

**What To Do With Wanderers (James 5:19-20)**  
**Sunday, July 5, 2020**  
**Faith Evangelical Free Church | Manhattan, KS**

*19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

This morning we will wrap up our study of the book of James, taking a look at Chapter 5:19-20 (which Sophie just did a GREAT job of reading for us).

Over the last few months we've seen that this New Testament letter has had a lot to say about how Christians -- thanks to their faith and the power of the Holy Spirit -- can persevere through challenges, trials, and even suffering that are all sure to be a part of any life as a follower of Jesus.

And last week Pastor Steve reminded us that the church -- our local community of followers of Jesus -- that we are meant to care for one another, depend on each other, pray with, for and over those who need physical and spiritual healing, and confess sins and seek forgiveness together.

Overall, the Book of James is rich with lessons about how to live by our faith in Jesus (how we live a Christian life).

But as he brings his letter to (a somewhat abrupt) conclusion, James anticipates, and attempts to answer, a question that has been lurking around in the shadows of everything he's taught and talked about in his letter:

- *What happens if someone in our faith community refuses and rejects the kind of life (the "Christian way of life") James prescribes?*
- What do we do if a brother or sister in Christ has a pattern of sinful behavior that they don't confess, perhaps that they don't even realize is wrong?
- If someone's faith or works breaks down or turns ineffective or even harmful, and they walk from the church or even from faith in Jesus...what should we do then?

James doesn't provide an exhaustive answer to these questions, but in the last few sentences of his letter he does give us some words of wisdom and some encouragement for what to do if a brother or sister in Christ wanders away from the truth. That's what we'll be considering as we look at 5:19-20 together today.

**Part 1: Some of us may wander from the truth. (v19a)**

The first thing we need to do is come face to face with something that is pretty unsettling and perhaps even frightening, but nonetheless a reality.

In the first half of v19, James warns us that: *Some of us may wander from the truth.*

*Some of us may (once, or perhaps even multiple times throughout our lives) wander from the truth.*

The meaning of "wandering" is (no pun intended) pretty straightforward:

- It's walking away from and losing track of the path you ought to be on.
- It's perhaps being led astray, but more likely it's a result of your own willful decision and initiative to pursue something sinful, disobedient, or untrue.

- When we wander, *we deceive ourselves about what is really true about God and about us* -- because we've decided we want something other than what God desires for us.

In 2 Timothy 3:13 “wandering” is associated with evildoers and imposters” who “go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived”.

In 2 Peter 2 “wandering” is linked to false teachers, and following them is said to result in “wages of wickedness” (2:15).

So yes, “wandering from the truth” is a really big deal.

- It’s disobeying what God asks us to do,
- It’s twisting doctrine and theology into something that fits our own comforts or preferred lifestyle,
- It’s rejecting what is written in the inspired Word of God because we simply don’t like it.

Abandoning or rebelling against God’s truth is a dangerous, life-altering thing to do.

We need to be COMPASSIONATELY vigilant in looking out for our brothers and sisters in Christ and helping them become aware when they may have strayed from the path the Lord wants us to walk.

But we ALSO need to be open and receptive to the possibility that we ourselves will need to be called back from wandering off from time to time.

Back when I was an adventurous and intrepid teenager, I spent two weeks canoeing the boundary waters of Quetico Park in Canada. When you go canoeing there every once and awhile you have to stop and portage, or carry your canoes and supplies over some land in order to get to the next body of water. So everyone in your crew runs back and forth, carrying everything from one side of the landbridge to the next. During one these portages, and I merrily skipped along with packs on my back, front, and in both hands, my path -- *which I had been VERY CLEARLY INSTRUCTED TO ALWAYS FOLLOW* -- made a big loop around the outside of a tallgrass meadow. Following the path would clearly add a few minutes to my trip, whereas cutting across the meadow would have me done in no time. I knew the instructions. I knew what my fellow crew members had already deemed wise (following the path). And I could clearly see that no one else had tried the meadow shortcut. So what did I do? I cut across the meadow. And about halfway across I discovered that the meadow was really more of a bog when I suddenly sank waste deep into thick, sludgy, stinky mud. Ignoring what I’d been told was wise and blazing my own trail left me stuck, in danger, and totally dependent on someone finding me and helping me back to the path (which, eventually, did happen thanks to my kind, albeit raucously laughing crewmates).

