

James: The Practical Christian

Restoring Love

James 5:19-20

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March 5, 2006

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Scripture

Contemporary Christian musician Kathy Troccoli was a rebellious teenager who drank, partied, and was caught in a vicious cycle of bulimia. But at a summer job, she couldn't escape the Christian witness of a co-worker named Cindy.

"She was the epitome of a girl I could not hang out with," said Kathy. "When she started telling me about Jesus, I made fun of her. And yet, deep down inside, I admired her. I liked that she didn't seem to care what people thought about her. I even suspected she was right, and I was on the wrong path.

"Finally, Cindy said to me, 'You know, Kathy, Jesus is Lord whether you accept him or not.' I went home thinking about that. If Jesus was real, I had to check him out. I plowed through the Gospel of John and when I got to the end, I knew I had to make a decision. Everything would have to change. And sixteen years ago, it did."¹

This is an example of love reaching out to another person and seeing her rescued from her sin. James closes his letter with counsel regarding restoring love. Let's read what James says about that in James 5:19-20:

¹⁹ My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

Introduction

A church treasurer at a church in southern California started having an affair. A man in the church found out about it and went

¹ Kathy Troccoli with Jim Long in "Campus Life." *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 5.

to confront him. The church treasurer responded by saying he would not cut off the relationship and return to his wife—that he had found this new relationship as a good and very needed addition to his life.

As a result of that conversation, the man who had approached the treasurer took two other men and approached him again. But, again, he was rebuffed.

After a period of time, when no progress was made, this adulterous relationship was made known to the church leaders. When the church leadership approached him, he was very arrogant and defiant. He said he had found true love for the first time in his life and would not give her up. Reluctantly, the church elders excommunicated the man.

He did not take being removed from the church very well. In fact he went throughout the community harshly criticizing the church for being unlike Christ—reminding people that Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1).

Not all cases of sin are as obvious or notorious as this one, and certainly, they are not as public. But there is hardly a church today that’s working for Christ and his kingdom that does not experience unrepentant sin in the lives of some within the assembly.

Lesson

But the question we still must answer is this: “How are we to respond to those who wander from the truth?”

Some would say that the right thing to do is just to “let them sow their wild oats.”

I know that is the easiest thing to do, but is it the right thing to do?

And knowing our own faults, are we ever really qualified to try to restore someone else?

Some say, “Hey, I’ve got my hands full just trying to deal with my own sin. Why should I get involved in helping others deal with theirs?”

And, “How can I know the difference between wrongly judging someone and properly restoring them?”

As James brings this letter of his to a close, he answers these very relevant and hard questions for us. I find it very interesting that James closes his letter with these final two verses.

It’s been several months now since we began our journey through the letter of James. It’s almost with a measure of nostalgia that we come to the end of any book study. It’s been such a challenging and rich time. Over the previous 20 messages we have taken a detailed look at these 108 verses, in hope of understanding what God has to say to us concerning the practical Christian life.

On this journey through these 5 chapters, James has pinpointed for us one practical and stimulating truth after another. And so as we now come to the end of the book, we should not be surprised to find still one more message of critical importance for us.

I. Four Important Questions

Let’s begin our study of these verses by answering four important questions.

First, to whom is this letter addressed? There are those who believe this is addressed to those who are not Christians. But that is not true. Verse 19 begins with the words, “**My brothers . . .**” James is addressing those who are brothers and sisters in the faith. This is clearly written to Christians.

Second, what has occurred? Someone has wandered from the truth. The Greek word translated “**wander**” in verse 19 conveys the idea of someone leaving something they once knew intimately. The picture is of a Christian who has left something special.

Third, what has this person left? James says that this person has wandered from “**the truth**” he once embraced. That would certainly mean that he has strayed from that body of truth we call the Scriptures. He has willfully and consciously walked away from the way of truth. Skepticism and doubt have set in.

Fourth, what should be done? Verse 19 says, “**My brothers . . . someone should bring him back.**” Verse 20 says that such a person needs to be turned from his error. The delicate part of the passage is the words translated “**bring him back.**” They convey the idea of someone going in a wrong direction who is loved and cared for by someone else so much that this person helps the other to turn around and go in the opposite direction.

Before we go any further I want to make the point that this whole process of restoring someone is extremely sensitive and even dangerous. It is so sensitive that in the *Sermon on the Mount*, when Jesus referred to this ministry of restoring someone who had strayed, he used the graphic imagery of taking a speck out of someone else’s eye. He was making the point that such a process demands not only the removal of logs from your own eye but also great sensitivity.

