

# James 5:19-20

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Let's turn to the passage that we read just a moment ago in James chapter 5 and the final two verses of this letter. Now, we've already read the final two verses, so we know how James finishes the letter, but in the event that we didn't know and we were wondering, well, how would a letter of this nature end? What would be a fitting ending to a letter that, as we noticed at the very beginning, is directed to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations? So James has a global audience. He's dealing with matters of great importance and significance, and he's coming to the end of his letter, and you might wonder, well, what would be a fitting way to end such a letter? We might have imagined, of course, we know that he didn't do this, but we might have imagined that such a letter would fittingly end with a rousing call to reach out with the gospel to the nations. But, of course, that's not how it ends, and rather intriguingly, James' concern is less with reaching out and more with keeping in.

James just wants to keep everybody on board and on course, and so he deals with this matter of believers who are wondering, and the need to help such believers remain within the fold and remain on track. Now, of course, when we talk about reaching out or keeping in, it's not a choice that we have to make when we think about our own responsibilities as believers and as a church. We need to do both. We need to reach out to those who are not yet believers, and we need to ensure that those who are, are kept within the flock and kept in the faith. But I think sometimes if we are giving thought to the matter, we might imagine that reaching out is somehow more urgent, maybe even a bit more exciting, a bit scary as well, it has to be said. But at least in our thinking, if not in our actions, we might think that that is what should take priority. And if we do, then there's a danger that we can be careless in the responsibility that we have to keep in and to build up those who are already part of the family of faith. And that would be all of us. That would be keeping in and building up one another. So we're not talking about hypothetical people, but we're talking about us here gathered this evening. And the concern that James has is about believers who are wandering.

In the words of the hymn, we are prone to wander. And the proneness to wander, or this proneness to wander, is a prevalent and I think a permanent reality in every church, in every congregation, and I would imagine throughout time. Sometimes we can kind of be reminded of that, or a kind of vivid way of being reminded of that is looking at old photographs. If maybe, for example, you've got a, I don't know if people have photo albums these days, but anyway, if you're looking at a photograph from several years ago, say of a church outing, and you're looking at all the people in the photograph, or it could be, let's think of something to do with Bon Accord, maybe a youth weekend away at our growth, I don't know, 10 years ago, 15 years ago. You've got a group there, 40, 50 people, or maybe if we're thinking beyond the congregation of a youth conference, 100 people, 120 people.

Just imagine you're looking at that photograph and you go through that photograph one by one, and you think, oh now, where are these people? Of course some of them, you won't know where they are, but as you go through those pictures, I would wager that you will find one or two or more of those present in those photographs who have wandered from the faith. In some cases, it might be very visible, it might be very obvious. There may be those in the photograph who you don't know that they're wandering, but actually they are. They're still going to church, they're still involved, but in ways that we'll notice in a moment, they are, or we can be still wandering. It's a reality, it happens, it happens all the time, and so it's something we need to recognize and try and get to grips with and respond to. So let's see what James has to say on this matter, in these very brief verses, two verses where he speaks about this matter. I think we can draw out some of what he says by posing three questions and trying to answer these three questions.

So first of all, we can ask the question, who's at risk of wandering from the truth? To use the actual language that James uses here, my brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth. So who's at risk? That's the first question. The second question I want to think about a little bit is, what does it involve? What does it look like, this wandering? What are we talking about? So what does it involve? And then thirdly, and very importantly, I want to ask the question, what are we to do?

[ 5 : 20 ] You know, in the face of this reality, when we witness this happening, what are we to do? And also kind of connected with that, why? Why is it that we should respond in the manner that we're going to discover, James proposes? So that's the kind of outline of what we want to try and cover this evening. First of all then, who's at risk in this matter of wandering from the truth? Well, there in verse 19, James begins by making clear who he is speaking to, and so evidently this danger relates to those he is speaking to. He says, my brothers, or my brothers and sisters. He's speaking to believers.