Christians often know the path they are supposed to be on. We know how to “talk-the-talk”, and how to “walk-the-walk”...but even if we keep up appearances, we can still stray from the truth of the Gospel, from embracing the life of faith and works that James describes throughout his letter.

We forget what it really means to love God and love others and have those truths shape our everyday lives and decisions.

We lose sight of discipleship and replace it with a consumer-style Christianity that is a lot more comfortable.

We sometimes refuse to confess sins. We sometimes refuse to forgive sinners.

We set fires with our tongues because we want to be justified by our own power, because we like to think of ourselves as the smartest, the sharpest, or the MOST right person in any given room (or social media platform).

We perform in public -- but sin in secret, and we become too scared or too ashamed to seek out help back to the right path.

When we see these sort of things happening in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ --OR when someone confronts us about their concern for our own wanderings -- we've got to commit to the work of getting out of the mud and muck and getting back onto the right path.

We must seek to bring those who wander away from God back to Him and back to what he says is true and good.

As followers of Jesus, we don't write off beloved wayward members of our faith community. We want to be people who care enough to stay engaged, to stay hopeful, and to stay prayerful that a lost friend can return home again.

Ultimately, *all of us should seek to bring those who wander back to the truth.*

**Part 2: All of us should seek to bring those who wander back to the truth (to the way of Christ). (v19b)**

*All of us should seek to bring those who wander back to the truth (to the way of Christ).*

Looking at v19 again, we read:

*19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back...*

There's something really interesting about the way James introduces this idea of bringing someone back home from his or her wanderings: James does not command that this is something Christians do. He ASSUMES that a believing community will go after help lead their brother or sister in Christ back to the truth. This is work James expects of the church he is writing to, and it's work that our God expects of our church, too.

And why does James have this expectation? Because he's a student of Scripture and a follower of the way and the life of Jesus.

Think with me for a moment how often there is a story in the Bible about helping someone who is physically, emotionally, and spiritually hurting. The broken and wandering aren't abandoned to their fate. They are sought after and helped in finding their way back to a loving relationship with God and a renewed connection with the believing community. Just a few examples:

- Jesus has many parables about how his followers need to value, cherish, and pursue those who are lost. The father rushing out to meet his prodigal son. The shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to find the one lost lamb. The woman who turns her house upside down to find one precious lost coin.
- And then Jesus practices what he preaches when he seeks out Peter after his resurrection, restores Peter to his life's calling, and more importantly restores Peter to a loving relationship with His Savior. Peter had abandoned Jesus to his death on the cross. But Jesus does not abandon Peter. He finds him, leads him through a process of confession and repentance, and restores their friendship.
- Later, in the book of Acts, Jesus will send a man named Ananias to go and find a man who had been blinded.
  - The man Ananias was sent to help and heal was feared by many 1st century Christians for his ruthless pursuit of the destruction of the entire Jesus movement.
  - But again, God loves people and loves redeeming their lives.
  - So he sent Ananias to pray over the man, and after "something like scales" fell from the man's eyes, he rose from his bed, was baptized, and Paul the persecutor became Paul the Apostle, Preacher, Evangelist, and Theologian.

There are many more examples we could look at, but the point is this: *Christians do not write off those who wander off.* We remain committed to them, pray for them, speak with them, and do what we can to try and help turn them back to Christ.

Do you know someone who has wandered off from the truth?

- Perhaps you have a friend or a family member whose life demonstrates that they are far from God.
- If that's the case, this expectation to lead someone back to the truth may be daunting.
- And I don't want to belittle the heavy responsibility or heartache that comes with seeing someone you love try to live life apart from God.

Two things I want to be sure you hear this morning:

- First, notice that James frames this whole expectation with the realm of possibility: "IF someone should lead a wanderer back", then certain things (which we'll talk about in just a moment) will happen.
  - Your calling is to be patient, persistent, and a good ambassador of a great God.
  - You live the kind of life James describes in Chapters 1-5, and you unflinchingly YET LOVINGLY keep the truth in front of your wandering loved one as much as possible.
  - That's the work. That's all you can do until the Lord allows for more to occur.

