

Believers Behaving Badly
How God Seeks Wandering Saints
so that Mercy Triumphs over Judgment

“A Journey through James”
Sermon 23

Texts: James 5:19-20; 1:13-15; Ps 32:1-3; Ps 85:2; 1 Peter 2:21-25

James 5:19–20 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ 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.

James 1:13–15 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Psalms 32:1–3 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

Psalms 85:2 You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin. Selah

1 Peter 2:21–25 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Introduction

James has been writing to believers who God has commissioned to go into the hard places and dark spaces of the kingdoms of the world with the mission of displaying the beauty of Jesus and the power of the Gospel to people who are blinded by sin and need to be rescued from its bondage (James 1:1).

This amazing mission will require that those messengers display a living faith that is wholehearted, single-focused, and fully trusting in God and His Word.

- This living faith is cultivated and strengthened by faithfully enduring trials (1:2-4).
- It is shaped by a whole-hearted embracing of “Wisdom from Above” (1:5-8).
- It is validated by resisting temptations (1:13-18).
- It is displayed by Spirit-energized obedience to God’s Word (1:19-25).
- It lives authentically so that it is acceptable to God and useful to men (1:26-27).

Like the farmer James mentions in chapter 5:7, these Gospel Risk-takers work in the hard places and dark spaces where God has placed them, waiting patiently for God to bring about a precious and valuable harvest of righteousness (5:7) as they sow seeds of gospel peace in the souls of men and women broken by sin and battered by life under the curse (3:18).

- Like Abraham, they obey God without wavering regardless of the personal cost (2:20-24).
- Like Rahab, they display radical loyalty to God in the midst of a wicked and disobedient culture (2:25-26).
- Like the Prophets, they extend gracious forbearance in the face of opposition and persecution (5:10).
- Like Job, they endure unexplained suffering faithfully and patiently (5:11).
- Like Elijah, they pray fervently and speak boldly for God in a world that has rejected truth and wandered far from God (5:16b-18).

They do this faithfully and graciously as they wait for God to bring about the promised harvest of righteousness by rescuing men and women from spiritual bondage by releasing them from the penalty and power of sin.

But as James closes his letter, he moves in a totally unexpected direction – something we did not see coming.

In the two verses that make up the conclusion, James delivers an urgent, compelling call to action exhorting believers to rescue a brother or sister in Christ who has wandered so far away from the truth they are in terrain that is not only dangerous, it is deadly.

- We have been thinking of James as a general book written to believers anywhere giving them practical advice about how to live effectively as Christians everywhere.
- We have come to see that James is calling believers to cultivate and display a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith as they embrace and live according to wisdom from above in the hard places and dark spaces around them.
- But we never expected James was taking us to a very specific hard place (our church) and confronting us with a very specific dark space (believers behaving badly in the Church of the living God).

We have been listening to the wise words of James for five chapters, let's make sure we do two things morning as we hear his final words:

- Let's make sure we understand what he is saying personally.
- Let's commit to embracing his call to action corporately.

I. Who is James talking about and what has happened to them?

*My brothers, **if anyone among you** wanders from the truth (5:19)*

A. He is talking to obedient believers who are members of the churches to whom he is writing (my brothers).

B. He is talking about disobedient believers who are also members of those churches (if anyone among you).

C. And these particular believers have been behaving badly before God, in the Church, and before the World they were sent to reach (wanders from the truth).

- “Wander” – we get our word “planet” from this term. It signifies someone who has willfully, intentionally, and blatantly departed from obeying the Word of Truth that James talked about in 1:18-26.
- This person has refused to obey the Word of Truth (1:19).
- He or she has filled up their life with moral filthiness and rampant wickedness by refusing to receive the Word of God with a meek heart or a submissive spirit (1:21).
- They are professional hearers of the Word who refuse to be active doers of what the Word demands (1:22-25).
- They think they are religious but because they refuse to bridle their mouth or control their lusts, their religion is worthless – it is neither acceptable to God nor useful to others who desperately need to the gospel (1:26-27).
- They have willfully sinned and openly transgressed against God to the point that some of them are in very real danger of facing God’s severe judgement (4:1-1-6).
- And as we read James, it is evident that all of this bad behavior has been happening inside the church!