Now, this is, you know, blindingly obvious that it is professing Christians who are at risk. It's only those who are walking in the truth who can wander from the truth. If you're not in the truth, then that's a problem, but you can't wander from it. And so clearly, those who are in danger of wandering from the truth are Christians, are believers, are those who are in the truth. But more significantly, when we pose the question, who's at risk, is to stress what James stresses, and that is that any believer and every believer is at risk of wandering. What does James say? Well, there in verse 19, he says, my brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth, that same form of words, that same verse is translated in the English Standard Version in the ESV as, if anyone among you, should wander from the truth, should wander from the truth. And that form of words is really just the same, but the form of words captures this idea of anyone being at risk. None are safe, none are immune from the possibility. And so that includes you, it includes me, it includes us all. And it's probably good for us just to, very briefly, to pause and let that sink in. When we're talking about this matter of wandering from the truth, we mustn't approach it from the perspective of, oh yes, I wonder who that's about, or oh yes, that reminds me of somebody I know. James is very clear that we are all potentially in danger of wandering from the truth. And so it's important for us to examine ourselves and ask the question, is that something I am doing in one way or another? Another thing that this recognition that all are in danger is to be careful not to assume that some Christians are safe, and not necessarily speaking about ourselves, but I think generally, you know, when we're part of a fellowship, part of a church, part of a congregation, you know, there's people within the congregation we might in our own mind consider, maybe rightly so, consider them to be very mature in the faith, very committed to Christ, and very involved, and so on and so forth. And in our minds, we think, well, they would never wander from the truth. We probably wouldn't verbalize it, but in our minds, we wouldn't conceive of that possibility. And James is saying, well, be careful, be careful. Don't imagine that there are some who are immune from this temptation or from this danger. So anyone, everyone is potentially at risk of wandering from the truth. So that's the first question answered. The second question, where we need to spend a little bit more time, is what does it involve, this wandering from the truth?

Well, the very verb that James uses is helpful and quite vivid, really, the verb wonder. I think it gives us an idea of what's involved. It's the same word that is used in Matthew chapter 18. We read just a few verses there in Matthew chapter 18, where Jesus is speaking of wandering sheep, and it's the same word that is employed here by James. And I imagine James has in mind, as he uses this language, this picture of wandering sheep. Now, wandering is not something dramatic. It's not something sudden.

It's not something scandalous. It's not something that happens, you know, from one moment or from one day to the next. Wandering isn't something that's immediately obvious or visible, be it to oneself, if we're the ones wandering, or in others, if others are wandering. We're not going to sort of immediately see something and say, ah, this person's wandering from the truth. The very nature of wandering is that it's not dramatic and perhaps immediately visible. Rather, the language of wandering presents the picture or generates the impression of this gentle, straying, maybe inconspicuous, drifting from your moorings or drifting from the fellowship or drifting from a life that is pleasing to God. This is, that's what wandering is about. But from what? What is it that we wander from? Well,

James tells us, my brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth. Now, maybe when we read that, the first thought that comes to our mind, I don't know. I don't know what the first thought that comes to your mind is, but when I read that kind of language of wandering from the truth, I suppose the first thought that comes to my mind is doctrine and theology and wandering from the truth. Well, that's somebody who abandons, you know, sound doctrine. They wander from the truth. That is a danger and that can happen. But I think here, when James speaks about the truth, he's speaking about the truth in the sense of the truth that we walk in. In fact, just a couple of pages on in 3 John chapter 4, we have a beautiful expression employed by John when he speaks in these terms. 3 John verse 4, I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. You're walking in the truth.

[ 11 : 45 ] So that's not just about doctrine. It's not just about ticking certain boxes that I believe the right things. I'm sound in doctrine. It's about our life. It's the way we live. It's about our service to God. It's about walking in the truth. It is practical. It's ethical. It has a lifestyle dimension.

Now, this is made clear even in what James has to say because there in verse 20, he says this, remember, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way. Now, the error of his way is about somebody walking in the wrong direction, you know, living in a manner that is not appropriate, is not right. And so they need to be turned or we need to be turned from the error of our way. So, wandering from the truth, one expression of it could well be doctrinal in terms of abandoning biblical truth. But for most of us, that won't be what it looks like. It will be wandering in the manner of our lifestyle and in the manner or in the area of our service to God and so on and so forth.

Well, let me just suggest some ways, some concrete ways in which we can wander or the different forms that wandering might take for us. For some of us, it may involve wandering in our commitment to the local congregation that we form a part of, our commitment to it, our service to God in and through it.

