

## Bring him back

- James 5:19-20
- This is not the kind of sign-off that we are used to in New Testament letters. This would normally be where Paul reminds the readers of God's grace, or asks them to give his greetings to various people he loves and has worked alongside. There's also no final mention of how James wrote this letter with his own hand, or no promise that he plans to come and visit the churches he is writing to. So, it is different, but that doesn't mean it is not appropriate, given James' style. We have said all along that James' letter reads like a sermon, so this final word of encouragement is a fitting end. He started the letter with a call to faithfulness, even in the midst of great trial. And he has ended the letter with a call to confess to one another, and to pray for one another, and now he says, "Look out for one another!" James is concerned for the spiritual welfare of the whole body, and that includes those who have wandered from the truth. Some of you may remember that in the first sermon, eleven months ago, I said that we could entitle James' letter, "Genuine Faith Works." If you have faith, you also have works. Faith is the root, and works are the fruit for the follower of Christ. James ends the letter with an encouragement to a vital work, a matter of life and death, that we must all be involved in. It is rescue work, the work of bringing back someone who has wandered from the truth. And for that, there is great reward. Let's look at this final text under two main points: The Work and The Reward.
- **The Work**
- If any of you have ever rescued someone from drowning, you know what it is like: the person is usually panicked, and fights against the rescuer. Ask Cindy sometime about the teenager in the New Directions who is now a Presbyterian minister in Statesville who panicked in the ocean and tried to push her under so he could breathe! The same thing can happen when we try to rescue someone who has wandered from the truth.
- Chuck Swindoll relates a story the late Dr. Howard Hendricks used to tell about a young man who had strayed from the Lord but was finally brought back by the persistent help of a loving friend. When Hendricks asked the young man what it was like when he was wandering in the wilderness, he said it was like he was in "deep water, deep trouble, and all his friends were on the shoreline hurling biblical accusations at (me)....But there was one Christian brother who actually swam out to get me and would not let me go. I fought him, but he pushed aside my fighting, grabbed me, put a life jacket around me, and took me to shore. By the grace of God, he was the reason I was restored. He would not let me go."
- That's what James is talking about here. We are to do all we can, by God's grace, to not let anyone go.
- **Someone wanders from the truth.** Anyone among you. Among you. You cannot wander away from a place you have never been in the first place, and once again James reminds us of the importance of the community of faith. The one who wanders away was here, among us, a part of us, in the community. But he has wandered. Wandered from what? The style of music? The leadership structure? The fact that we have a steeple and a cross? No. He has wandered from the truth, not a particular set of doctrines or beliefs or practices, but as Douglas Moo says, from "all that is involved in the Gospel." What's the big deal? If he has wandered off, chances are he will wander back at some point, right? Not necessarily. This is so serious that James said to bring him back saves his soul from death. How does one wander from the truth?
- **Wandering from the truth is willful.** The word for wandering is "planao," the root of our word, planet, because the ancients believed the planets just wandered around in the sky. But James sees the movement toward apostasy as deliberate. And, listen! The Hebrew mind always connected what we believe with what we do. Truth is something we do. James understands that the wanderer from truth is also a wanderer from moral convictions. I have seen it in 30+ years of

ministry, that when a person says that he doesn't believe in Jesus the way he once did, or he doesn't see God the way he once did, he is also in a place where he has decided he wants to live in a different way. He wants to be free of doctrinal constraints so he can be free, he thinks, to live any way he feels is best for him. So he can pursue what his heart really desires. So he can cast off restraints, and to do that, you have to lose the vision that you once held dear. Isn't that what James said earlier in this letter, that all temptation comes from our desires?

