

Introduction

This church appreciates first responders. A first responder is a person who will generally arrive initially and provide assistance at the scene of an emergency. Police, firemen, EMTs, and paramedics are on the ready to respond when disaster strikes. We depend upon these individuals to risk themselves in the midst of trouble. They need to be brave, watchful, determined, and wise. They must be calm under pressure. We call them heroes because of the extraordinary amount of danger to which they expose themselves for the well-being of others. It takes a specially-gifted person to be a first-responder.

In our closing text this morning in the epistle of James, we will learn that there is a sense in which the local church must be a community of first responders. James urges the church community to be ready to face emergency situations in the body and to realize what is at stake.

[Read Text and Pray]

My dad was really concerned about my care and caution and safety when I began to drive. He earnestly wanted me to grasp how suddenly a ride in the car could turn into disaster. He came in the back door after work one day and called to me. He wanted me to take a quick ride with him. I got in the car and we took off down the road. He began his now familiar lesson about taking driving seriously. Then he explained where we were going. He took me to the scene of a car crash that had just happened. I saw a couple banged-up cars and several people on the roadside whose injuries were being attended to by paramedics. My dad wanted this image etched in my mind as a reminder to be cautious. That picture returns to my mind as I think about what James is telling us in this text. He brings to the attention of the church one kind of the emergency situations we will likely face. He tells us what the situation is, what we need to do when we face it, and how important it is that we face it rightly. Recognize the emergency. Respond rightly. And realize what is at stake.

I. Recognize the Emergency.

The emergency James has in mind is when a person who associates with the visible church wanders from the truth. It is an urgent matter when a professing believer goes astray. The person James is talking about is one who outwardly identifies with the church. He or she claims to believe. When James says "my brothers," he is addressing fellow followers of Jesus Christ. In chapter 2:1 James specifies his brothers are those who "hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." Men and women who believe in Jesus, who take up their cross and follow Christ are family. We are children of God and brothers and sisters with each other. We belong to one another. Among us, however, will be imposters, men and women who appear to belong the family but who in fact do not. Judas Iscariot appeared to belong to the family, but he did not. He was a false convert among the twelve. Likewise, the names of false converts appear on church rolls of church families of every size and distinction.

James is pointing our attention to an individual who is "among you." Back in verse 13, he asked, "Is anyone among you suffering?" In verse 14, he asked, "Is anyone among you sick?" Now he points to "anyone among you [who] wanders from the truth." This person is in the company of the church. It could be a man or a woman. They worship with the church; they pray with the church; they go to Bible study; they take the Lord's Supper; and they fellowship with the church.

But there is an urgent problem with this person. They wander from the truth. The idea of wandering speaks of going astray and leaving the path of truth. Isaiah said, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Peter wrote that before we were converted, we were "continually straying like sheep." Jesus accused the Sadducees of going astray because they did not understand the Scriptures or the power of God (Matthew 22:29).

The thing that we will notice about this person is they depart from the truth. They wander. They go astray from the truth. In the Scriptures, the TRUTH often specifically refers to the word of God and specifically the message of the gospel. Those who are saved come to a KNOWLEDGE of the truth. They understand it and they believe it (1 Timothy 2:4).

To wander from the truth then is to deviate from it in terms of rejecting its content. Paul warned Timothy that in the last days folks would depart from the faith by devoting themselves to false teaching. James does not have in mind smaller doctrinal differences between true believers but major errors or heresies which in effect result in no gospel at all. They oppose the true gospel. The faith that was once delivered to the saints is that Jesus Christ is both human and divine. His life was spotlessly perfect. His death provided atonement to satisfy God's wrath demanded by our sins. Jesus rose from the dead for our justification. There is no other name by which anyone might be saved. We are justified by faith alone, but it is a faith which evidences itself in obedience. These are a few bedrock truths of the gospel. To reject any of them is to wander from the truth.

But those who are saved not only come to a KNOWLEDGE of the truth. They also come to OBEY the truth. Paul speaks of the lost and those who will face eternal judgment as ones "who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:12). It is more than what they think. Believing the truth is also about what you do. James has made this point earlier in his letter when he urged his readers to be doers of the word and not merely hearers of it.

The truth of the gospel accords with godliness. Those who wander from the truth deviate from the truth in terms of how they live. Jude described such persons. He was urging Christ's followers to contend for the faith because of false teachers. He described them as "ungodly people, who pervert the grace of God into sensuality." James pointed out back in chapter 2 that true and saving faith is demonstrated by its works. Alec Motyer aptly says that, "It is impossible (in Scripture) to make 'truth' a mere matter of holding some propositions or creedal statements in our heads. Truth is a living thing; when it grips our minds it changes our lives" (198). If the truth doesn't change our lives, we have wandered from it.