I think it’s very significant that when Jesus taught on this topic he used the illustration of the eye. For there are few places in our bodies more sensitive to touch than the eye.

Just last week one of our precious young covenant babies was demonstrating that she knew where the various parts of her face were. Her Mom said, “Show us your mouth.” And the little girl touched her mouth. Her Mom said, “Show us your ear.” And she touched her ear. Her Mom said, “Show us your eye.” She touched her eye, and immediately started tearing up because her eyes were so sensitive to her touch.

What James is referring to here is what we might call spiritual eye surgery. The only difference is that we are all responsible to do this surgery. God does not mean for just an elite few, highly trained people to do this. In fact, we are all called by God to help remove the speck in our brother or sister’s eye.

But we still need to be trained in the basics so that we can do this very sensitive work of removing specks in other’s eyes in a way that truly helps to restore those who have wandered from the truth.

In order to equip you for this ministry to others I want you to take a close look at Galatians 6:1-2 for a moment. Here you find three very critical ingredients necessary if you are going to be able to help restore someone who has wandered from the truth.

The first critical ingredient is that you must be spiritual. Paul writes in verse 1, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, *you who are spiritual* should restore him” (italics mine). To be one who is spiritual does not mean to be perfect but to be one who is truly walking through life in dependence upon the Spirit of God. For one believer to do spiritual surgery on another means that the one doing surgery must first be in touch with God.

This was Jesus’ point when he spoke about judging others in the *Sermon on the Mount*. People have often misunderstood Jesus’ teaching, thinking that he taught that you should never judge someone else. And if you do, that means you are a hypocrite.

Jesus did not say that! Instead, his point, with the use of the splinter and the log picture in Matthew 7, was simply to encourage you, before you go to someone who has wandered from the truth, to first check out your own life. And once you have taken the log out of your eye—then you “will see clearly” enough to help remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Jesus never says that you should avoid helping your brother who is in sin. In fact, it’s just the opposite. The very climax of this passage in Matthew 7 is that once you take care of your eye, you will then be able to help your brother with his. Then you are even commanded to go to the person with the speck in his eye. To leave it there, and make no attempt to remove it, is not consistent with Christian love.

When I need eye surgery on my eyes, I don’t go to just any neighbor or to just anyone I find on the street. You can be assured I would find someone qualified to do that delicate task. Galatians 6 tells us that those who are spiritual are qualified. Not perfect. Otherwise this could never be obeyed. But those who have their own sins confessed and their hearts tuned to the heart of God.

The second critical ingredient is the attitude of gentleness. Paul writes, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him *gently*.” This is a heartwarming term. This job is not to be done in haste. There is no place here for fools to rush in. This is never to be done in haste or in anger.

It is ridiculous to think that you can ever walk up to a person who has wandered from the truth, rebuke them and then walk away, thinking that you have fulfilled your Christian duty. Jesus never dealt with people like that, nor should we.

Proverbs 18:19 tells us that “an offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city.”

When you are working with someone who has wandered from the truth, you are usually working with someone who has been deeply hurt by others. Real or imagined—they are hurt. So you can’t just barge in, slap them across the face and expect them to turn around. It takes time. Often it takes weeks, months or years of loving and caring concern before they will turn around. The one who restores is one who is gentle.

The third ingredient is the attitude of humility. Paul writes, “But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” You don’t go to someone with your thumbs under your suspenders saying, “I’m God’s gift to you to straighten you out.” Rather you go with the attitude that says, “If it were not for the grace of God I’d be exactly in your shoes.” You go remembering the many times in your life you have wandered away from the truth. You go as a fellow struggler to another struggler in order to offer a helping hand, and the support for a way back.

II. The Results of this Process

Second, the results of the process.

The results are twofold. *First, you will save this person from death.* James writes in verse 20, “**Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death.**” This means that if this wandering Christian were to con-

tinue in this wrong way, he may actually die under divine discipline.

In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul talks about those whose lives were taken by God in abusing the Lord's Supper. In Acts 5 God took the lives of Ananias and Saphira for lying to the church leaders and thereby lying to God.

So James is saying here that the individual who helps someone turn around may actually be keeping him from facing death.

By the way, James cannot be referring to eternal death because he is talking about a brother in Christ, someone who is already a Christian.