- **Wandering from the truth is also gradual.** You don't go to Easter service and raise your voice with the saints to proclaim the risen Savior and then wake up the next morning and decide that the whole thing is a hoax. No, it is a gradual decline. That's why it is vital for us to express our doubts and our questions to those in our circle of influence who are grounded and settled and mature in the faith. Don't share your questions with skeptics or scoffers, for they will surely encourage you in your wandering, and take you one step further away from the truth! The godly counsel will gently answer your questions and help you through your doubts.
- **Someone brings him back.** Someone. James doesn't specify who, does he? Notice that the work of reclamation is not relegated to spiritual authorities. In fact, it is usually not the pastor or the elders who hear about someone going off the rails first. It is a close friend, a family member, a co-worker. And in fact, by the time the elders hear about it, sometimes it is so far down the road that apart from a miraculous intervention by God, the person will not be brought back. Well, if it is left to someone, and that's you, what should you do?
- I heard on the radio this week, no joke, that the Department of Transportation in NC has asked radio hosts to announce to their listeners that this is prom season, and that young people who are planning to go to a prom should be reminded NOT to take selfies on railroad tracks. Seriously? Has the intelligence level of our young people sunk to an all-time low, that they have to be reminded not to stand on railroad tracks in sight of an oncoming train and take pictures? But listen, if you saw a young person standing on the tracks and a train was coming, should you run to your house and call the elders? No! What should you do? Right. Yell at them, run towards them, flail your arms and act like a crazy person until they see you, see the train, and get off the tracks! It's not hard. If your friend has wandered away from the truth, do whatever it takes, as much as you are able, to bring him back. You also have the Spirit of God, as Paul said, and so you are fully equipped to do rescue work.
- The plain sense of this text tells me that if someone you loved has wandered off, you first have to go look for him. Then you have to find him, and find out why he is there. What has he believed that has brought him to this place? Then, you have to risk rejection, or ridicule, or even attack if you are going to bring him back. Paul gives us more instruction on this ministry of recovery:
- **Galatians 6:1-2**
- The rescuer is spiritual. Not a spiritual giant, but a person whose motives for his own life are spiritual, and that is his main concern for others as well. The rescuer will love the person he is trying to bring back, and we see that in his gentleness and in his desire for restoration, not retribution. Spurgeon said "I have known a person who has erred hunted down like a wolf. He was wrong to some degree, but that wrong had been aggravated and dwelt upon till the man has been worried into defiance...The object of some (rescuers) seems to be to amputate the limb rather than to heal it." No, restoration is what we are called to in any rescue operation.
- Love is the motive. That doesn't mean the rescue is a lovefest and the wanderer joins hands with the rescuer and they sing together as they skip back to the place where the wanderer belongs. No, sometimes there is a confrontation. Kent Hughes tells the story about a woman his wife was friends with who had taken a job as a secretary. Her boss began to make advances and she was flattered by it. She was ready to toss everything, her husband, her children, and her reputation for the affair. Kent's wife hates confrontation, as do most people, and would have welcomed a way out of it, but there wasn't one. She prayed, Kent prayed, they prayed together. She went to confront her friend, and Kent kept praying. When his wife returned a few hours later, she was exhausted.

She said that it had been a battle—she actually felt like she was fighting with the devil for the woman’s soul. Like the devil had hold of one arm and Kent’s wife had hold of the other. Every rationalization imaginable was argued, with considerable heat. But the woman finally repented, by God’s grace and mercy. She went on to serve Christ and the church. (Hughes, Commentary on James)

- The rescuer must also keep watch over his own heart, understanding that the same ditch his friend fell into, he could end up in as well. We all know the simple adage that it is much easier for the man in the ditch to pull you in than for you to pull him out. Be careful!
- **The Reward**
- We have talked about the work of bringing back the wanderer. What about the reward? Let him know this, James says. There’s a great reward for bringing him back.
- **First, you will save his soul from death.** Now, there is some debate as to whether James means that you will save the person from going to hell. But, here’s the thing. If a person wanders from the truth, rejects Christ, and never comes back, that leaves the question wide open as to whether that person was ever converted. John wrote, “They went out from us but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” 1 John 2:19 So, the truth is that yes, you may very well be saving someone from hell. We won’t know until the day of Christ, perhaps, whether that wanderer was a believer or a false believer. Either way, we must do what we can.
- Listen, is there any greater work you could do than to save someone’s soul from death? It is the greatest possible kindness, and so I have to wonder, why am I so reluctant to go after those who have wandered? It can only be because I love myself and my comfort more than I love them and their eternity!
- **Second, you will cover a multitude of sins.** James is using language we see in the Old Testament for forgiveness. The mercy of God covers our sins, as David said in Psalm 32:1, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Peter picks up the theme in his first letter, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” That’s what we are called to do for the wanderer. And as Peter says, that’s what we are to do for the non-wanderer as well.
- The late EV Hill was pastor of Mt Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, and one of my favorite preachers back then. I love the story James Dobson wrote about EV Hill’s wife: As a struggling young preacher, Hill had trouble earning a living and decided to invest in the purchase of a service station. His wife knew he lacked the time and expertise to oversee his investment, and soon the station went broke and Hill lost everything. "It was a critical time in the life of this young man," Dobson writes. "He had failed at something important, and his wife would have been justified in saying, 'I told you so.' But Jane had an intuitive understanding of her husband's vulnerability. Thus, when E.V. called to tell her that he had lost the station, she said simply, 'All right.' "E.V. came home that night expecting his wife to be pouting over his foolish investment," Dobson continues. "Instead, she sat down with him and said, 'I've been doing some figuring. I figure that you don't smoke and you don't drink. If you smoked and drank, you would have lost as much as you lost in the service station. So it's six in one hand and a half-dozen in the other. Let's forget it.'"
- Is there someone in your sphere of influence who has wandered from the truth? Bring him back. It may be a battle, probably will, but it’s worth it. Ultimately, it is up to God whether the wanderer returns. But He uses people like you and me to go after them.