In the last twenty years we have seen how an evangelical culture has gradually downplayed or disregarded various fundamental gospel truths. And predictably, it has also gone astray in conduct, perverting the grace of God into sensuality, celebrating lifestyles that God hates. You can't stray from the truth in doctrine without straying from the truth in living. We all need to keep a watch on both in our lives! What James is saying here is a warning not to let the disaster of wandering happen in your life. It is like driving a car. If you take your mind off the road, pretty soon you can be completely distracted and wander into disaster. See the image of a wandering believer. He has turned from the truth. She has lost sight of the joy of walking with God. They have pierced themselves with the pain and injuries of going astray. Let that image be etched in your mind to keep you alert lest you turn away as well.

But notice that James has another designation for this wanderer. The one who goes astray from sound teaching and godly living he also calls a sinner. And this designation is purposefully strong.

We are all sinners, and we all sin in many ways. However, James is pointing specifically to an unsaved sinner. As Paul put it, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus did not come to call the righteous but SINNERS to repentance." The blessed man of Psalm 1 does not walk in the path of SINNERS. Christ Jesus came into the world to save SINNERS. Last week we mentioned the fact that the prayer of the righteous person has power. We explained that the righteous there is a redeemed person. In close proximity James sets the sinner in contrast to the righteous. He is asserting that this wanderer is one who has not been born of God. He lacks saving faith. She remains in the grip of sin and needs true salvation. They are lost and under condemnation.

So here is a person who thinks or professes he belongs to the family. But their professed doctrine and/or their style of living say otherwise. They are NOT a brother or sister caught in a trespass; they are an imposter. They are a false convert. They are headed for eternal damnation. This is the emergency to which James points us. We are urged then to recognize the emergency.

Recognizing the urgent situation then, James counsels the body to . . .

II. Respond Rightly.

Before we get to the response, we should ask who it is who should respond. Just above in verses 13-18, James specifies duties of elders and duties of all the saints. Here now in verses 19-20, he shows that the response of care for the wanderer is a response that can be carried out by anyone who is in the body. Whoever realizes that a so-called brother is straying has the opportunity to be used of God in the situation. They have the opportunity to be the SOMEONE God will use to restore the wanderer. You don't have to be an elder, a deacon, or a teacher. You just have to be someone who cares. And we all should care. That is what loving our neighbor is about—caring, being alert to others, serving them as Christ has served us.

Twice James tells us what we should do. We realize that here is a professing brother or sister whose life and testimony are demonstrating that they do not actually belong. What is our responsibility? How do we respond? James tells us what our goal should be. It is to "bring them back."

The church is intended to be a body of care. We are to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. When we see someone in trouble, even if they are a false convert, our heart's desire should be to see them truly come to Christ and be restored to the family of faith. James is not specific as to what this looks like. However, there is a good deal of material in the New Testament to guide us.

First, we need to love them. Paul tells the church that we are to be a body of believers which speaks the truth in love. These are wandering from the truth. They need to be directed back to the truth but not with a judgmental spirit. They need to know that love is the reason we speak. Love needs to be the attitude that comes across. Love cares. Love will speak truth. Love will speak gently and tenderly. Love will tell them that we will be waiting with open arms like the father of the prodigal. We need to love them.

Second, we need to instruct them. This is what we are doing when we speak the truth to them. It doesn't ever matter whether a person says they believe the truth or not. The truth of God is what the Lord uses to break hard hearts. God is pleased to work through the speaking of his word in order to demonstrate that the power which returns the wanderer is in fact the power of God. So instruct them in the truth.

Third, warn them of the danger of turning away. The epistle to the Hebrews is an extended appeal to people who had associated themselves with Jesus but were on the verge of wandering away. Relentlessly, the author warned them of the fearful consequences of rejecting the Lord. In chapter 2 the writer asks, "how shall we escape [just retribution] if we neglect such a great salvation?" In chapters 3 and 4 he warned them not to harden their hearts against the voice of the Lord. In chapter 10 he declared that if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Thinking of the consequences under the law of Moses, the writer asked, "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant?" So warn them.

Fourth, keep pointing them to Jesus. He is the way the truth and the life. No one will ever come to the Father except through him. Say with the writer of Hebrews that we must be looking unto Jesus who for the joy set before him endured the cross. We should consider his suffering for his people and be moved to be faithful to him.

