

JUDGE NOT--BRING SINNERS BACK

James 5: 19-20 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

A couple weeks ago, Eugene Peterson went Home to the Lord. Any man or woman who ever takes the Word of God and paraphrases everyone of the verses of the 66 Books of the Bible, from all 1189 chapters, 39 books in the OT and 27 books in the new, any person who does business with every verse in the Bible is someone who has come to love the Word of God. Eugene Peterson paraphrased our text today with these remarkable words. “My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God’s truth, don’t write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.” The New Living Translation translates these last words of James, saying, “My dear brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back again, you can be sure that the one who brings that person back will save that sinner from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.”

Today we come to this last message in the Epistle of James. As Our Daily Bread writer, Julie Ackerman Link once wrote words I have prayed to God for all of us. She prayed, “May I learn to hear Your quiet voice, Lord, so You don’t have to speak to me in thunder.” As I read those words, the Holy Spirit led me to imagine with you what it will be like in Glory someday when we get there and someone we have rescued from their wandering, walks up and joins us at the feet of Jesus, and says, “Thank you for giving to the Lord, I am a life that was changed. Thank you for giving to the Lord. I am so glad you gave.” Those words are so beautiful and the man who wrote them some years ago became struggled with homosexual temptations successfully, though most of us never knew it. Jesus was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin. Yet, after years of writing beautiful praise songs and singing them, this song writer gave in to temptation and became a practicing homosexual and he is living with another man. As I read about his life it made me think of these words he wrote. I ask the question, “Will anyone who lives close to Ray Boltz go after him?” Maybe many have. Whatever is the case, James is addressing something that happens continually today. Professing believers wander away from the fold of God into drugs, alcohol, bitterness, grudges, gossip, sins of prideful control, immoral lifestyles, and into cultic, legalistic lifestyles. Where are the men and women like Barnabas who will stop judging, gossiping, and condemning, who will roll up their sleeves and go after these men and women of God who have fallen from the truth? Seldom has any text in the Bible felt more-timely for us in 2018 than this text. All of Scripture is so up to date and relevant, but this passage sounds almost as if James were standing among us as one of us, and urging us to stop judging fellow-sinners, and to call us to God’s search and rescue team. Tuesday morning, I read in the Rock Springs Daily Rocket Miner on

the front page about the 150 people on the search and rescue team. Then later in the day, I saw our Sheriff, Mike Lowell, at the dry cleaners and we talked about the search. He called for volunteers, and many have signed up and gone down to Pine Mountain. Will they miraculously find this man who has been missing so long, or will the search and rescue teams be called off because of deep snow? The urgency to find Terry Meador is stronger every day. Beloved, the urgency for us to get involved in God's search and rescue team has never been greater.

Pastor Stephen Cole put it this way. He said, "If you are a Christian, then you're a member of God's search and rescue team." He is right. This is automatic. But even though every believer is on the team, many never respond to the call to go out into the storm and look for the lost. Can you imagine yourself being lost in the forest or wilderness, but no one comes looking for you? When you finally stagger out to civilization, you ask why no one came looking. One member of the search and rescue team says, "It was really cold and stormy, and there was a good show on TV. So, I just prayed for you to be okay." Another says, "I wanted to be sensitive to your feelings. I thought you might be embarrassed if we came looking." Another says, "I wasn't sure you were really lost. It would be judgmental to imply, that you actually, were lost. Besides, it would be arrogant of me to say that I'm not lost. After all, we all have our own paths on the journey." God's search and rescue teams today refrain from their jobs with abundant excuses.

That's not the kind of search and rescue team that I would want to be responsible for finding me if I were lost! How about you? I know today, that many others on God's search and rescue team also say, "You made your bed; now lie in it." Others would say, "You were warned, and you deserve the mess you are living in and the judgment that is coming." Others would say to as many others as would listen to their gossip, "Can you believe that they took that wrong road and are headed for hell? I don't feel any inclination to speak to them, although maybe the pastors can do something. Maybe they have committed the unpardonable sin." Beloved, sins are all awful, just as all sins are, but do we write off these people that we have worshipped with, served with, testified with and prayed with when they have wandered away? James says, "My brothers, if anyone among you—he's talking about fellow-Christians, wanders from the truth, these are people who have believed every word of Scripture, and they now refuse to believe passages that expose their sin, James continues, "and someone brings him/her back, let him/her know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering, will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Today, I want us to examine our hearts and see if we are active, solid, and searching members of God's search and rescue team. Are we active in bringing back wandering brothers and sisters who have quit reading the Bible, who have quit praying, who have quit attending church, and who have started up habits that are daily taking them farther and

farther from the truth. Are we swimming out to rescue those who are drifting farther and farther from the shore? Are we judges or searchers? Are we condemners or rescue workers? Are we gossipers or intercessors praying to see the wanderers brought back home? In our text, we encounter five vital pointers to help us decide who God wants us to be and what He wants us to do when a member of His forever family wanders off from the truth and is lost in the wilderness of sin. Let's learn from five of James strong spiritual pointers for those willing to serve on God's search and rescue team. Here are the pointers.

