

We come to the end of our study of the New Testament letter written by James, the Lord's half-brother and leader of the church in Jerusalem. We've seen this is a very practical letter. James has addressed all kinds of things that deal with how to live our lives as followers of Christ.

He's taught us:

about the power of our words

about how to respond to trials and temptations

about money and wealth

about helping the poor and needy

about not showing favoritism

about the pitfalls of pride

about getting along with others

about how to pray in any and all circumstances of life.

In all of this, James is trying to keep our walk with Jesus on track. He wants more than anything for us to be single-minded in our devotion to Him. But one of the things I love about James is he's very realistic. He assumes we'll all fail to do that from time to time. So James is also careful to tell us what to do when we do fail. In the passage last week, James said to "confess your sins to one another and pray for each other." That applies to all of us. There'll be times in all of our lives when we need to say, "I blew it. I was wrong. I need God's forgiveness. I need your forgiveness."

But at the very end of his letter, James addresses an issue that's also a reality in every church community, and that's when someone wanders away from the faith and doesn't confess; doesn't seek forgiveness. This is someone who's heart has grown hard. I'd imagine we all know people like this. I think of three of my best friends in college. We were very passionate about our faith. We had a lot of fun together, but we were very sincere about our desire to follow Jesus. We held each other accountable. We prayed together. We studied the scriptures together. We served together in ministry. Well, guess what? Last time I checked, not one of them was walking with the Lord. I don't even think one of them would confess Jesus is Lord.

So, what do I do about that? What does anyone of us do when someone wanders away from the faith? This is the issue James tackles at the end of his letter. He doesn't offer up a blessing or a benediction as the apostle Paul often did at the end of his

letters. He doesn't even say "cheers" or "good-bye." Rather, he tackles this one last practical issue of what to do when a brother or sister wanders away from the faith. What's our responsibility when this happens?

**My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.
James 5:19-20**

The problem: One of you has wandered from the truth

James begins by defining the problem. Notice how he addresses them as "brothers and sisters." What's crazy is this is the 14th time in this letter he addresses them this way. He beats this drum over and over again. He's emphasizing throughout the bond we have as family. We're brothers and sisters with a common Father. We're knit together as spiritual siblings. And sometimes one of us might wander from the truth. James says, "one of you," a brother or sister, who's part of this family.

One of the things we all need to realize is, as the old hymn says, we're "prone to wander." You know: "*Prone to wander. Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the Lord I love.*" By the way, the word James uses for "wander" is an interesting one. It's the Greek word, *planeo*, from which we get our word planet. Planets appear to wander through the night sky, but people wander too. James specifically says we wander "from the truth." That could refer to wandering from adherence to doctrinal truth, like someone who no longer believes in the Trinity or salvation by faith. Or it could refer to wandering away from the practice of the truth in our lifestyle. Perhaps someone caves into a lifestyle of pornography or an addiction to alcohol, or perhaps they become so bitter at someone in the church they don't want to a part of it anymore. Whether it's in our doctrine, our lifestyle, or both, we wander from the truth. Down in verse 20, James describes the one who wanders as "a sinner" and speaks of the "error of his way." Well, we're all sinners, but this person has continued in sin and turned his back on God and his people as a way of life.

How does this happen? Why would someone wander? Certainly, sometimes it's a blatant rejection of the truth. But my experience tells me it more often happens gradually, starting with small, seemingly inconsequential compromises. I mean, how do sheep get lost? Well, they keep their heads down, nibbling and

wandering, from one grassy tuft to another, until they're lost. A sheep doesn't set out to get lost. He just strays farther and farther from the flock until, suddenly, he looks up and sees he's terribly alone.

A brother or sister can get lost in just the same way. They don't set out to get lost. They just get caught up in their own lives, or their kids' lives, or their jobs and their worries consume them, and all this takes them farther and farther away from walking with God. They drift away from their church family, they open their Bible less and less, and the things of God that used to be important to them are now secondary. They didn't set out to wander or to get lost, but they did. I'm not saying their innocent, just that it wasn't always their intention.

Jesus once told a story that might help us understand how this happens. He said, *"A farmer went out to sow his seed."* He then described four different kinds of soil the seed might fall on. Each of these soils represents a different kind of person and how they receive the word of truth in their hearts.

He says, *"Some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up."* These are people with hard hearts who hear the word but never respond at all. It's like, "That's fine for you, but I'm good. I don't need God. I don't need Jesus." James isn't talking about them.

But Jesus went on and said, *"Some fell on rocky places, where it didn't have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root."* These are people who hear the word and respond immediately with joy. They sign up for the new believer class at church. They're all in! But when hard times come, persecution, or just times of testing, they fall away because the soil of their hearts is shallow. Sometimes people wander from the truth because the Christian life can be hard, and God never promises a life free from troubles and hardships.