It may be for some of us that we wander in, to use Paul's language in his letter to the Galatians, we can wander as we grow weary in doing good. So, a very vivid expression that Paul uses there in that epistle, how we can grow weary in doing good. So, there's nothing dramatic. We're not guilty of any scandalous sin, but we grow weary in doing good. And in that way, we can wander from the truth. We can wander in the fulfilling of our duties and responsibilities. And we can, of course, wander morally. We can begin to tolerate behavior conduct that displeases God. We may begin to mold ourselves or be molded by the values and by the morality of the society that we're part of, that tells us that this is okay, that's not so serious. And, you know, I could give examples, but you're more than able to work it out for yourself. Those areas where we can wander from the truth in the question, not only of morality in terms of what we think, but also in terms of how we behave. We can wander in our commitment to the truth in terms of being honest and allowing ourselves just to lower our standards when it comes to telling the truth and being honest and transparent with others and beginning to just act and behave like others round about us. We can wander in the exercise of personal devotions and praying to God and studying God's Word. And we could go on. So, there's any number of ways in which this wandering can take or find expression. But let me turn to a third question and try and answer it. And that is, what are we to do in the face of this wandering? And also, why are we to do so? And verse 20, the second of the two verses, James deals with that. He says there in verse 20 of, let me just get back from 1 John, right, yes, from in James chapter 5 and verse 20, he says, remember, or let's read verse 19 as well, because it speaks about the response as well. My brothers, if one of you should wonder for the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his ways will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. So, it tells us there in the second half of verse 19 and in verse 20, first of all, what we're to do, we're to bring him back or bring him back. And then it tells us why or the outcome of that. It will cover, it will save a sinner from death and cover over a multitude of sins. So, the call, the responsibility that's being laid upon us is to bring somebody back, that such a person would turn back from their wandering in the wrong direction. It's the same verb, this verb translated bring back or bring him back. It's the same one that's used when Luke records the incident of Peter being brought back to Christ following his denial.

And that's the language used of how Peter was brought back, having denied his Savior. So, what we need to do, what we're being urged to do, the responsibility we have is to bring people back. Now, that in itself is something that we need to just pause and highlight as being very important. Our natural instinct as believers, as a church is, or maybe I need to say ought to be, to bring back and not to throw out.

[17:18] That's the priority, that's the concern, to bring back. The biblical imperative is to be as inclusive as possible rather than being swiftly exclusive. You know, the view that suggests that the more exclusive we are, the more we keep people out, the more faithful we are, is an ugly perversion of the truth.

What James is reminding us and what the Bible ever reminds us is that our great concern should be to bring people back, to keep people in, not to be looking to exclude people because of some lapse in behavior or because of some incident or some problem that's arisen. Well, let's be rid of them, let's be shot of them. That isn't or oughtn't to be our first response. But before considering what this bringing back involves, let's note who is responsible for doing it. Well, what does James say?

He says it very clearly in verse 20, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way, whoever. And what he means by that is just what he says, he means whoever. So this isn't a responsibility that is solely in the hands of the leadership of a congregation. It's not solely in the hands of those who are more mature in the faith, though maybe they have a particular responsibility.

It's clearly the responsibility of all, whoever does it and whoever can do it, whoever should be concerned to do it. So this is a task for all of us to be involved in. But what's involved?

How are we to do this in the real world? What's involved in being able to bring somebody back who is wandering from the truth? Well, there's a couple of things that I think are maybe very obvious, but worth stressing. The first is that we need to know people. Because wandering can often be something very subtle, because it's something that isn't immediately visible, it's not something very dramatic or scandalous often. If we don't know people, then we won't even realize that this is happening. And of course, if you don't realize it's happening, you're certainly not going to do anything about it. And yet many of us can be drifting really quite far from the truth and still be in church every Sunday, or at least with a fair degree of regularity.

[ 19 : 43 ] So there's a need for us to know people better. Now, how does that happen? Well, I think in a congregation of this size, which isn't a large congregation, but a medium-sized congregation, we're not going to know everybody. We're not going to be able to be sensitive to everybody and everybody's circumstances. But in the measure that we're involved with a group of people, be it in a neighborhood fellowship or in some ministry that we're involved in, perhaps there we would have a better opportunity to know people to the extent that we are able to see and to detect and be sensitive to this problem as we see the signs in others. So we need to know people.

If we don't know people, even if we wanted to do this, we're not going to be able to. But the second thing that's also very obvious is we need to do something. What are we to do?

How are we to bring back the one who is wandering? Well, that will depend a great deal on the person. It will depend a great deal on the circumstances. It may involve visiting the person. It may involve speaking to them. It may involve sending them a text or an email or phoning them, taking that initiative and getting in touch with somebody for whom we have concern. It may involve us gently and sensitively inquiring as to why it is they're behaving in a certain way or why it is we're not seeing them.

