Christ, but again, something happened that caused the commitment to

wane and he began to wander. He has gone back to his old ways, maybe even dropping out of church.

Here are some reasons or steps that cause this backward journey of wandering from the faith.

1. Self-confidence

Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can know it?"

Mark 14:29 "Peter declared, 'Even if all fall away, I will not.'"

I Corinthians 10:12 "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."

2. Boasting

Mark 14:31 "But Peter insisted emphatically, 'Even if I have to die with You, I will never disown You.' And all the others said the same."

Proverbs 16:18 "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

Proverbs 29:23 "A man's pride brings him low."

3. Prayerlessness

Mark 14:32-38

I Peter 4:7

I Peter 5:8

Ephesians 6:18

I Corinthians 16:13

The common thread in these verses is to pray and be watchful so that we stand firm in our faith. Prayer can help us stand against temptation that might cause us to wander from the truth.

4. Shame

Mark 14:54 "Peter followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest."

The man who boldly wanted to stand with Christ hours earlier, now sheepishly follows from a distance. When we become ashamed of associating with Christ, we are stepping closer to wandering from the faith.

5. Worldliness

Mark 14:66-67 "While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him"

I John 2:15-16

When we become ashamed of Christ it's easy to warm ourselves with the world, to love the things of the world more than we love the things of God.

6. Denial

Mark 14:66-70

It's just a small step from worldliness to denial. I think that's what happened to Demas.

7. Recklessness

Mark 14:71 "He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'"

Peter may have been a fisherman in his past, but I don't think the word here means profanity. I think it means he was making a vow, emphatically stating that he didn't know Jesus. Recklessness means to be careless with how we live. There is little concern for morals and he begins to make wrong decisions.

Another reason I believe this wayward person is a believer is that they have wandered from the truth. On Wednesday we have been considering the shield of faith. We discussed this past week the correlation between faith and truth. **GotQuestions** "When we believe God and take Him at His Word, we remain grounded in the truth, the lies of the enemy lose their power, and we become overcomers. In this way, faith is our shield." Faith must be grounded in the truth of God's Word. The degree to which we believe in the truth of God's Word will directly impact our depth of faith. When we begin to doubt the truth of God's Word, then our faith will wane, and we will begin the downward spiral toward waywardness.

In **John 18:38** Pilate asked Jesus what is truth? Here, James is saying that without a firm footing on knowing and obeying the truth, a person will wander from the truth. It will no longer have a hold on that believer. He will no longer use it as a guide in living. He will instead choose to be led by the philosophies of the world. Jesus said in **John 17:17** that the Word is truth, and that truth will sanctify you, it will change your character to be like Christ. He then said in **John 8:31-32** that if we hold to His

teaching, in essence, the truth, we will prove we are His disciples, and that truth will set us free. Jesus also said in **John 14:6** that He is the truth. But the wayward person doubt that and so begins their journey of wandering from the truth.

As I look at the passage, I see a person who is a believer, but who has wandered from his faith and in need of restoration. James' point is that when you see someone who is in trouble, someone who has strayed, you need to get involved, take some personal responsibility and "bring him back." When we see a person who has taken a path that is wayward, I see next a pursuit that is willful.

II. A PURSUIT THAT IS WILLFUL – v. 19b

When it comes to being involved in the life of another believer who has strayed, many Christians are like the drivers who saw the same accident I witnessed but who just kept on going, only concerned about keeping their own schedules rather than being concerned for someone who was in trouble. Each had their own reasons for not getting involved.

James is telling us to take an active role in the spiritual restoration of the person who has strayed from the truth. It's my personal opinion that this a part of fellowship. Fellowship isn't just sitting around campfires singing Cum By Yah, swapping stories. It's even more than just getting together for prayer, Bible study and communion. I think fellowship also includes spiritual accountability where we encourage one another in godly living. Part of spiritual growth is helping point out some areas where growth is hindered due to sin.

Solomon put the importance of fellowship and spiritual support this way in **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** when he said that two are better than one because when one person falls, the other is there to pick them up.

Proverbs 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

Unfortunately, there are some in the body of Christ who think criticism and condemnation is their

spiritual gift rather than encouragement. They prefer to point out the sins of others rather than help lead them back to restored fellowship. That's what Jerry Bridges calls a Crisis of Caring, which is the title of his book. Let me read an excerpt to help you see why I think there is a direct connection between what this verse says is our responsibility and fellowship (pg.9-10).

Another book I would recommend is by David Augsburger: Caring Enough to Confront. He provides a biblical model for confronting someone with compassion.

Ephesians 4:15 tells us to speak the truth, but that truth is to be spoken in love. Without love we are more likely to drive the person further away than to draw them to repentance and restoration.

One more book I recommend is written by Ken Sande, The Peacemaker. Listen to what he has to say: "Sin needs to be confronted when it is seriously harming the offender, either by direct damage (e.g., alcohol abuse) or by impaired relationships with God or other people. Looking out for the well-being of other Christians, especially those in your own family or congregation, is a serious responsibility. Unfortunately, because many Christians have adopted the world's view that everyone should be allowed to 'do his own thing,' some believers will do nothing, even when they see a brother or sister ensnared in serious sin. This is not the kind of love Jesus demonstrated, nor is it consistent with the clear teaching of Scripture."