Then Jesus described another kind of soil. He said, *"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants."* You might call this an infested heart because later Jesus says they represent someone who hears the word and accepts it, but the worries of this life, the pleasures of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word and keep it from bearing fruit. Anyone of those things can cause us to wander: the worries of this life, the pursuit of pleasure, the ambition to make more and more money. Again, you don't even always know it's happening, but it is, and before you know it, you've wandered so far from the truth you don't know how to get back.

The fourth soil, of course, is the fertile heart, which Jesus says, *"stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering, produce a crop."*

Each of us should understand we're prone to wander, and we need to tend the soil in our hearts. And we shouldn't be shocked when people we know and love wander from the truth. But how

do we respond when they do wander? What's our responsibility towards them?

The remedy: Bring that person back!

Thankfully, in very simple terms, James spells out the remedy. He says, "someone should bring that person back," and "turn a sinner from the error of his way."

By the way, please don't miss here what I'd call the importance of the one: "If one of you should wander..." One person matters. We're not a herd; we're a flock. And Jesus knows and cares for each and everyone of his sheep. When I see a flock of sheep, they all look alike to me. But I'm told shepherds know their sheep. They know them individually. They even have names for them! Over and over, Jesus showed how he cared about the one. Listen to what he said,

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he's happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that didn't wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven isn't willing that any of these little ones should perish." Matt 18:12-14

He's talking about believers who are weak in their faith, need extra care, and often lose their way. Jesus, the Great Shepherd, will go out looking for the one. But get this: In doing so, he uses each one of us! Let me emphasize this is not the job of any one group of people in the church. It's not just the job of the professionals. It's not just the job of the pastors, elders, or staff. James is addressing all the "brothers and sisters" in the church family — this is the responsibility of all of us.

You say, "Well, okay, I get that. But how do I do it?" Look for a moment with me at Galatians 6:1-2,

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Notice how Paul also calls us "brothers and sisters." Again, we're a family. Families should be upfront and honest with each other. We don't sweep things under the rug. Paul says, what happens if "someone is caught in a trespass?" He speaks of this as a normal occurrence in the life of the church. Some might think this kind of thing ought to never happen in a church, but, again, we're all frail humans, and we all fall from time to time.

When he speaks of being "caught in a sin," he isn't saying this person has been caught red-handed by someone else in the act of sin. He's talking about someone who's been overtaken or ambushed by the sin itself. The picture is of one caught in a trap who doesn't want to be there. The picture isn't of a stiff-necked

rebel, shaking his fist at God; it's of someone caught by something he can't get free of himself. That's how we ought to see them—as a precious brother or sister who wants to please God but who's been ambushed by sin.

What do we do with someone like that? Unfortunately, believers usually do one of two things. Some of us just sweep it under the rug and deny it completely. Maybe we do that under the guise of grace. Maybe we just don't want to appear "judgy." Maybe we just take the attitude that it's none of our business or "nobody's perfect." But this is wrong. Elizabeth Elliott, in her book, *On Asking God Why* says this,

The current popular notion that judging others is in itself a sin leads to such inappropriate maxims as "I'm OK and you're OK." It encourages a conspiracy of moral indifference that says, "If you never tell me that anything I'm doing is wrong, I'll never tell you that anything you're doing is wrong."

So we do nothing. Or maybe we just gossip about it or share it as a confidential prayer request. But Paul gives us a very different approach. He says to restore that person. We can't restore someone if we're ignoring where they're at. To restore means to act in such a way that we bring positive healing and change to their life. The word restore was used to describe the mending of fishing nets after they'd been torn. It was also used to describe the resetting of a bone by a doctor after it had been broken. The purpose isn't to tear down but to bind up and heal so it can function again the way it's supposed to.

Paul also tells us how to do this. He says, *"Restore that person gently."* Don't be harsh or vindictive in your approach. Be tender. Be soft. This doesn't mean we're weak. The idea behind gentleness is strength under control. If you've ever had a broken bone and had a doctor trying to reset it, you know there's a need for firmness and strength, but also for gentleness. That's how we deal with a brother or sister who's wandered off and been broken by sin. We're dealing with sensitive areas and fragile people, so it's critical to be gentle.

But Paul says not only to be gentle but also be humble. He says, *"But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted."* You have no right to approach this person with an air of spiritual superiority. If you think you'll never have to be in a place where you've wandered off, or you're caught in sin, watch out because pride comes before a fall. Don't make that mistake. We all must understand our own vulnerability. So if you have to go and restore a brother, go with a humble spirit.