POINTER # 1 – ANYONE--ACTIVE MEMBERS OF GOD'S SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM ARE WILLING TO IDENTIFY, SEEK, AND BRING BACK FELLOW-SINNERS. WE EACH COULD BE THE NEXT

WANDERER OURSELVES. (II.) Notice James 5: 19a states, "If *anyone* among you..." The pathway of the Christian life is no easy pathway. Jesus compared our walk with the Lord to a narrow road which only a few people find. Paul likened the Christian race to a grueling marathon race. Scripture is clear Christ is our strength and hope along the way, never failing us. Scripture is also clear that the way will not be easy. James makes clear that along the pathway of the Christian life there are going to be some who, at some point, will wander off the trail and away from Our guide—the Holy Spirit and His Word, and the body of Christ they are a part of. The Word of God says in Isaiah 53: 6, "All we like sheep have gone astray. Each of us have turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him, that's Jesus, the iniquity of us all." All wanderers, anyone can place themselves in grave danger.

Born again believers can and often do defect and wander away from the truth in both creed and conduct. Some believers are more prone to wander away in doctrine or truth—they are either ignorant of truth because they are not grounded in the truth or they are easily persuaded by cults that promise the moon, if those they deceive will embrace their false doctrine. Other believers wander away from the truth by loving the world and making things in the world their idol, just like a disciple named Demas who left the apostle Paul—II Timothy 4: 10. Other believers because of a bad habit they have latched on to, are willfully resistant to known truth. Instead of walking in the truth, as obedient children, they disobey and walk in error as John wrote about in II John 9 as one man who proudly wanted control in the church, as thousands of believers are prone to be, this man, Diotrephes did. John said, "Diotrephes likes to put himself first, and does not acknowledge our authority." Many wanderers who quit going to church or quit reading their Bible or praying, are simply adults, who have never grown up and have never learned to accept authority. For them, it begins with finding fault with every pastor or church they go to, until there is nowhere else to go, so they tell their family, "I am the only one who is right. I must not taint myself being with

other believers.” Anyone can go astray. Paul warns us all in I Corinthians 10: 12, “Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall. Secondly,

POINTER # 2 – WANDERERS --ACTIVE MEMBERS OF GOD’S SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM ARE MOTIVATED TO RESTORE WANDERING SHEEP TO THE TRUTH. (II.)

Notice James 5: 19b, “If anyone among you *wanders from the truth...*” In James’ words, there are some who are going to “wander from the truth.” The Greek word James used for “wander” is the word “**planao** or **plane**”. The word plane means to stray from orthodoxy, to be deceived as James warns us not to be in James 1: 16, it means to err in belief, to be seduced, to wander off course, or it means to be fraudulent, to be found believing a lie. This is where we get our English word “planet.” In early days, plane referred to the fact that while stars remain fixed in the sky – as the North Star, always pointing north – planets appear to wander. It’s gradual, of course, but Mars will not be in the exact same place one night as it was the night before. As believers over time, for millions of reasons, our faith can be eroded, especially as we let go of our roots in the Word of God and we embrace sinful practices and morals, and then work backwards, trying to write our practices into the Word of God. Without the Word of God and prayer, we become busy, consumed with activity, with no space or silence or meditating on God’s word, we are gradually in the course of a year or so—out of the habit of being in church when the doors are open, and we justify occasional attendance—once or twice a month at most. Slowly we are drifting, a little more, and a little more, and it is so gradual, as we justify it—we have no idea how far we have drifted from the truth. Hebrews 10: 25 warns us that we ought to not abandon our fellowship with others in God’s house but go more often as we come nearer to the coming of the Lord. Sometimes we drift because of spiritual laziness, or discouragement, or conflict. We get hurt. And how often I have known of believers who used a hurt to keep them out of church for the past 30-40 years. You may be here today, and you know God is speaking to you—that you have wandered far from the truth. Will you wake up from James’ wake up call, or will you smile at the idea that you have wandered? Are you drifting today? Be honest! 3rdly,

POINTER # 3 – SOMEONE--ACTIVE MEMBERS OF GOD’S SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM WANT TO FOLLOW THE RESTORING EXAMPLE OF OUR OWN REDEEMER. (III.)

This is not the primary job of only the pastors or the elders with spiritual oversight. James 5: 19 is clear, “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders... from the truth and *someone brings him back...*” Could that someone God uses, be you? Like Jesus, will you leave the ninety and nine to rescue a sheep that is astray? Our God always goes after wanderers. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God went looking for them, calling Adam and finding them covering their nakedness up with fig leaves and being ashamed. When Moses murdered a man in Egypt, God hunted him down and spoke to him

through a burning bush and used Moses mightily. When Jonah ran away from God and His call, in disobedience, God sent a big fish to track him down, vomit him up and God still used him. The children of Israel were regular wanderers from God to idols, and the Lord kept coming after them in hot pursuit, to discipline them and then restore them. When Peter denied knowing Jesus, Jesus came after him. When Thomas wandered off in doubt, Jesus met him and showed him His hands and feet. The whole Christmas story is the story of God coming to world gone astray, come to show us who God is, and to die for us to be our Redeemer, to bring us back. All the shame and agony of Calvary was to rescue all of us gone astray.