Proverbs 9:8-9

Proverbs 24:11-12

Proverbs 27:5-6

Matthew 18:15

Galatians 6:1-2

That last passage has a very important principle that should guide us in confronting someone about sin: "you who are spiritual". Verse 2 gives the reason for being godly – so that we don't give in to the same temptation. Any person who has their telescope up scanning the horizon for wayward Christians so they can confront them is probably not the person to approach someone else about their sin.

Scripture teaches against eagerly looking for opportunities to point out the sins of others. Jesus said that we should first consider the beam that is in our own eye before we approach someone about the spec that is in theirs (**Matthew 7:3**).

People choose not to get involved for a variety of reasons stemming from a misunderstanding of Scripture.

Don't resist an evil person. **Matthew 5:39**

Who am I to judge someone?

Don't judge so that you won't be judged.

Isn't God's job to judge people?

Ken Sande writes "the best confronters are usually people who would prefer not to have to talk to others about their sin but will do so out of obedience to God and love for others." And let me add that they will do so in humility.

As you prepare to bring that person back to the Lord let me suggest five important thoughts to remember.

1. **Be prepared.** How important it is to first clean our own house through a time of confession and repentance before approaching someone who has strayed due to sin. Again, **Galatians 6:1** is a call for practicing our own godly character so that we have the right to be heard by someone else. We can't be hypocritical saying one thing and living something else.
2. **Be prayerful.** Ask the Lord for the right words to say and for a receptive and repentant heart of the person you will be talking to.
3. **Be purposeful.** There must be a deliberateness to our going and why we are going. The goal is restoration not condemnation.
4. **Be persistent.** Don't give up after one or two visits with them. Keep at it because it may take a while for them to see their need to repent. Continue to love them even if they refuse your initial effort to bring them back.
5. **Be Patient.** It may take time, maybe even years. The point is, don't give up on them. Pursuing restoration is going to take time. Be willful, intentional, knowing that it may require a long

commitment on your part, it may even be inconvenient at times. Don't go armed with Bible verses to bombard them with how wrong they are for what they are doing. Instead, show that person the love of Christ. People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

Chuck Swindoll writes "Real faith produces genuine patience not passive permissiveness. Under the excuse of 'patiently waiting for the Lord,' Christians frequently stand back and 'patiently' watch a brother or sister sink deeper and deeper into sin." We should pray that God will work in their heart, but we may be the one God uses.

In **verse 19** we see a path that is wayward and a pursuit that is willful.

In the closing verse we see a purpose that is wonderful.

III. A PURPOSE THAT IS WONDERFUL – v. 20

What is the reason we are to bring them back from wandering from the truth?

We are given two reasons.

A. His Circumstances Are Changed

B. His Character Is Changed

By intervening in the life of the wayward believer, the first thing we see is that he will be saved from death. Again, because I believe this is a believer who has erred, James is not speaking of saving from spiritual death but physical death. In writing to the Corinthian church as he addresses the issue of communion, Paul said that some who had sinned were sick and some had even died as a result of their sin (**I Corinthians 11:30**). He referred to them as having fallen asleep, a reference to the physical death of the believer awaiting their resurrection.

In his first letter, John referred to a sin that leads to death (**I John 5:16**).

By intervening in the life of the wayward believer, the second thing we see is that a multitude of sins will be covered. I believe there are two things that happen here. First, the wanderer will have his sins

forgiven by God which is promised in **I John 1:9** and the second is that by being restored to faith, he will be kept from going further down the wrong path of sin. His circumstances are changed, and his character is changed.

Anyone can stray from the truth. We can give the appearance of doing all the right things like faithfully attending services, reading our Bible, even praying, but our heart can be far from the Lord. How important to remember from **II Timothy 3:16** that the inspired Word of God can lead us back onto the right path once we have gone astray from the truth. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to stay on the right path by staying in God's Word daily, using it to stand firm against the devil.

Warren Wiersbe once said "God's Word will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from God's Word."

Eagerly spend time in God's Word – (**Jer. 15:16**).

Examine your spiritual life regularly through prayers of confession and cleansing – **Psa. 51:1-9**. **Psalm 139:23-24** encourages us to ask the Lord to search our heart and reveal any sinful way.

Enjoy regular fellowship with other believers (**Hebrews 10:24-25**) who will spur you on. That includes accountability for godly living.

Endure trials and temptation by standing firm in your faith. Use the armor of God – **Eph. 6:10-18**.

Endeavor to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength – **Mark 12:30**.

Exhibit the power of God's Spirit working in you as you yield to His control in developing God's character in you – **Galatians 5:22-23**.

Do you know someone who fits James' description of wandering from the truth?

Is the Lord prompting you to lovingly pursue after them to bring them back into a right relationship with Him?

Do you need to first get yourself cleaned up?

It is a wonderful purpose to see God work in that person's life as they confess and are restored into a right relationship with Him and with the body of Christ. Let's take the risk and be doers of the Word. Our goal is practical Christian living.