When Paul says, *"you who live by the spirit,"* he isn't talking about an elite class of spiritual giants in the church. It's not a group of spiritual Rambos who go around trying to get other people's lives straight. He's just talking about people who are walking in that Spirit-filled way. People who are loving, gentle, patient, kind, and self-controlled. The work of restoration isn't the job of immature

believers. Those are the folks that are most likely to be too harsh. This is the job of those who are spiritually in a place where the Lord is allowed to manifest His character through their life.

Finally, he says we're to *"carry each other's burdens."* Not only do we point out sin, but we help that person get free from it. It's not enough to reset the bone. You may have to carry the load for that person for a while. It's not enough just to lift him back up on his feet. You may have to hold him up and help him walk. You don't say to the brother caught in a sin, "Go and get well and when you're well, then come back to us." You say, "Let me help you carry some of the load. Let me walk with you through this time and be a part of the process of healing and growth and strengthening."

The result: You'll save them from death and cover many sins

And when you do that when you see a brother or sister come back home, there's joy; there's a celebration. Like when the Prodigal Son came home, the Father said, "Let's throw this boy a party! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Let's BBQ a fattened calf. Let's have a feast and celebrate!" *"My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found"* (Luke 15:22-24).

And the reason for this joy is laid out right here at the end of James. He says, first when you turn a sinner from the error of his way, you "will save them from death." What kind of death is he talking about? It could be physical death because we know earlier in chapter 5, James spoke of those who were gravely ill as a result of sin. Or, he could mean spiritual death. When a believer wanders from the truth, they'll experience a deathlike condition where they're out of fellowship with God, and that results in frustration, boredom, shame, and hostility. If that person is a genuine believer, he's not a happy camper. He loses the assurance of his salvation. He's experiencing all the symptoms of spiritual death. To save him from that kind of death is something to celebrate!

The second thing is similar. He says you'll also "cover over a multitude of sins." James is most likely thinking about Proverbs 10:12 (NASB), *"Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions."* So instead of stirring up strife, instead of harping on sin, love covers up sin. Love is quick to forgive sin. It makes peace. Love is restorative and redemptive. It covers the sin with love and points the way home. And, when that person comes home and embraces that forgiveness, there's rejoicing.

I received a beautiful letter from a woman who loves the Lord but had been trapped in an unhealthy relationship. She came to me years ago for counsel, and I told her she had to get out of that relationship. She was experiencing all the symptoms of death — guilt, shame, a lack of peace, and lots of frustration. But she wrote me a letter to let me know she finally broke it off and she was so filled with joy and excitement about all God was

doing in her life. It was just like James says — she's no longer experiencing death, but now she's now experiencing genuine life from above, rejoicing over God's grace and forgiveness. That's the hope James holds out for all of us who wander from the truth, and that's why we all should be mindful of how we can reach out in love and bring them back.

This brings us to the end of James, and I believe it's a fitting conclusion. James has covered a multitude of topics, but if there's one unifying theme, it's to be single-minded in our love for God and our commitment to living for Him.

In chapter 1:8, James spoke of the “*double-minded*” person who is “*unstable in all his ways*.” In chapter 4:8, he challenged us, “*Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*” In contrast to that, we're called to be single-minded. Sometimes this is called “simplicity” or “purity.” The idea is to have a life that's integrated; that's focused on one thing. Kierkegaard famously said, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” When we live a life of duplicity, we want to be friends with God and the world at the same time. We want to have what Jesus said is really impossible to have, and that's two masters, because, “*Either you'll hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other*” (Matt 6:24).

James has challenged us in all kinds of areas, our use of words, our wealth, our pride, our response to trials, our planning for the future, and our prayer life. In all of this, he's simply saying, “You need to be all about one thing.” Today we've learned how to help someone who's wandered off and pursued other things. So perhaps this is a good time to just reflect on that: Am I really all about one thing? Is my relationship with God at the center (core) of all that I do and all that I'm pursuing in my life? Or has that single-mindedness become diluted?

Let me share with you something Francis Fenelon wrote about 300 years ago.

Those who are God's without reserve are in every state content, for they will only what He wills and desire to do for Him whatever he desires them to do. They strip themselves of everything, and in this nakedness, they find all things restored a hundredfold. Peace of conscience, liberty of spirit, the sweet abandonment of themselves and theirs into the hand of God, the joy of perceiving the light is always increasing in their hearts, and finally the freedom of their souls from the bondage of the fears and desires of this world - these things constitute that return of happiness that the true

children of God receive a hundredfold in the midst of their crosses while they remain faithful.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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