Do we share God's heart? Do we share His love and concern for those who wander away? James is down to business as he closes this epistle—this is a now or never kind of call. James wasted no words in verses 19-20. Do you hear the urgency in this call? The church will argue over the security of the believer, and I believe a true believer has eternal life. Yet I cannot, and I will not water down what James is saying. Some would say, "Was the wanderer ever truly saved?" I ask you, "The last time you wandered from faithfully praying, were you saved? When we argue whether we can lose our salvation or whether we can't, James cuts through the rhetoric and with concern, urgency, and a strong call, he is telling us that for the wanderer, the death of a person's soul is somehow on the line. Will they be dying early as Paul speaks about taking the Lord's Supper without examining ourselves resulting in weakness, sickness, and some have died? Paul says in I Corinthians 11: 32 states that "When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned with the world." I would tell you from the heart of God in this verse, God never gave us these two verses to argue about whether a true believer can lose their salvation or not. No, he gave these words to send us after the lost—whatever the consequence of wandering is bringing—it's not time for theological debate. It's time to put our long underwear on, to put on our Redwing boots, our heaviest coat, our warmest flannel shirt, and spiritually speaking, head out into the cold until we bring back the lost one.

Many year ago, in 1975, a young converted college student by the name of Anne came to Jesus. We invited her to Sunday dinner at our home. I knew she was a zealot. Weeks later I heard a cultic group was on the Illinois State University Campus in Normal, Illinois. Anne wasn't in church. After eating on Sunday, I told Jinny, "God wants me to find Anne." I found her with that new group about to leave town. I pled with her not to believe their lies. Reluctant to even come to the car to listen to me, I exposed the lies and begged her to break free. She did. Today, 42 years later, she is the wife of my brother, Bruce, and is a godly zealot for Jesus. Remember, bringing back is not a pastor or elder's job alone—It is your job. Will you be that someone? Fourthly,

POINTER # 4 – BRING BACK--ACTIVE MEMBERS OF GOD’S SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM DESIRE TO BRING BACK THE SINNER FROM WANDERING AND SAVE THEIR SOUL FROM DEATH. (IV.) Notice James 5: 20a. “Let him know that *whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death...*” The Greek word for bring back is **epistrepho**. It means to revert, to turn back, to bring back to conversion, to turn from falsehood back to truth. These people James speaks of, are our family. Would you go after your own child or sister or brother? These are the subject of James’ call. You may say—James isn’t talking about saints astray, but sinners. Don’t forget David, the man after God’s own heart, said, though forgiven, his sin was ever before him. (Psalm 51: 3) Paul, the saint of all saints spoke freely of himself as the chief of sinners. (I Timothy 1: 15) Beloved, bringing back a sinning saint is one of the greatest blessings you or I could ever live to do. You don’t need seminary training to do this. Just obey Galatians 6: 1 which speaks about restoring sinning saints. We read, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual/mature—not judges or condemners or gossipers, but you who are mature, not you who are pastors or elders, but you, beloved, should restore him or her in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Whatever this saving of a soul from death, be that arguably, from physical death to spiritual death, it speaks of a dramatic rescue. The Greek word is **sodzo**. This word means to deliver, to protect, to make whole, to heal, and to save. I Timothy 1: 15 is Paul’s word to us about being the chief of sinners. He said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save—sodzo sinners, of whom I am chief. Whatever this salvation is, I want to be faithful to serve until death on God’s search and rescue team. Fifthly,

POINTER # 5—COVER--ACTIVE MEMBERS OF GOD’S SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM ARE MOTIVATED BY LOVE FOR GOD AND THEIR BROTHER OR SISTER. (V.) Notice James 5: 20b. “Let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death *and will cover a multitude of sins.*” God doesn’t promise us we will always be successful. I cannot tell you how many times I have been cursed, roared at in anger, laughed at, and put off. God only says that when search and rescue works, He comes back over the mountains with a lost sheep on His shoulder and all heaven rejoices. But if you get on this search and rescue team, it takes a deep love for God, and His Book, and for people. Despite their past, despite their addictions, their immoralities, their bitterness, their suicide attempts and their leaving our church. Lovers keep loving, keep seeking as our Savior who came to seek and save that which was lost like Zacchaeus—Luke 19:10. We must love regardless of the response, the results or the cost. Jude 1: 21-25. God will bless you. Proverbs 10: 12 tells us—and James knew this verse. “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” True love covers. God’s search and rescue team is a team of lovers, lovers of Him and lovers of others. Let’s pray!