II. What is the evidence that this is actually true?

*... whoever brings back **a sinner** from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover **a multitude of sins** (5:20).*

- James describes these believers as sinners who have intentionally transgressed and willfully walked away from God’s law (2:8-11).
- And they have sinned so blatantly and so often that James describes them as having committed a multitude of sins (5:20).
- And the sins they have been sinning are the sins James warned about that if left unchecked, will lead to death (1:13-15).

- Here is a partial list of some of the sins going on in the church that James confronts in this letter:

- ⇒ *Moral filthiness and rampant wickedness among believers (1:21)*
- ⇒ *An unbridled tongue (1:26, 3:1-12) leading to unbridled lusts (4:1-3), marked by bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and every vile practice (3:14-16).*
- ⇒ *Sinful partiality (2:1-9) and empty professions of a powerless faith (2:14-26).*
- ⇒ *Bitter quarrels and verbal assassination among believers (4:1-3; 4:11-12).*
- ⇒ *Spiritual adultery marked by friendship with the world and enmity with God (4:4).*
- ⇒ *Spiritual arrogance and sinful independence from God and from His will (4:13-17).*
- ⇒ *Extortion, oppression, and persecution of other believers (5:1-6)*

- And the evidence that this has been going on and that it has not escaped the notice of the Head of the Church who has set Himself against these sinners is that He has sent mortal illness upon them (5:15).
- *Note: We have seen that not all illness in 5:15 is on account of sin; however, some illness is on account of the blatant, willful, and obvious sinning that some believers have been committing before the Church and before the World.*

III. How did this happen in the church and in these believers?

... *If anyone among you **wanders from the truth** (5:19)*

- How did something this bad find its way into the hearts of God's people and into the corporate life of Christ's Church? It happened to them the same way it happens to us:
- They were not doers of the word they heard and read regularly in worship (1:22-25)
- They intentionally and willfully disregarded God's wisdom and disobeyed God's words – they embraced the wrong wisdom and ended up as transgressors of the Law in danger of God's judgment (2:1-11).
- They were deceived by sin (1:16,22,26; 2:20).
- They were enticed by their unbridled lusts (1:14, 3:14-15; 4:2).
- They were frustrated by their unanswered prayers (4:2b-3).

- At the end of the day, they were double-minded in their soul (1:6-8) and divided in their heart between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world (4:1-8) and as a result, they were unstable in all their ways, disloyal in their hearts, disobedient in their walk before God, discredited in their mission before men, and defiled as members among God's Church.
- No wonder James describes them as proud people who God actively and purposefully opposes (4:6), desperately in need of God's humbling grace and bountiful mercy (4:7-10).

IV. **What is needed and what will be required of those God sends to rescue those who have wandered?**

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders and someone brings him back . . .

A. The Picture – someone has wandered!

Illustration: A hiker has intentionally disregarded every instruction and disobeyed every warning and has departed from the trail and now this hiker is wandering lost in a very dark and dangerous place – so dangerous that if he is not rescued, he will die!

- James tells us that this believer has been enticed by his unbridled lusts and dragged away into sin and is now practicing this sin willfully, intentionally, and openly.
- James has also reminded us of the deadly outcome on unbridled sin that is left unchecked in a believer's life – "sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (1:15).
- And this has been going on openly in the churches to whom James writes – and some of these sinning wanderers have fallen under the severe judgement of God and are about to die (5:15).

B. The Assignment – someone must go and bring them back!

- While James has been reminding us that God is commissioning Gospel risk-takers to labor for the gospel in hard places and dark spaces, some of those Gospel risk-takers need to go into an even

harder space as they pursue a wandering brother who has been captured by his lusts and enslaved by his sins.

- God is a good shepherd who never forsakes His sheep. He never abandons those who wander from His voice or depart from His way. He pursues them with relentless love in order to rescue them and return them to the righteous path!
- And the particular way He does this is by sending other believers into those hard spaces and dark places where they have wandered in order to turn them back to the path and return them to the Shepherd!
- The turn “brings back” is the word for “return” or “turn” and occurs throughout the OT to describe true repentance.
- When believers behave badly in the church, God does not ignore their bad behavior, and neither can other believers.
- We must be willing to step out of our comfort zone and enter that difficult space to do everything possible in our effort to rescue our brother from the deadly danger that is upon him.
- We do not have the option of passing that wandering sheep by and leaving them to die in the wilderness of their sin!
- Illustration: Having a flat tire on the trail and being rescued by a fellow biker.
- What will be required as we pursue a brother who has wandered in an effort to get him to repent?