As we used to see them. And again, it will depend on the person and the circumstances. But also it will involve, where necessary, and often it will be necessary, the willingness and the courage to point out that which is wrong. Now, we're not good at that. You know, we really aren't good at that. We're cowards. We don't want to have an awkward conversation. We don't want to risk rejection. And so generally we just don't do this. But the onus upon us is very clear. If we see somebody who is wandering from the truth, then we need to have the courage to approach them and to rebuke or to challenge them in the matter that we are concerned about.

The Bible is clear on this in many ways. The book of Proverbs has much practical advice or wisdom on this matter. In Proverbs chapter 27, we read, better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. Sometimes being nice to somebody isn't loving them.

[ 22 : 26 ] Sometimes saying something that can be difficult or seemingly harsh or painful is the loving thing to do. That does need or does require love and courage and wisdom. Paul speaks about the need for gentleness in matters of this kind. So, for example, in Galatians chapter 6 and verse 1, he puts the matter really very strikingly or memorably. And here he's speaking about something perhaps, well, I don't know if I can call it more serious. Wandering from the truth is pretty serious, but he's speaking about something maybe very specific. In Galatians 6 verse 1, he says, brother, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Restore him gently. Don't ignore it. Don't sweep it under the carpet. Don't imagine you didn't see anything. Don't say, well, it's his problem. He needs to sort that out with God. Or it's somebody else's problem. But whatever you do, do it gently.

So, we need to do that. We need to be willing to do something, to approach somebody and to help bring them back. Now, we may be rejected. They may not be interested. And if that's so, well, perhaps there's not much more we can do at that point, but at least we need to make the effort.

And finally, just very briefly mention why. Why do we need to do this? Well, two reasons are given by James. He says, first of all, that doing so, we will save a soul from death or save him from death and cover a multitude of sins. Now, the question that these two reasons kind of given generates or poses for us, is it the case that a Christian, because we've said at the very beginning this is about Christians who are in danger of wandering from the truth, is the Christian at risk of death, particularly spiritual death, which would seem to be the clear implication here. If we're being told that if you bring him back, then you save him from death, well, the implication seems fairly obvious.

But then how does that sit with our understanding of what the Bible teaches, that the saints, though we stumble, though we wander, we ultimately are upheld and persevere.

Let me just read a quote from one commentator who I think helpfully allows us to see what it is, what James is saying, or the angle from which James is approaching this matter, or writing. And he says this, and I'm simply going to read this quote. What James writes is not written, this matter of saving a soul from death, is not written from the point of view of what God knows about us, nor from the point of view of what we know about ourselves, but from the point of view of our fellow Christians observing our lives and hearing our talk. To them, the evidence of backsliding our lives must call in question whether we are truly Christ or not, hence saved from death. So what we observe can lead us to be concerned that perhaps here we have somebody who is not a believer. Their behavior would suggest that. And so bringing them back is actually bringing them to faith. Now we don't know if that's what's happening, but nonetheless we have to take it as seriously as that. And then the second reason that we're given for doing this is that doing so will cover over a multitude of sins.

[ 26 : 03 ] And of course the implication there is that the one who is brought back will repent of his sins and so be forgiven. The covering over is not the action of the restorer, but the result of the restoration.

The one brought back acknowledges their situation, repents of their sin, receives the forgiveness, the covering of their sin that God offers to all who do repent. So that's why we are to do it. So wandering from the truth, we're all at danger from it. Within our gathering this evening there will be those of us who are in some measure wandering from the truth. And the importance is that each of us and all of us be sensitive to that, be aware of that, be concerned about that, and be willing to do something about it. As we look to consider the manner in which we must fulfill our missionary mandate to reach out with the gospel, we must do that more carefully and more seriously and more urgently as we consider the lost outside. Let's not be careless with regard to our duty to keep in those who are on the inside.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which it acknowledges and recognizes and describes our condition so accurately. We thank you for the timeless truths of the Bible. We read what James wrote a couple of thousand years ago, and yet what he writes is so real and so relevant, so reflective of our own reality as individual believers prone to wander, and as part of congregations where there are those who are not only prone to but are wandering from the truth. We pray that you would help us to have the sensitivity to be able to see and to recognize that, but perhaps even more so give us the love and the wisdom and the gentleness to do what James requires of us, to seek to bring back the sinner from the error of his way. We thank you for those who perhaps in our own life and experience have had the courage to bring us back or to challenge us, to rebuke us, and we pray that we likewise might be given the courage and the wisdom to do so for others, and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.