Fifth, we should pray. James had just been exhorting us to pray no matter what. He has told us of the power of God into which we tap when we pray. Turning a sinner back from the error of his way is not something we in ourselves are able to do. We must pray.

Sixth, we should be merciful. Jude says "Have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh." Showing mercy grows out of pity for others. Looking at them, our hearts are not filled with a desire for retribution and revenge, but with sympathy, knowing that we ourselves are who we are only by the grace and mercy of God.

If you were to happen upon an emergency situation on the road and no one was already there to help, would you stop? Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to instruct us what it means to love our neighbor. It cares for the suffering despite a cost to self. The man was beaten by thieves and left on the road for dead. Two Jewish leaders intentionally passed by on the other side to avoid the situation. It was the outcast who helped the victim even though the victim belonged to the group which cast him out. It is such a picture of Jesus! He was cast out by his own people whom he came to help. We need to follow that example and love our neighbors who need to be brought back.

III. Realize What is at Stake.

James wants us to know that the stakes could be no higher. What is at stake for the wanderer is his soul. One's soul is their most precious possession. If you lose your soul you have lost everything. After all what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?

James wants the body of Christ to understand and not forget the enormous opportunity that is set before us when we encounter one of these emergency situations. The opportunity is to potentially save their soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

The death about which James is speaking is eternal death. Returning to God will not keep a person from dying in the biological sense. It is appointed unto human beings to die once. James is talking about the second death which is eternal judgment. Revelation 21:8 records graphically the nature of such death: "as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually

immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

All who do not receive the free gift of God which is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord will be consigned to the curse of eternal death. It does not matter who you are, how important the world thinks you are, how rich you are, how many good deeds you think you have done. It DOES NOT matter that you may be a church attender, a church member, or even some office holder in a church. What matters is if you have come to a knowledge of the truth and embraced the truth of the gospel with heart and life. And so when this kind of wanderer is turned back, his soul is saved from death.

And when this sinner is brought back from his wandering, his multitude of sins is covered. When God forgives sins, they are covered. They are eliminated from his remembrance. They will never again be brought up between us. Psalm 32 reflects the joy of the forgiven sinner. The psalmist David writes, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is COVERED. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity!” Psalm 85:2 says, “You forgave the iniquity of your people; you COVERED all their sin.” When sin is COVERED, it is out of sight. And do you know how that can happen? The blood that Jesus Christ shed on the cross was enough of a payment to COVER the debt we owed to God!

Every two weeks I have an automatic transfer from my checking account to my savings account in a specific amount. I take my estimated property tax bill and divide it by 26. That’s the amount I save every two weeks. As a result I am at peace when December rolls around. When that old property tax bill comes to my house in December, I look at it and shudder. But I don’t worry because I have saved enough through the year to COVER it. If we by faith in Jesus take part in his death on the cross, our sin debt is covered. We are forgiven. Our sinfulness itself is covered over. But if we stray from the truth, if we do not truly trust in Jesus, then our sins are exposed and our debt will be outstanding for all eternity. This is what is at stake—covered sins and delight in the presence of our gracious God or eternal exposure to his wrath. The stakes could not be higher.

Hence there is great joy when a sinner repents and solemn concern when for those who do not. We must be gripped by these stakes.

A couple months ago on a Sunday morning a man was driving down Greenfield Ave right in the vicinity of where my daughter Ariail lives. He turned his vehicle up on its side in the road. Ariail heard the noise as she was about to leave for church and went to see if she could help. There was little she could do because the man was trapped. He kept honking his horn and crying for help. She stayed there with a couple others. They were attempting to reassure the desperate man that help was on the way. That experience shook Ariail up. She couldn’t escape the cries for help that echoed in her mind, wishing she could free the man but being unable to do so.

Jesus says that in the place of the second death there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Those images should be a fixture in our minds to keep us aware of what is at stake when it comes to turning a sinner from his wandering.

Conclusion

There is a sense in which every church is a first-responder station. The whole body is the crew. The emergencies within are false converts. They display that they do not really belong by wandering from the truth whether in the teaching itself or in behavior that is disobedience to the gospel.

The fact is that even genuine Christians wander though in lesser ways from time to time. Sometimes we may not be able to distinguish between the stumbling Christian and the straying imposter. And I think that is not so much the main thing. What we must not fail to do is care fr one another and minister tenderly to one another remembering at all times that souls and our eternal destinies hang in the balance.

Recognize the emergency. Respond rightly. Realize what is at stake.

Brothers and sisters, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near."