C. The Requirement – what will this require of us?

- Unswerving obedience to God’s will as we pursue a sinning brother (like Abraham).
- Undivided loyalty and allegiance to God’s truth over our own personal friendship with that brother (like Rahab).
- Gracious forbearance when opposed or resisted by that brother (like the Prophets).
- Faithful endurance if God chooses to use unanswered, prolonged suffering in us as a means to bring about the repentance of another (like Job).

- Fervent prayer leading to bold, gracious confrontation calling that brother to choose to obey God or to follow the World (like Elijah).

V. **What assurance does James provide the Rescuers that their mission is worthy and will succeed?**

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 (5:20)

- In light of the difficulty of the task (God must grant repentance),
- In light of the duration of the process (like the farmer, we must wait patiently and work faithfully for God to do the work),
- In light of the danger on our lives as we face opposition and resistance as well as the demand on our own souls as we endure unexpected suffering God may choose to use to bring our brother to repentance
- We need confidence from God that our labor is not in vain – and James provides that by pointing us to two things God assures us we can know with certainty (*“let him know”*).
- When God uses our lives and our faithful service to bring a sinning brother to repentance –

A. His life will be saved from Death

- Term “soul” here means physical life – (i.e., souls on a ship)
- “Death” – certainly means spiritual death; but probably means physical death due to the judgment that has come to him as a consequence of willful sinning and spiritual adultery.
- If this person confesses and repents, his sins will be forgiven, and God will raise him up (5:15-16).

B. His many sins will be forgiven (will cover a multitude of sins)

- Term “cover” is an OT term for atonement or forgiveness.
- Not talking about ignoring or passing over sins ... talking about what God has promised to do with his multitude of sins – He will cover them (forgive them).

- David talked about this marvelous mercy in Psalm 32:1-2:
Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- James announces that this mercy from God triumphs over judgment (2:13).
- And this magnificent mercy is available to those who will draw near to God, humble their hearts before Him, cleanse their hands, and purify/unify their divided heart by confessing and repenting of their sins – AND – when they do this, God will lift them up by His grace and exalt them because of His love (4:8-10).
- This is what God did for David in Psalm 32:5:
I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah
- And this is what He promises to do for you and for me when we confess our sins to one another (5:16).
- Year later, John would affirm James by reminding us that, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

Conclusion

- What makes all of this forgiveness possible so that “mercy triumphs over judgment” for God’s repenting people is something astounding that God Himself did when His creation “wandered” from His purpose and plan (1:17).
- He sent down a good and perfect gift from heaven to seek and to save those who wandered into the darkness and bondage of sin – He sent a good Shepherd to seek them in order to rescue them from danger and to save them from the death that sin brings.
- This Shepherd came and lived in a hard place and a dark space where he lived obediently even unto death. He never wavered in his loyal allegiance to God even when offered all the kingdoms of the world. He displayed gracious forbearance when his own people despised, rejected, reviled, and attempted to kill him. He endured immense suffering even unto death. And he prayed fervently for his own and for His Father’s forgiveness on those who were nailing his hands and feet to the cross.

- And because of His faithful service, patient endurance, and unwavering obedience unto death ... because He believed His Father would keep His promise to Him and raise Him from the dead, and because Jesus kept entrusting himself to the One who always judges justly ... God raised Him up and highly exalted Him.
- And more than that ... By His wounds we have been healed and returned from our wandering (straying) to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:24-25).
- Just as our Good Shepherd gave His life to rescue us, it may be that God will call us to give our lives to rescue others. And when our Good Shepherd sends us out to rescue other wandering sheep and it requires unexplained suffering or even our lives, we can be sure that His Father will do the same for us that He did for His own Son.
- So ... who is wandering in your life? Are you praying fervently? Are you obeying willingly? Are you living loyally to God? Are you willing to suffer whatever our good and wise God deems best in His plan to bring a wandering sheep around you back to Christ?
- What if your **obedience** brought others to Christ – would it be worth it? What if your **suffering** brought a brother to repentance – would you endure it? What if your **death** brought another to Christ – would you embrace it?