Second, you will be covering a multitude of sins. James writes in 20b, “. . . **and cover over a multitude of sins.**” By reaching out to someone who has strayed, you can actually become an instrument God uses to bring that person to confess her sins to God and receive forgiveness from Christ.

1 John 4:18 tells us that “love covers a multitude of sins.” The reason you go to those who have wandered from the truth is simply because of love. You love that person so much you are even willing to risk their rejection and harsh words. You love that person too much to keep quiet.

One of the reasons loving parents discipline straying children is because of love. The good parent says, “I love my child too much to overlook that problem.”

One of the least attractive parts of the ministry is reaching out to those who have wandered from the truth. It is not a rewarding ministry. It's not a popular ministry. It is often not received well. Frequently there is great misunderstanding. But it's a ministry God calls us to do.

It may be that one in your home is in this condition now. It may be a child who is now older and has obviously wandered from the truth. It may be husband or wife. It may be a former roommate, a close friend or former classmate. A work associate. Or a neighbor. Some of you have already had a particular person you know come to mind. They have wandered from the truth and

you've not done much if anything to reach out to restore them in love.

It may be that a letter is needed. Or a phone call. Or a visit. A lunch or breakfast appointment. Maybe even a trip. It may call for an extended time commitment for discipleship. Whoever it may be, and whatever God leads you to do, I want you to always remember that as you reach out to them, you are actually being used by God to save them from possible death and you are covering a multitude of sins.

Conclusion

I think it's fitting that James ends his book this way. His entire book has been spent on exhortations. If anybody lives up to his word, James does. He has addressed the most intimate areas of our lives and done it with that spirit that only God could have directed.

And so as he comes to the end of this book he closes it on a very serious note. In fact he closes out this book with one word: "Sins." He's saying in a sense, "I've invested myself now in you who were wandering from the truth by giving you these five chapters, you now in turn take these truths, along with all the truths of God's word and invest yourself in the lives of others." He's saying, "Do as I have done for you."

That's what Jesus did. One of the most moving passages in the entire Bible tells us that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Think about that in light of this truth we've been studying. While you were carrying on blatant acts of sin, living apart from the way of truth, he sought you out. Instead of allowing you to go your own way, he came to your rescue. And in order to turn you around it cost him. He paid the highest price to bring you back. It cost him his very life.

And even when you wander today the Lord doesn't say, "Oh well, nobody's perfect. Maybe someday he will come back." No, like the Good Shepherd, he leaves the 99 who are not wandering and he actively comes after you to restore you. And he uses all

sorts of means. It may be the letter of a friend, or the words of a family member, perhaps a close associate or a pastor. Through them God calls you back to the way of truth. In the Psalm 23 David tells us that the Lord as our Shepherd “restores our soul.” The duty of the shepherd is to restore the soul of the sheep.

Frankly, some of you even now may be very close to that quitting point yourself. Perhaps you have seriously entertained the thought of going your own way, or you may be presently engaged in a life that you know is not honoring to Christ.

Because you will rarely find someone today who will warn you, allow me to do so. If you have been joined by faith to Jesus Christ, you are a child of God. You may deny him, but he will never deny you; although you are faithless, he will remain faithful. And the grace of God, the seal of the Holy Spirit preserves you permanently. Salvation is by grace through faith, not of ourselves. We receive it as a gift by faith not works. It’s a free gift that God gives, and he seals you with his Spirit so you will know him forever. Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Lord, we thank you for your initiating, sacrificial love. We thank you for your willingness to keep on loving us even though we are so unlovable. We thank you that your love does not stop when we come into your family. But that it only begins there. Thank you for your discipline in our lives when we stray from the way of truth, for loving us enough to bring into our lives people and circumstances that call us back to you. We know that life can only be found as we draw near to you and walk closely with you. Thank you for making us the object of your never-ending love and care. May we all be encouraged today with this simple reminder that we are never away from your Shepherding care.

Show us how you want to work through our lives to show your love to others who are wandering. Make us instruments of your restoring love.

CHARGE:

The early church father Chrysostom once said when alluding to someone who was in serious sin, “Correct him, but do not do it as a foe, nor as an adversary exacting a penalty, but as a physician providing medicines.” And we might add, “And as a loving, compassionate brother or sister with a heart anxious to rescue and restore.” That’s what a fellowship of forgiving people is all about! Now, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all forevermore. Amen.