Second, IF the Lord does indeed move the life of that wayward soul, then v20 tells us something truly amazing happens:

**Part 3: Returning to the truth and repenting of wandering is always met (or should always be met) with an abundance of grace. (v20)**

***20 ...remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.***

This is a grammatically difficult sentence to unpack. There are pronouns ambiguously attached to actions everywhere, and scholars who are much smarter than me disagree on just exactly what James is trying to say here.

To save you all lots of time I'm going to consolidate a couple dozen pages of discussion from a couple different commentaries for you and suggest these three interpretations/conclusions of v20:

1. The person who helps the sinner (v19's "wanderer") see the "error of their way" and repent (that's what "turn" means) plays a role in saving that person from death -- at a minimum physical death, but I also think spiritual death and being eternally cut off from God is at play here.
  - a. (Recall that in 1:13-15 James lays out a path from sin to spiritual/eternal death).
2. When this happens, a multitude of sins are covered.
  - a. My best guess is this means -- at a minimum-- the sins of the wanderer are forgiven.
  - b. Last week Pastor Steve, as he preached in the verses prior to vv19-20, mentioned that the believing community's intercession on behalf of someone who has sinned can help lead them to restoration.
  - c. I think v20 fleshes that idea out further -- we're so interconnected and interdependent on each other that the forgiveness which truly comes from God flows through those who seek out the lost and wandering and gets administered to those in need of conviction, confession, forgiveness, and redemption.
  - d. Which leads us to the next point:
3. Those that have done the work to help bring this wanderer back are participating in this person's salvation and/or restoration, but God is still very much in control.
  - a. Salvation is still His and His alone to work in the hearts of those who seek and surrender to Him.
  - b. We may be part of the rescue team, but we're not saviors.

- c. We may act with great love and personal sacrifice to see a wandering brother or sister return back to the truth, but we shouldn't allow ourselves to become idols because of it.
- d. We participate in God's amazing saving acts...we don't perform the acts ourselves. Salvation is God's alone.

Now some of you clever folks are thinking "okay...I can follow that, but the third point on your outline (found on the Church Center App!) is:"

**Returning to the truth and repenting of wandering is always met (or should always be met) with an abundance of grace.**

So how did I get there? Why did that lesson jump out to me while reflecting on v20?

Because I think it's important, if we're going to commit to this work of bringing wayward believers and lost folks back to faith in Christ and into a right relationship with God, we need to keep in mind that *when God does this sort of thing He goes after people with an abundance of GRACE* -- NOT with an eagerness to come down on them heavy and hard for being wrong.

If you set out to help someone come back from a sinful life, and your motivating desire is to prove them wrong, win an argument, or make them feel the hurt of their lostness in order to turn them around...then stop.

Because that's not the way we see God do things in the Bible. That's not how he treats us when we sin and wander off. It's not how we should treat others.

If you're going to be on the rescue team, you have to be able to let grace and love lead the way. It does no good to try and bludgeon someone back to obedience.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul counsels those seeking to restore their wandering brothers and sisters, "*if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person GENTLY.*"

I want you to keep this image in mind as you try to restore wandering friends and family to the truth. It's from Isaiah 40 and is a picture of how God seeks those He loves who have lost their way:

*10 See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 **He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.***

You don't need to shame, demolish, or destroy the one who had wandered from the truth. You need to love them. You need to gather them up and carry them close to your heart, the same way God carries you.

A few final thoughts to help you process and think about how this passage might apply to you:

- First: Be honest about your own potential for wandering.
  - Before you do ANYTHING, spend some time in serious and honest reflection and prayer about whether or not you've wandered off from the truth in any capacity.
- Second: Be humble when you seek to help a wanderer return to what is true.
  - If you think God's leading you to be part of a "rescue team" and to go help restore someone who is struggling with sin, be sure to be prayerful.

- Be mindful of your own sins (check for the plank in your own eye!),
- And remember that Jesus sought the lost lamb because he LOVED it, not because he was eager to rebuke it.
- Finally: Be quick to embrace those returning with the same grace Jesus is eager to share with them (and with you).
  - Whether you're the saved or the "saver", remember -- ALL glory really goes to God.
  - All boasting really goes to God.
  - Salvation and the multitude of covered sins are His work, not ours. Leave the praise and admiration for that work where it belongs: with Him and Him alone.
  - Do not turn your rescuer into an idol, and do not perceive yourself as a savior.
  - Be quick to embrace those returning with the same grace Jesus is eager to share with them (and with you).